

Palestine: Reflections on the Third Intifada

Dispelling illusions

Monday 31 May 2021, by [IBRAHIM Salwa](#) (Date first published: 21 May 2021).

Palestine is a stone, stuck in the throat of the world; none can swallow it.

-Elias Sanbar, *Le bien des absents* (2001)

The Third Intifada is anti-zionist

Against analyses which attribute the Palestinian uprising to the politics of the Israeli far-right, a clarification is needed. Let us say it at once: the Israeli far-right is not the problem – Zionism is. It is Zionism, this colonialism which aims to expel and replace Palestinians, that is the origin of this third intifada.

It is no coincidence that it began in Sheikh Jarrah. Sheikh Jarrah is the Long Nakba in miniature. Sheikh Jarrah is another Lifta, another Deir Yassin, another Haifa; an echo of the villages and towns colonized and de-Arabized since 1948. “The old will die and the young will forget,” thought Ben-Gurion – a lost bet, since even if amnesia began to set in, repeated Sheikh Jarrahs would again banish it. [1]

Whether there is a far-right, a centre-right, or a left-wing government at the head of the Zionist state is a question that must be taken seriously and analysed, without losing from sight the conflict’s principal issue: the colonial enterprise which constitutes Zionism. If not, that same analysis would involve a mistaken reading of the current situation in occupied Palestine.

It would apply an interpretative framework valid in “normal” states, where political conflict is structured around the left-right cleavage, around progressivism, conservatism, and fascism: a poor framework for interpreting Israel-Palestine, with the function of implicitly absolving the Israeli state as such – its ideological underpinnings, its military and militia history, its colonial policy systematically pursued since its creation, and its reactionary role in the Arab East.

Whether the colonial state, created for the conquest of Palestine and the expulsion of the autochthonous populations, adorns itself with a socialist or fascist identity makes no difference to those seeing their land and their homes expropriated. Let us recall history, and remember that Yitzhak Rabin, that hero of the Zionist left, was not of the far-right when he co-led the first war of ethnic cleansing in Palestine between 1947 and 1949, mainly in the region north of Jerusalem and in the villages of al-Lidd and Ramleh. [2] Similarly, those colonies which presented themselves as kibbutz, which so fascinated socialists in Europe, were, for that, no less colonies from the point of view of the dispossessed.

Left-wing Zionism is as opposed to the national liberation of Palestine and to the political rights of Palestinians as right-wing Zionism is. The only difference is that it aspires for peace, through the denial of justice – in order to “save” Israel.

As to the left-wing Zionist tradition, with all its humanism, its main preoccupation has been to “save” Israel. To save what it considered to have been gained, the territories conquered by force in 1948, hoping that the same military state which had deprived Palestine of the larger part of its coastline (and so its ports) would deign to allow a Palestinian enclave by its side. In this, left-wing Zionism is as opposed to the national liberation of Palestine and to the political rights of Palestinians as right-wing Zionism is. The only difference is that it *aspires* for peace, through the denial of justice – in order to “save” Israel.

It is pernicious, therefore, to disguise Zionism with a “socialist” halo, to give it a left-wing epithet; the equivalent of the bowler hat and umbrella in Orwell’s image of fascism. [3] Viewing the Palestinian intifada as a reaction above all to the far-right, rather than Zionism, is the product of a steady habituation, of making the Israeli state appear “normal.” It is time to dispel this illusion.

And so, comrades, let us not deplore this exposure of Zionism. Netanyahu, the far-right government, and the fascist settlers: they are its ugly façade, but it is one to be uncovered, with neither disguise nor mask.

The Third Intifada is national

Certainly the Zionism conducted by a far-right Israeli government is coarser, more racist, more brutal, and hence still less tolerable. One can assuredly say that it has contributed to accelerating the conditions which have produced the current intifada – one that was, however, inevitable, to the extent that oppression inescapably produces resistance. If you will pardon the repetition, the heart of the conflict is the project to colonize and replace Palestine. This is why the struggle animating Palestinians is a struggle of national liberation; a struggle against colonialism. The various political majorities that have structured [rythmé] its history have never altered what it is: colonialism.

To be convinced, one has only to listen closely to the demonstrations happening in the interior territories, in Israel, or in the West Bank: nowhere does one hear demands for a reform of the Israeli state, for a change of regime towards something more progressive, or for rights that the Israeli state might concede to Palestinians. The slogan repeated practically everywhere is not “the People Demand the Downfall of the Regime”, but “*al-Sha’b Yurid Taharir Filistin*” – “the People Demand the Liberation of Palestine.” The anger is directed towards Israel itself, towards Israel as a whole. Against Israel before 1948, against Israel in its essence, which is to say, against Zionism. That which is bringing together the Palestinians of Haifa, of Bethlehem, of Gaza and Jerusalem is the idea of national liberation, and more precisely, of all Palestine.

This third intifada has created a precedent that Israel will be at pains to counter: it smashes more than seven decades of territorial fragmentation. Jerusalem, Gaza, Haifa, Jenin, Ramallah, al-Khalil, Jaffa, Ramla, Nablus – for the first time since 1948, it is all of historic Palestine that has arisen, at the same time, politically, for itself. All of this constitutes an irrevocable disavowal of the Palestinian “Authority,” the principal function of which is to police the Palestinians of the West Bank, in collaboration with the forces of Israeli occupation.

And, an irony of history: this third intifada is unfolding precisely when the legislative elections ought to have been held, which Mahmoud Abbas had reported paused *sine die*, under the pretext that the Palestinians of Jerusalem were prevented from voting – in reality, the pause was due Israeli pressures and divisions within Fatah itself. Yet, Jerusalem “voted,” and with it, all of Palestine followed. The struggle for national liberation thereby pursued its own course.

An Intifada of a new type

To each conjuncture, its own adequate revolutionary strategy. This third intifada is neither an uprising of stones against tanks, nor the resistance of Gaza against the Israeli army, nor a direct confrontation with Israeli colonialists, nor the Marches for Return from neighbouring countries: it is all of them at once. And, it is taking the initiative. The decision of the Palestinian resistance of Gaza to respond to Israeli aggressions in Jerusalem was both unexpected and unique; it sweeps aside the minutely-particular territorial logics that Israel has put in place, and re-establishes the national principle.

What is happening in Jerusalem has consequences for Gaza; the uprising of Palestine '48 is joined with those of the West Bank; most importantly, the refugees at the borders are involved. [4]

As these lines are being written, hundreds of Palestinians and Arabs in Jordan and Lebanon are attempting to cross – for the first time in three generations – the occupied border with Palestine, tearing aside the painful, colonial discontinuities of *Bilad al-Sham*. For some, an eternal dream, a near-fantasy, is coming to be realized – to walk on the land of Palestine, to return.

As to the resistance, it is multiform, hybrid. All possible means are mobilized simultaneously, in a relation of reciprocal dependence. There is no contradiction between the armed and the peaceful resistance; they are complementary. It is necessary to impose a new balance of force, a new, definitive situation on Israel, one that would prevent it from pursuing its ethnic cleansing in total liberty, without worry or care. One of the major remaining issues is to rebuild a unified structure for the national movement, dedicated to organising and reinforcing the unity of this third intifada – the task is immense.

Full, unconditional solidarity

What is being shown to the world today, seventy-three years after the start of the Nakba, is Israel's failure to swallow up Palestine, its failure to hurl it into an abyss of forgetting. Through every wave of repression, Palestine has never stopped protesting, never stopped reacting. Up to the present it has recomposed itself, it has rebuilt itself, it has reaffirmed itself, by and through a collective, national struggle.

There is no doubt that the coming repression will be of an astonishing brutality – it is already. The Israeli army intensifies the bombardment of Gaza, threatens a ground invasion, and lends its heavy hand to the police within Israel. We know how violent anti-colonial wars can be (this being one of the lessons of the last century); we know also that liberation is possible, that different peoples have triumphed. This is why an unconditional solidarity with the Palestinian resistance for its national and democratic rights is, more than ever, necessary. The Palestinian anti-colonial struggle is a struggle for all progressives, for all anti-colonialists, across the entire world – let us march with it.

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P.S.

This piece, which originally appeared in French in [Contretemps](#), was translated by Al-Muzāharāt. They are a collective that translates writings from the Maghrebi left.

Footnotes

[1] Quoted by Michael Bar Zohar, *Ben-Gurion: The Armed Prophet* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1967). The paragraph's final line is, more literally, "Since, even if amnesia were an option, repeated Sheikh Jarrahs would make it absolutely impossible."

[2] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (New York: Oneworld, 2006)

[3] "*Lorsque les fascistes reviendront, ils auront le parapluie bien roulé sous le bras et le chapeau melon*" [to retain the French translation of Orwell's famous image; al-M].

[4] Designating the Palestinian territories captured by Israel in 1948.