

A PALESTINIAN VIEW

The demographic argument is inherently racist

An interview with Hanan Ashrawi

Bitterlemons: Israel's demand to be recognized as a "Jewish state" at Annapolis caused an uproar among Palestinians. This doesn't seem like a new demand, so why the uproar?

Ashrawi: It is new in a sense. It is new as a prerequisite for negotiations. The demand has always been the recognition of Israel. Then Israel added the recognition of Israel's "right to exist", and then the recognition of it's right to exist as a "Jewish state". But when the PLO recognized Israel in 1993 there was an assumption that that was it, in the context of a two-state solution and international law and UN General Assembly Resolution 181 and Security Council Resolution 242.

This issue of the Jewishness of the state came up recently mainly because of the so-called demographic issue--which to me is an inherently racist issue--which became the central motivation for the two-state solution among the Israeli right, including Ariel Sharon. The fear of the demographic balance, projections for the birthrate and so on, led people to this position, and now Israel wants to ensure that there is always a Jewish majority.

Bitterlemons: Why is this position unacceptable to the Palestinians?

Ashrawi: Once you start raising this issue it means that you want to eliminate the Palestinian refugees' right of return because they happen not to be Jewish. Israel sees the return of Palestinian refugees as a demographic way of destroying the state of Israel. Hence it has become a main prerequisite for qualification for the "good housekeeping seal": if you are a Palestinian who adheres to the right of return you are not qualified for negotiations or as an interlocutor because you want to destroy Israeli demographically.

It is also unacceptable to the Palestinian citizens of Israel. These are the people saying Israel should be a state for all its citizens. The irony is that this is seen as something entirely unacceptable by Israel. But every state should be a state for all its citizens. It cannot be a state for a select number of citizens depending on ethnicity or religious affiliation. So in a sense, Israel also wants the Palestinians to negate the right of Palestinian citizens of Israel and ensure that they remain second or third class citizens.

Finally, there is a question of principle. People recognize states. They do not recognize the right of any state to exist. The moment you recognize a state you recognize its right to exist. But you don't recognize the nature of the regime or form of governance. I don't only recognize the US as long as it maintains a democratic, presidential system, France as long as it is a secular republic or Iran as long as it is an Islamic state. It is ironic that at a time when we as Palestinians are struggling to have a state that's pluralistic, democratic, open, inclusive and tolerant and are fighting internally against absolutist and exclusionary ideologies, we are asked by Israel to accept their form of exclusionary ideology.

Bitterlemons: Israel claims that upholding the right of return would be the end of a two-state solution because two Palestinian states would essentially be created. Is this a fair position?

Ashrawi: A right is a right and it cannot be negotiated. You do not enter negotiations having relinquished a right and violated international law. You have to uphold international law, recognize rights and then negotiate their implementation.

It is Israel that is destroying the two-state solution with its settlements and by refusing to accept a viable democratic state on the 1967 borders. There are now voices increasingly calling for a one-state solution and democracy as the answer, with one voice and one vote.

To me, the demographic argument is by definition racist. I think Palestinians have the right to independence, statehood and self-determination as a legal and political imperative. It is not an issue that has to become a threat or that we formulate in response to somebody else's position.

Bitterlemons: Israel says the idea of two states for two peoples is embodied by UNGA Resolution 181. Is this your interpretation?

Ashrawi: The language used was a "Jewish state" and an "Arab state". If they want to accept 181, then let us take all of it. Then we go back to the whole partition plan. We have agreed to give them 78 percent of historic Palestine. If they want to use 181, then they can have 54 percent of Palestine and then they can say they have a "Jewish state".

Bitterlemons: But is that your understanding of 181? Does it call for this kind of ethnic division?

Ashrawi: No it doesn't. But it describes the state as Jewish and that's why Israel wants to use it. 181 was a response to the Jewish Question. It was decided to give part of Palestine to Jews for as long as it would not endanger the rights of the indigenous Palestinian population. Now Jews have a state. But does this mean that this state can be exclusionary and discriminatory? Does it mean that this is the language that should be used in twenty-first century? If they want to use 181, let's take it in its totality.

Bitterlemons: In view of the apparent US endorsement of the Israeli demand, what can Palestinians do?

Ashrawi: We don't have to accept the Israeli demand. If anyone came up and said the US should be legitimate only as a Christian state there would be an outcry. But the fact that the US took their cue from the Israelis and adopted Israeli language is not new. It doesn't mean we have to accept it.

Bitterlemons: But how significant is it?

Ashrawi: It depends on how you pursue it. It's significant in the sense that the US adopted the Israeli position, but this is not new. But will it be translated into concrete steps when it comes to refugees, or the suggestion by some Israeli racists of a land swap based on demography? Would the US endorse such racist solutions? Would they accept the negation of the rights of Palestinians? That's the issue.

Bitterlemons: Do the Americans understand that this is the issue?

Ashrawi: If they don't, they have no business mediating. The implications of these words are enormous. The Palestinians see this as a way of forcing them to accept the Israeli narrative and therefore negate the Palestinian narrative and Palestinian legitimacy. If you want a peace process you have to incorporate the legitimacy of the Palestinian narrative.

Hanan Ashrawi is a Palestinian legislator and a member of the Third Way party.

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