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Introduction



Some months ago, when Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation recognised each other, I had a vivid recollection of the night of 14–15 May 1948, when Israel declared its independence. I was nine years old. I remember my father coming to my bed and lying beside me in the dark. ‘When I was a boy, I was beaten in school in Russia and then in Poland for being a little Jew’, he said. ‘You may still get beaten in school, but not for being a Jew. This is what the State of Israel is all about.’ In the darkness I could suddenly feel his tears. It was the only time in my life that my father cried in my presence.

The next morning, within hours of Israel’s declaration of independence, five Arab armies invaded the country from all directions. The Jewish section of Jerusalem was besieged for several months, bombarded by Jordanian artillery from the east and by Egyptian forces from the south. What had been, since the beginning of the century, a neighbourly feud between Arabs and Jews turned that night into a major international war.

Twice in my life, in 1967 and again in 1973, I saw the face of

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war as a reservist soldier, first in Sinai and then in the Golan Heights. That experience turned me into a peace activist, but not into a pacifist ready to turn the other cheek to an enemy. If anyone tries to take my life or the life of my people, I will fight. I will fight if anyone tries to enslave us, but nothing short of the defence of life and freedom could make me take up arms. 'National interest', 'ancestral rights' and an extra bedroom for the nation are not reasons to go out on the battlefield.

As a teenager addicted to politics, I would do my shift as a night watchman along the perimeter fence of Kibbutz Hulda, secretly listening to the news on a portable radio. Through the night, I would wander between the transmissions of Jordan, Syria and Egypt. Whenever they referred to Israel, they used the term 'the Zionist entity'. The announcer would say, 'the so-called government of the so-called state', but would stop short of pronouncing the word Israel, as if it were a four-letter word. The Arab world, primarily the Palestinians, dealt with us as if we were nothing more than a passing infection.

I remember how those nights in Kibbutz Hulda, about three miles from the pre-1967 armistice lines, were punctuated by fires and explosions on the eastern horizon as we guarded against the fedayeen, which is what the Palestinian infiltrators were called. On the Israeli radio station, you could hear the rhetoric of a society of armed settlers: 'Our generation, and perhaps generations to come, are destined to plough the fields while carrying a gun.' At that time I didn't think I would see an Israel-Arab peace in my lifetime. The term 'Palestinians' was hardly used in those days. It was almost as unpronounceable for Israelis as 'Israel' was for the Arabs. We used to talk about 'refugees', 'terrorists' or simply 'the enemy'. Since the Israeli occupation of

the West Bank and Gaza Strip, most of us simply refer to them as locals. One winter night I shared my guard duty in Kibbutz Hulda with an elderly ideologue (without the illicit radio). With a strangely ironic expression on his face, he suddenly whispered to me, 'What do you expect from those Palestinians? From their point of view, aliens have landed in their country and gradually taken some of it away, claiming that in return they will shower the natives with loving-kindness, and Palestinians simply said no thanks, and took to arms in order to repel the Zionist invaders.' Being the teenage product of a conventional Zionist upbringing, I was shocked by his use of the word Palestinians, as well as by the treacherous revelation that the enemy not only had a point of view, but a fairly convincing one at that.

His words eventually turned me into a relativist about the ethical dimension of the Israeli–Palestinian tragedy. There is nothing tragic about the conflict between Israel and Syria or Israel and Iran. They have been the aggressors, and we have defended ourselves as best we could. The case between Israelis and Palestinians is a tragedy precisely because it is a clash between one very powerful claim and another. Israelis are in the land of Israel because there is not and cannot be a national homeland for the Jews anywhere else. The Palestinians are in Palestine because their ancestors have been here for more than a thousand years. Where one powerful claim clashes with another, there can be either an endless cycle of bloodshed or a somewhat inconsistent compromise. Since 1967, the Israeli peace movement has advocated a compromise based on mutual recognition of the simple fact that one small country, about the size of the state of New Jersey, is the only homeland for two peoples. Wherever there is a clash between right and right, a

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value higher than right ought to prevail, and this value is life itself. I believe a similar premise underlies the changing attitudes towards peace among Palestinians.

I was one of the first of the few who tried to express the thought that the question concerning the areas with a dense Palestinian population was not a question about territories but about people. Or, more precisely, about the Palestinian people. This stance was problematical, both because Palestinian nationalism was not yet an established fact even for many Palestinians, and because no Arab government was willing to recognise the very existence of Israel, in whatever borders. The Arab summit in Khartoum in the autumn of 1967 resolved that there would be no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel and no direct negotiations with Israel. In these conditions it was difficult to voice a solution based on reciprocal recognition between the Israeli and Palestinian nations. This stance of 'no compromise' had come about as a result of the events of that summer. In June 1967 Nasser's Egypt, together with Syria, Jordan, Iraq and other Arab states, and accompanied by a chorus of ecstatic war-cries from the PLO, attacked Israel from all its borders with the declared aim of 'driving the Jews into the sea'. Within a week the Arab armies were defeated, and the Israelis were in control of the Old City of Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Desert. Almost at once an argument broke out within Israel which has carried on for the past twenty-five years, about what to do with these territories.

Towards the end of 1977 President Sadat came to Jerusalem and offered Israel total peace in return for total withdrawal. Within a couple of years a peace agreement was signed between Israel and Egypt on the basis of the return of the entire Sinai Peninsula

to Egypt in exchange for a comprehensive peace and effective de-militarisation of Sinai. For the first time the twin taboos were broken: the Arab taboo about recognising Israel and the Israeli taboo about dismantling settlements. Eleven years later, in the autumn of 1988, the PLO announced, in somewhat veiled terms, that it was willing to negotiate with Israel about a two-state solution, that is to say partition of the land between Israel and Palestine. It was not the Intifada but this change in the Palestinian position that really made possible the profound change in the thoughts and feeling of many Israelis. In September 1993 an agreement in principle was signed between Israel and the PLO in Oslo, and the position that my friends and I had maintained ever since June 1967 became the fundamental standpoint of all sides in the negotiations: territory in exchange for peace and security, and a recognition that the Land was the homeland of two nations.

For many years, fanatics on all sides have tried to turn this conflict into a holy war or a racial clash. Do-gooders outside the region tended to present it as a civil rights issue or simply as a sad misunderstanding. Fortunately, this conflict is essentially nothing but a dispute over property: whose house? Who is going to get how much out of it? Such conflicts can be resolved through compromise. I believe in a two-state solution that can be achieved only step by step: Israeli recognition of the Palestinian right of self-determination in part of the land, in return for Arab readiness to meet Israel's legitimate security provisions. Now that the agreement is signed, the two parties are not about to fall in love with each other (especially in the light of such incidents as the tragic Hebron massacre). Yet the parties do not need to see eye to eye regarding who was David

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and who was Goliath in this conflict. (Obviously if one focuses on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, then the Israelis are a clumsy Goliath, whereas the stone-throwing Palestinians are brave little David. Yet by changing the zoom and putting the frame around the conflict between almost 5 million Israelis and more than 100 million Arabs, and perhaps several hundreds of millions of Muslims, the question of David and Goliath looks very different.) Luckily, Israelis and Palestinians and other Arabs can conclude their conflict even without agreeing about the narrative.

Many Israelis and certain past Israeli governments are guilty of blindness to the gradual emergence, perhaps as a by-product of modern Zionism, of a Palestinian national persona. The Palestinian national movement, for its part, has brought disaster upon the two peoples by taking an uncompromising stance towards the Israeli national persona. It may have blinded itself by perceiving Zionism as a colonial phenomenon. Actually, the early Zionists had absolutely nothing to colonise in this country when they began to return to it nearly one hundred years ago: it has no resources. In terms of colonial exploitation, the Zionists have involved themselves in the worst bargain of all times, as they have brought into the country thousands of times more wealth than they could ever hope to get out of it.

Both parties, in two different ways, are victims of Christian Europe: the Arabs through colonialism, imperialism, oppression, and exploitation, while the Jews have been the victims of discrimination, pogroms, expulsions and, ultimately, mass murder. According to the mythology of Bertold Brecht, victims always develop a sense of mutual solidarity, marching together to the barricades as they chant Brecht's verses. In real life some of the worst conflicts develop precisely between victims of

the same oppressors: two children of the same cruel parent do not necessarily love each other. They often see in each other the image of their past oppressor. So it is, to some extent, between Israelis and Arabs: the Arabs fail to see us as a bunch of survivors. They see in us a nightmarish extension of the oppressing colonising Europeans. We Israelis often look at Arabs not as fellow victims but as an incarnation of our past oppressors: Cossacks, pogrom-makers, Nazis who have grown moustaches and wrapped themselves in kaffiyehs, but who are still in the usual business of cutting Jewish throats.

Naturally, all sides are uneasy, even worried, about the present breakthrough. Many Palestinians fear that 'Gaza and Jericho first' is nothing but a disguise for an Israeli plot to get away with 'Gaza and Jericho only'. Many Israelis, for their part, fear that Israel is about to give away land and forfeit strategic assets in return for nothing more than a piece of paper, a sweet document that may easily be torn to shreds the following day. Some of those apprehensions can be alleviated when people on both sides realise that the present contract contains an element of time as well as one of space: the fulfilment of Palestinian national rights in the Occupied Territories is going to be implemented over a period of several years, delivered not mile by mile, but one attribute of sovereignty after another, so that Israel will have the time to find out if the Arab and Palestinian peace cheque does not bounce.

The present agreement is not accompanied by a burst of brotherly emotion on both sides. If anything, Israelis and Palestinians may be feeling like patients awakening from an anaesthetised slumber after amputation surgery, discovering with pain and frustration that things are never going to be the same again.

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This is the time for well-meaning governments and individuals outside the region to stop wagging their fingers in disapproval and instead to consider the prompt incorporation of a peaceful Middle East into larger security and economic systems, thus helping both sides to overcome some of their fears. This is the time to develop a Marshall Plan for the Middle East, in order to help resettle almost a million Palestinian refugees as well as a similar number of Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union and elsewhere. I believe within fifteen years a peaceful, prosperous Middle East will be able not only to repay the sponsors of such a Marshall Plan but even to extend material aid to other, less privileged parts of the world.

The labours of peacemaking are not concluded once the treaty is signed. Courageous sappers on both sides must start clearing the emotional minefields, the aftermath of war, removing mutual stereotypes created by many years of fear and hatred. Describing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a tragic clash between right and right, I maintain that we do not want a Shakespearian conclusion, with poetic justice hovering over a stage littered with dead bodies. We may now be nearing a typical Chekhovian conclusion for the tragedy: the players disillusioned and worried, but alive. This is not the end of history. But come what may, Israelis and Palestinians will never again have to get past the terrible emotional obstacle of shaking hands for the first time. The cognitive barrier has begun to be broken down.

Let us not forget that even now there are still different sets of clocks at work in the Middle East. The real rift is no longer between Jew and Arab but rather between past-oriented and future-oriented people on both sides. I believe there is a good chance that the future will prevail over the past. Together the

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Israelis and the Palestinians are today sending a resounding message to every agonised corner of the earth: if we can compromise with each other and turn our backs to violence despite 100 years of sound and fury, is peace not possible between all deadly enemies in the world?

The essays in this collection are mostly concerned with these two themes: the painful route of peace and compromise between Israel and the Palestinians, and indeed the Arab world, and the fascinating story of the revival of the Hebrew language and its literature. This revival can indeed be seen as the most certain achievement of Zionism. A language that for some eighteen centuries had hardly been spoken in everyday life has become in ninety years a language spoken daily by about six million people, a language that is developing with an explosive power comparable to Elizabethan English, with one of the most dynamic and exciting literatures in the world today. The theme of the book is therefore, in a very real and pressing sense, the theme of renewal. While the essays in question were written in the 1960s and 1970s, the fears expressed in them still exist. The hopes they describe now seem a little closer to reality.

(This introduction is an expanded version of an article which appeared in *Time* magazine on 20 September 1993)