

Palestine/Israel: Friedman's Last Gasp - "The Western model of 'peace-making' was always about preserving Jewish supremacy"

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Thomas Friedman's recent column [1] in the *New York Times* reflecting on Israel's 11-day destruction of Gaza is a showcase for the delusions of liberal Zionism: a constellation of thought that has never looked so threadbare.

It seems that every liberal newspaper needs a Thomas Friedman – the UK's *Guardian* has Jonathan Freedland – whose role is to keep readers from considering realistic strategies for Israel-Palestine, however often and catastrophically the established ones have failed. In this case, Friedman's plea for Joe Biden to preserve the 'potential of a two-state solution' barely conceals his real goal: resuscitating the discourse of an illusory 'peace process' from which everyone except liberal Zionists has moved on. His fear is that the debate is quietly shifting outside this framework – towards the recognition that Israel is a belligerent apartheid regime, and the conclusion that one democratic state for Palestinians and Jews is now the only viable solution.

For more than five decades, the two-state solution – of a large, ultra-militarized state for Israel, and a much smaller, demilitarized one for Palestinians – has been the sole paradigm of the Western political and media class. During these years, a Palestinian state failed to materialize despite (or more likely because of) various US-backed 'peace processes'. While Americans and Europeans have consoled themselves with such fantasies, Israel has only paid them lip-service, enforcing a de facto one-state solution premised on Jewish supremacy over Palestinians, and consolidating its control over the entire territory.

But in recent years, Israel's naked settler-colonial actions have imperiled that Western paradigm. It has become increasingly evident that Israel is incapable of making peace with the Palestinians because its state ideology – Zionism – is based on their removal or eradication. What history has taught us is that the only just and lasting way to end a 'conflict' between a native population and a settler-colonial movement is decolonization, plus the establishment of a single, shared, democratic state. Otherwise, the settlers continue to pursue their replacement strategies – which invariably include ethnic cleansing, communal segregation and genocide. These were precisely the tactics adopted by European colonists in the Americas, Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Friedman's function in the Western media – conscious or not – is to obfuscate these historical lessons, tapping into a long legacy of unthinking colonial racism.

One of the central pillars of that legacy is an abiding fear of the native and his supposedly natural savagery. This has always been the unspoken assumption behind the interminable two-state 'peace process'. A civilized and civilizing West tries to broker a 'peace deal' to protect Israel from the Palestinian hordes next door. But the Palestinians continuously 'reject' these peace overtures because of their savage nature – which is in turn presented as the reason why Israel must ethnically cleanse them and herd them into reservations, or Bantustans, away from Jewish settlers.

Occasionally, Israel is forced to 'retaliate' – or defend itself from this savagery – in what becomes an endless 'cycle of violence'. The West supports Israel with military aid and preferential trade, while watching with exasperation as the Palestinian leadership fails to discipline its people.

Friedman is an expert at exploiting this colonial mentality. He often avoids taking direct responsibility for his racist assumptions, attributing them to 'centrist Democrats' or other right-minded observers. Coded language is his stock in trade, serving to heighten the unease felt by western audiences as the natives try to regain a measure of control over their future. In some cases the prejudicial framing is overt, as with his concern about the threat of an ascendant Hamas to women's and LGBTQ rights, couched in an identity politics he knows will resonate with NYT readers. But more often his framing is insidious, with terms like 'decimate' and 'blow up' deployed to cast Palestinians' desire for self-determination as violent and menacing.

Friedman's promotion of the two-state model offers a three-layered deception. First, he writes that the two-state solution would bring 'peace', without acknowledging that the condition for that peace is the Palestinians' permanent ghettoization and subjugation. Second, he blames the Palestinians for rejecting just such 'peace plans', even though they have never been seriously offered by Israel. And finally, he has the chutzpah to imply that it was the Palestinians' failure to negotiate a two-state solution that 'decimated' the Israeli 'peace camp'.

Such arguments are not only based on Friedman's dehumanizing view of Arabs. They are also tied to his domestic political concerns. He fears that if Joe Biden were to acknowledge the reality that Israel has sabotaged the two-state solution, then the President might disengage once and for all from the 'peace process'. Of course, most Palestinians would welcome such an end to US interference: the billions of dollars funnelled annually to the Israeli military, the US diplomatic cover for Israel, and the arm-twisting of other states to silently accept its atrocities. But, Friedman argues, this withdrawal would carry a heavy price at home, setting off a civil war within Biden's own party and within Jewish organizations across the US. God forbid, it might 'even lead to bans on arms sales' to Israel.

Friedman reminds us of Israeli businessman Gidi Grinstein's warning that in the absence of a 'potential' two-state solution, US support for Israel could morph 'from a bipartisan issue to a wedge issue'. The columnist writes that preserving the two-state 'peace process', however endless and hopeless, is 'about our national security interests in the Middle East'. How does Friedman define these interests? They are reducible, he says, to 'the political future of the centrist faction of the Democratic Party.' A 'peace process' once designed to salve the consciences of Americans while enabling the dispossession of Palestinians has now been redefined as a vital US national security issue – because, for Friedman, its survival is necessary to preserve the dominance of foreign policy hawks in the Democratic machine. The argument echoes Biden's extraordinarily frank admission made back in 1986 that 'were there not an Israel the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interests in the region'.

Friedman then concludes his article with a set of proposals that unwittingly expose the true consequences of a two-state settlement. He insists that Biden build on his predecessor's much ridiculed 'peace plan', which gave US blessing to Israel's illegal settlements on vast swaths of the occupied West Bank, penning Palestinians into their Bantustans indefinitely. Trump's plan also sought to entrench Israel's control over occupied East Jerusalem, remake Gaza as a permanent battlefield on which rivalries between Fatah and Hamas would intensify, and turn the wealth of the theocratic Gulf states into a weapon, fully integrating Israel into the region's economy while making the Palestinians even more dependent on foreign aid. Polite NYT opinionators now want Biden to sell these measures as a re-engagement with the 'peace process'.

The US, writes Friedman, should follow Trump in stripping the Palestinians of a capital in East Jerusalem – the economic, religious and historic heart of Palestine. Arab states should reinforce this dispossession by moving their embassies from Tel Aviv to West Jerusalem. Neighbouring countries are encouraged to pressure the Palestinian Authority, via aid payments, to accede even more cravenly to Israel's demands. (Of course, Friedman does not think it worth mentioning that Palestine is aid-dependent because Israel has either stolen or seized control of all its major resources.)

Once this subordinate position is guaranteed, divisions within the Palestinian national movement can be inflamed by making Hamas – plus the two million Palestinians in Gaza – dependent on the PA's patronage. Friedman wants the Fatah-led PA to decide whether to send aid to the Gaza Strip or join Israel in besieging the enclave to weaken Hamas. For good measure, he also urges the Gulf states to cut off support to the United Nations aid agencies, like UNRWA, which have kept millions of Palestinian refugees fed and cared for since 1948. The international community's already feeble commitment to the rights of Palestinian refugees will thus be broken, and the diaspora will be forcibly absorbed into their host countries.

Such proposals are the last gasp of a discredited liberal Zionism. Friedman visibly flounders as he tries to put the emperor's clothes back on a two-state solution which stands before us in all its ugliness. The Western model of 'peace-making' was always about preserving Jewish supremacy. Now, at least, the illusions are gone.

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P.S.

• New Left Review/ Sidecar. 10 June 2021:
<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/friedmans-last-gasp?pc=1349>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/25/opinion/israel-palestine-two-state-solution.html>