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Palestine

Palestine and Empire

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The brutality of the Israeli Occupation, the scale of Israel’s continuing political turmoil, the undisguised Ku Klux Klan-ish murderous Israeli settlers’ attacks on Palestinian civilians and towns, the deepening rage within the Palestinian population of the Occupied Territories and inside Israel — and the visible unease among the rulers of the United States’ Middle East Arab allies — have pressured the U.S. government to pretend that it cares about Palestine. The key word here is “pretend.”

Policy in practice is illustrated by recent too-typical episodes. Amidst near-daily killings of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, President Biden welcomed Israeli president Isaac Herzog to the White House and the honor of addressing a joint session of Congress. This in itself, we must admit, was hardly surprising — given that Biden already disgraced himself and the country by similarly receiving the nationalist Hindu-supremacist Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, and followed in Donald Trump’s footsteps to Saudi Arabia to be warmly greeted by mass murderer crown prince Mohammad bin Salman (whom Biden previously called a “pariah”).

After Congressional Progressive Caucus chair Pramila Jayapal, accurately if perhaps accidentally, publicly called Israel a “racist state,” a bipartisan Concurrent Resolution 57 repudiating such a heresy was rushed to the House of Representatives, where the vote passed 412-9-1. We pause briefly for the honor roll of those opposing the resolution: Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY), Rashida Tlaib (MI), Jamaal Bowman (NY), Summer Lee (PA), Ilhan Omar (MN), Cori Bush (MO), Andre Carson (IN), Delia Ramirez (IL) and Ayanna Pressley (MA). Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN), author of a bill (HR 3103) against U.S. aid for Israel’s large-scale administrative detention of Palestinian children, voted “present.”

An atrocity mostly under the media radar is a Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. and Israeli governments for opening visa-free travel between the two countries for their respective citizens. Under this Visa Waiver Program, naturally, the arrangement is reciprocal. But that is decidedly not the case at Ben-Gurion Airport, where Arab and Palestinian U.S. citizens are routinely hassled and frequently denied entry, especially if they are residents of Gaza. The MOU providing a 45-day test period for the waiver program has outraged Arab American activists who had been assured it wouldn’t be implemented. (See the scathing commentary by James Zogby of the Arab American Institute, July 24, 2023, <https://james.zogby.com/>.)

In short, the Israeli state continues to get not only a free pass for gross human rights abuses in view of its status as a strategic U.S. ally — far from unique in that respect — but also enjoys the highest standing as a moral beacon, including among those same far-right Republicans who promote narratives of “Jewish space lasers” causing wildfires and George Soros spearheading the Illuminati plans for the new world order.

“Shared Fiction” Endangered

Nonetheless, strains are visible. They’re detailed, for example, in an unusually-lengthy feature July 12 New York Times column by Thomas Friedman, “The U.S. Reassessment of Netanyahu Has Begun,” which deserves to be read in full and carefully for channeling the angst of the mainstream “pro-Israel” U.S. establishment.

Friedman is a Pulitzer Prize winner, formerly head of the Times’ Jerusalem Bureau, known for his support of the Iraq war and longtime apologetics for Israeli “defensive” state terrorism — in short, a pillar of elite consensus. Today he

writes that “the Biden team sees the far-right Israeli government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, engaged in unprecedented radical behavior — under the cloak of judicial ‘reform’ — that is undermining our shared interests with Israel, our shared values and the vitally important shared fiction about the status of the West Bank that has kept peace hopes there just barely alive.” (emphasis added)

Further down, Friedman gets explicit:

“One of the most important Israeli and American shared interests was the shared fiction that Israel’s occupation of the West Bank was only temporary and one day there could be a two-state solution with the 2.9 million Palestinians there. Therefore, the U.S. doesn’t need to worry about the now more than 500,000 Israeli settlers there...

“Because of that shared fiction, the U.S. has almost always defended Israel in the U.N. and the International Court of Justice against various resolutions or judgments that it was not occupying the West Bank temporarily but actually annexing it permanently.

“The Israeli government is now doing its best to destroy that time-buying fiction...Netanyahu’s steady destruction of this shared fiction is now posing a real problem for other U.S. and Israeli shared interests”

(by which Friedman means the stability of Jordan, Israel’s Abraham Accords with Gulf kingdoms, and normalization with Saudi Arabia. These rulers don’t care about Palestine any more than Washington does, but their populations do.)

Two things stand out here. First is the extensive repetition of that loaded phrase “shared fiction,” as it’s clear that Friedman wants to make sure that even the least attentive reader gets the point and its implications. Second, as experienced readers of Thomas Friedman know, he almost always leaves something out, often something quite significant: In this case, his own decades-long role helping to perpetrate precisely that shared fiction, always by blaming Palestinians for rejecting U.S.-Israeli “peace plans” to preserve the shimmering mirage of a two-state solution somewhere in an always-receding future.

From this and other commentators, and Biden’s remark to CNN that Netanyahu’s cabinet is “one of the most extreme” he’s seen, it’s emerging that Israel’s conduct and internal state is becoming an irritant to the efficient operation of the U.S. empire.

To be clear, Israel remains a powerful asset, not a liability, to Washington’s project of controlling the Middle East and its strategic assets through a system of regional alliances, as the hegemon itself continues to “pivot” towards the U.S. rivalry with China. We are still a long way from a genuine crisis in the U.S.-Israeli partnership, but the run amok character of the Netanyahu coalition, dependent as it is on extreme Jewish-supremacist nationalism, the settler movement and ultra-Orthodox fundamentalism, doesn’t bode well.

All proportions guarded, of course. Compared to the state of Israeli politics and the deadly degenerative spiral in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, a much bigger threat to the prestige and power of the U.S. empire is the internal state of U.S. politics, where the cult leader and dominant presidential candidate of the Republican Party engaged in major criminal conduct before, during and after his calamitous term in the White House. Where the present electoral cycle may leave the United States’ status in the world is another complex and unfolding discussion.

Disaster on the Ground

This is not at all to discount the gravity of circumstances in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The highly-publicized first part of the “judicial reform,” stripping Israel’s (far from progressive or pro-Palestinian) Supreme Court of the power to nullify laws as “unreasonable” — in the absence of a written Constitution for the country — has already brought Israel closer to a full-scale rupture than any time since a notorious armed confrontation between the official Haganah and Menahem Begin’s rightwing Irgun militia in the very early days of the state.

It remains to be seen whether the Supreme Court itself might escalate the crisis by declaring the new law itself to be “unreasonable.”

The announced refusal of elite reserve military officers — thousands are reported to have resigned — to continue their service may not come to fruition, but even such a threat constitutes a genuine earthquake in the Israeli context. It’s rather astonishing that protest mobilizations have continued even during Israeli military operations in Jenin, Nablus and other Palestinian population centers.

There’s more to come. A piece of the “reform,” less reported here because it’s harder to summarize, will remove judicial nominations from professional bodies and put them in the hands of parliamentary committees — which in the highly disciplined Israeli political party system means control by party bosses of the ruling coalition, crippling the relative independence of the judiciary.

The protests seem likely to continue as much of the Israeli-Jewish population see the reform as “the end of democracy” — for themselves. They have not taken up issues of anti-Arab discrimination or found much resonance among Palestinian Israeli citizens. That’s the movement’s Achilles heel. Nonetheless the changes would have consequences — if for example the electoral commission bars Arab-led parties from running on grounds of “insufficient loyalty to the Jewish state” and the Court can’t overturn the exclusion, or stop townships from declaring themselves officially “Jewish only.”

Unquestionably, however, the core disaster is on the ground in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and that’s where the real danger may lie not only for Israel but even for imperial “stability.” The eruption of settler violence has revealed the depth of truly nazi-like attitudes and action. An Israeli writer, Yuval Noah Hariri, attended a pro-democracy rally in the town of Beit Shemesh, where they were confronted by a smaller pro-government counter-demonstration with a loudspeaker blaring songs, including a celebration of the February settler burning of Hawara:

“(T)he leader of the Religious Zionism party, Finance Minister Bezael Smotrich, supported the attack and publicly called for Hawara to be ‘wiped out.’ In a similar spirit, the pro-government loudspeakers in Beit Shemesh sounded out the following gleeful song:

“Who is going up in flames now? — Hawara!
Houses and cars! — Hawara!
They are evacuating old ladies, women and young girls,
it is burning all night! — Hawara!
Burn their trucks! — Hawara!
Burn the roads and cars! — Hawara!

“I later looked for the song on YouTube, and found that it’s had thousands of views. One Israeli YouTube channel accompanied with it a request of viewers to share, ‘with all your might, to show everyone that just as Hawara is

burning, so is our faith.' I hummed the tune, and thought about the meaning of 'destruction.'" ("Can Judaism survive a messianic dictatorship in Israel?" Haaretz, July 13, 2023)

If that isn't frightening, you're not paying attention. But the dissident Israel historian Ilan Pappé also writes that

"(t)his is a rare moment in history that opens opportunities for those struggling for liberation and justice in Palestine...a time to energize the popular Palestinian resistance and unite both the Palestinians and their supporters around an agreed vision and program." (Palestine Chronicle, August 3, 2023)

As chilling as it is, the vicious military and settler violence is also having an impact on sectors of U.S. society. While the Democratic Party leadership remains unshakably committed to the Israeli-partnership, sympathy with Palestine is growing among the voting base and especially young people.

More of the U.S. Jewish community is becoming alienated and angry, particularly as the pillar of the Zionist lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) turns more and more to supporting rightwing politicians including election-denying Trump Republicans. In the face of state-level attempts to criminalize Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions activism, support for the BDS movement is gaining ground.

Congressional Representative Betty McCollum has reintroduced the above-mentioned "Defending the Human Rights of Palestinian Children and Families Living Under Israeli Military Occupation Act," which her website describes as a bill "to prohibit Israel from using U.S. taxpayer dollars on the military detention, abuse, or ill-treatment of Palestinian children in Israeli military detention; to support the seizure and destruction of Palestinian property and homes in violation of international humanitarian law; or on any support or assistance for Israel's unilateral annexation of Palestinian territory in violation of international humanitarian law."

These changes in public sentiment are far from what's needed in a long struggle against U.S. support for Israeli racism and apartheid, as well as the other brutal structures of oppression undergirding imperialist dominance in the region. As Ilan Pappé writes, it's a fight "rooted in the Palestinian struggle for democracy and self-determination ever since 1918. The future liberated and de-Zionised Palestine may look now as a fantasy, but...it has the best chance to galvanize locally, regionally and globally every person with a modicum of decency. It would also provide a safe place for anyone living in historical Palestine at the present or for whoever was expelled from there."

Toward such a vision, the emerging cracks in elite circles, which are likely to deepen, open possibilities for enhanced, effective solidarity activism.

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