

It Can Happen Here

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ZIONISM WAS A revolutionary idea. It proposed that the “Jewish people” should create a new Jewish entity in the land of Palestine.

The Zionist project was very successful indeed. By 1948 the embryo nation was strong enough to create a state. Israel was born.

When one builds a house, one needs scaffolding. When the building is finished, the scaffolding is removed.

But political ideas and structures don't die easily. The human mind is lazy and apprehensive, and clings to familiar ideas, long after they have become obsolete. Also, political and material interests become vested in the idea and resist change.

Thus “Zionism” continued to exist after its aim had already been achieved. The scaffolding became superfluous, indeed obstructive.

WHY OBSTRUCTIVE? Let's take Australia, for example. It was created by British settlers, as a colony of Britain. Australians were deeply committed to Britain. During World War II they came to us, on their way to fight for Britain in North Africa. (We liked them very much.)

But Australia is not Britain. A different climate, a different geography, a different location, which dictates different political options.

If we consider World Jewry as a kind of motherland, like Britain for Australia, Israel should have cut the umbilical cord at birth. A new nation. A new location. A different neighborhood. Different options.

This never happened. Israel is a “Zionist” state, or so the vast majority of its citizens and leaders believe. Not being a Zionist means being an apostate, almost a traitor.

But what do Israelis mean by “Zionism”? Patriotism? Nationalism? Solidarity with Jews around the world? Or something much more: the idea that Israel does not really belong to its citizens, but to all the Jews around the world?

THESE BASIC conceptions, whether conscious or unconscious, have wide-ranging consequences.

Israel is officially and judicially defined as “a Jewish and democratic state”. Does that mean that non-Jewish citizens of Israel, such as the Arabs, do not really belong, but are only tolerated and their civil rights are questionable?

Does it mean that Israel as such is in reality a Western nation transplanted to the Middle East (in itself a Western name)?

Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, suggested in his fundamental book “The Jewish State” that in Palestine we would volunteer to serve as an outpost for European civilization against barbarism. Which barbarians did he have in mind?

Some 110 years later, the Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Barak, expressed the same idea in more colorful words, when he described Israel as a “villa in the Jungle”. Again, it is easy to guess which wild beasts he had in mind.

Since the mass immigration of Oriental Jewish communities to Israel (and other countries) in the early 1950s, very few Jewish communities have remained in the East, and those are tiny and pitiful. World Jewry is concentrated (or, rather, dispersed) in the West, especially in the US.

The Jewish-Israeli connection is immensely important for Israel. The dominant position of the Jewish community in US politics guarantees the diplomatic immunity of the Israeli government, whatever the government does and whoever is the US president, and massive financial and military support, of course.¹

On the other hand, the Jewish-Israeli connection turns Israel indeed into a “Western outpost”, as Herzl envisioned, and guarantees that the Jewish State will forever be at war with its geographical neighbors.

“PEACE WITH the Arabs” is a subject endlessly discussed in Israel. It is the dividing line between “Right” and “Left”.

The prevailing conviction is: *“Peace would be nice. We all want peace. Unfortunately peace is impossible.” Why impossible? “Because the Arabs don't want it. They will not accept a Jewish state in their midst. Not now, not ever.”*

Based on this conviction, Binyamin Netanyahu has formulated his condition for peace: “The Arabs must recognize Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People”.

This is ludicrous. Sure, the “Arabs” must recognize the State of Israel. Indeed, Yasser Arafat did so officially on behalf of the Palestinian people on the eve of the Oslo

¹If tomorrow all US Jews were seized by messianic fervor and immigrated en masse to Israel, this would be a terrible catastrophe for the “Jewish State”.

agreement. But defining the character of the State of Israel or its regime is the sole responsibility of the citizens of Israel.

We do not recognize China as a Communist country. We do not recognize the US as a capitalist country—not did we, in the past, recognize the US as a White Protestant country. We do not recognize Sweden as a Swedish country. The whole thing is ridiculous. But nobody, inside Israel or outside, dares to tell Netanyahu to sleep it off.

But on one point Netanyahu touches something fundamental. Peace between Israel and Palestine—and, by extension, with the entire Arab and Muslim world—requires a basic mental change both in Israel and in Palestine. A piece of paper is not enough.

ON THE eve of the 1948 war, in which the State of Israel was born, I published a brochure called “War or Peace in the Semitic Region”. It started with the words:

“When our fathers decided to set up a ‘safe’ haven in Palestine, they had to choose between two alternatives:

“They could appear in West Asia as a European conqueror, who sees himself as a bridgehead of the ‘white’ race and a master of the ‘natives’, like the Spanish conquistadores and the Anglo-Saxon colonialists in America. So, in their time, did the Crusaders in Palestine.

“The other way was to see themselves as an Asian people returning to its homeland. . .

A year later, near the end of the war, I was seriously wounded. Lying in hospital, without sleeping or eating for many days, I had ample time to think and draw conclusions from my recent experiences as a soldier in combat. I came to the conclusion that there exists an Arab Palestinian people, that this people needs a state of its own, and that there would never be peace between us and them unless a State of Palestine came into being next to our own new state.

That was the start of the “Two-state” idea as it is now discussed. In the following years, it was rejected by everybody—by the Arabs, the US and the Soviet Union. And of course by all the successive Israeli governments. Golda Meir famously said: “There is no such thing as a Palestinian people!”

Today, the Two-state Solution has become a world consensus. Most Israelis accept it, if only in theory. Even Netanyahu pretends, from time to time, to accept it. But on what grounds?

Many of its new adherents adopt it as a good way to “separate”. As Ehud Barak (the “villa-in-the-jungle” man) put it: “They will be there and we shall be here”.

This won't do. It is a negative attitude. Some of its adherents go for it because they are—quite rightly—afraid that otherwise Eretz Israel will become Eretz Ishmael, a bi-national state with an Arab majority. There already exists an Arab majority in the area between the Mediterranean sea and the Jordan river. Those who want a “Jewish State” are attracted by the Two-state Solution, but for the wrong reason.

But the main argument against this kind of thinking is that after a historical conflict already lasting for almost 140 years, this is not enough for achieving peace. One cannot achieve a historic peace with a mentality of war and conflict.

When, in hospital, I thought for the first time about this solution, with the war still in full swing, I did not think about “separation”. I was thinking about reconciliation between two peoples after a long-long conflict, two peoples living side by side in two free and national states, each under its own flag, without a wall between them. Indeed, I envisioned an open border, with free movement of people and goods.

This land—call it Palestine or Eretz Israel—is very small. Living in it in two mutually antagonistic states would be a nightmare. Therefore, some kind of free association, call it confederation or federation, is a sheer necessity. Setting it up and keeping it up needs a spirit of reconciliation.

Not just a negative peace, the absence of war, a cold peace of recriminations and mutual animosity, but a positive peace, a real peace, with each side understanding the basic motives of the other side, its historical narrative, its hopes and fears.

IS THIS possible?

Well, it happened between Germany and France after many centuries of conflict, including two World Wars.

Yes, I believe that it can happen here.