

The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: Extremists versus Moderates

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The last few weeks have witnessed unusually harsh criticism of Mr. Sharon's policies coming from Israeli current and former officials. Criticism was directed against Sharon's cruel policies in the Palestinian occupied territories and his lack of any plans regarding a possible solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In an interview conducted by Yediot Ahranot, Israel's largest daily, four previous directors of Israel's most secretive intelligence agency, the Shin Bet, declared, "Israel is in grave danger." The Israeli generals argued that Sharon's policies are immoral, creating hatred and leading to disaster and, therefore, Israel needs to change directions. General Yaakov Perry, for example, said that Israel is "going in the direction of decline, nearly a catastrophe" in almost every area – economic, political, social, and security. "If something does not happen," he added, "we will continue to live by the sword, we will continue to wallow in the mud and we will continue to destroy ourselves." General Ami Ayalon, in turn, said, "we are taking sure and measured steps to a point where the state of Israel will no longer be a democracy and home for the Jewish people."

A week earlier, the head of Israel's armed forces described Sharon's policy as "catastrophic." And two months earlier Avraham Burg, former speaker of Israel's Knesset, said that Israel under Sharon has no leadership that understands reality and acts in an honest way. He wrote, "A failed Israeli society collapses while its leaders remain silent...The Zionist revolution has always rested on two pillars: a just path and an ethical leadership. Neither of these is operative any longer," Mr. Burg added, "It turned out that the 2,000-year struggle for Jewish survival comes down to a state of settlements, run by an amoral clique of corrupt lawbreakers who are deaf both to their citizens and to their enemies." While all those who criticized Sharon alluded to the suffering of the Palestinian people, their main concern was the future of Israel as a Jewish state.

Throughout recent times Jews have had a problem wherever they lived and regardless of what they did or said; they were subjected to discrimination and often humiliation as well. Such discrimination forced Jews in general to live in isolation and limit their contribution to and participating in the life of the nations to which they belonged. Isolation, in turn, was largely perceived by the other as a proof that Jews did not belong to the larger community and were only there for economic reasons. Jewish behavior, consequently, was often perceived as corrupt and corrupting, making discrimination justified in the eyes of the many. Discrimination under the rule of non-Christian societies, particularly the Islamic ones, was rather mute and limited to denial of certain rights. Under Christian

rule, however, discrimination against Jews adopted several ugly faces. In Spain, especially after the recapture of the land from its Muslim rulers at the end of the 15th century, Spaniards, armed with radical nationalism and Catholicism, adopted severe measures to force many Muslims and Jews to convert to Christianity, kill many more, and drive the rest out of Spain.

Reasons for creating and perpetuating this Jewish problem are numerous and can't be blamed on one group or one ideology only. The Catholic Church in particular, and until a decade or so ago, had continued to hold Jews responsible for the killing of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, both Jewish and non-Jewish peoples, because of their beliefs and perceptions of the other, had contributed to expanding Christian discrimination against Jews while deepening Jewish isolation from the larger communities in which they lived.

Around the middle of the 19th century, and in reaction to the pogroms committed against them in European countries, Jews began to organize and seek a solution to what they identified as the "Jewish Problem." Recognizing the negative role played by a self-imposed policy of isolation in creating and perpetuating the Jewish Problem, integration with the larger European societies was proposed as a solution to that problem. Consequently, European Jews began to adopt Christian names in large numbers. Today, most American Jews do not have typical Jewish names but Christian ones. But before long, this solution faced a serious problem in France that caused belief in its utility to weaken. Subsequently, the idea of Zionism was born; it sought to gather Jews in one country where they could have a state of their own and govern themselves. While many countries were suggested and several proposals were considered, Zionist leaders at the time decided that they would seek to realize their dream in Palestine.

A group of three Rabbis was subsequently sent to Palestine to have a look at the land. The Rabbis reported back in a telegram saying, "the bride is beautiful but she is already married," meaning that Palestine was inhabited. But instead of accepting this verdict and seeking another place, Zionist leaders created their first and biggest lie; they raised the slogan, "A land without people for a people without land." But when Jews began to arrive in Palestine in large numbers, especially after the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s, the "Jewish Problem" was transferred to Palestine. The creation of a Jewish state at the expense of Palestinian Arabs caused the creation of a Palestinian problem instead of solving the Jewish one. And that in turn made the problem in Palestine a shared Israeli-Palestinian one.

During more than seventy years of conflict and many attempts by Israelis and Palestinians to solve this problem no solution has so far been found; neither Israelis obtained what they wanted, nor were Palestinians able to recover their national and human rights. As a result, many people on both sides of the conflict began to realize that their problem has two faces, one Israeli, the other

Palestinian and, therefore, neither party is able to solve its problem without, at the same time, addressing the problem of the other. While moderates on both sides are now seeking a compromise solution, extremists still think that a unilateral solution is possible. In seeking the long sought-after solution to the Jewish problem, Israeli extremists, led by Sharon, continue to think that getting rid of the Palestinians through deportation or extermination is the only way to solve the Jewish problem. Palestinian extremists, on the other hand, continue to think that solving the Palestinian problem and regaining lost rights can only be accomplished with the liquidation of Israel as a Jewish state.

It must be recognized, however, that no Israelis, except may be one in a thousand is willing to acknowledge that Palestinians were robbed of their homes and land and were subjected to ethnic cleansing and denial of rights by Israeli Jews. Israeli moderates, no matter how rational and humanistic they may be, continue to seek a solution to their Jewish problem, not to address the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people in an honest way. Whatever they suggest that Palestinians should get in a deal to achieve peace is seen by them as an unenviable price to pay for solving their own Jewish problem, not as a way to right some of the wrongs they committed against the Palestinian people. And this makes Palestinians in general less willing to forget the past and forgive the Israelis.

Nonetheless, neither Palestinians nor Israelis can reverse the course of history or have the land of Palestine free of the other. Both, therefore, should acknowledge that they have no options but to seek a compromise solution based on equal rights to the land of Palestine. Past failures by both Israelis and Palestinians to solve their problem demands that moderates on both sides fight together for a solution that is mutually acceptable. Extremists should not be allowed to impose their agenda of exclusivity, continue to plant hatred and cause more destruction. Future Palestinian generations should not suffer because of mistakes committed by their grandparents, and the honorable struggle of this generation will be meaningless if it continues to cause more suffering and fails to bring peace and transform the tragic life conditions of the dispossessed.