



Israel's Bogus Civil War

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Is Israel on the verge of civil war, as a growing number of Israeli commentators suggest, with its Jewish population deeply riven over the future of the occupation?

On one side is a new peace movement, Decision at 50, stuffed with former political and security leaders. Ehud Barak, a previous prime minister who appears to be seeking a political comeback, may yet emerge as its figurehead.

The group has demanded the government hold a referendum next year – the half-centenary of Israel's occupation, which began in 1967 – on whether it is time to leave the territories. Its own polling shows a narrow majority ready to concede a Palestinian state.



On the other is Benjamin Netanyahu, in power for seven years with the most right-wing government in Israel's history. On Friday he posted a video on social media criticising those who want to end the occupation.

Observing that a Palestinian state would require removing hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers currently living – illegally – on Palestinian land, Netanyahu concluded: "There's a phrase for that. It's called ethnic cleansing."

Not only did the comparison upend international law, but Netanyahu infuriated the Obama

administration by implying that, in seeking to freeze settlement growth, the US had supported such ethnic cleansing. A spokeswoman called the comments “inappropriate and unhelpful” – Washington-speak for deceitful and inflammatory.

But the Israeli prime minister is not the only one hoodwinking his audience.

Whatever its proponents imply, the Decision at 50 referendum is about neither peace nor the Palestinians’ best interests. Its assumption is that yet again the Israeli public should determine unilaterally the Palestinians’ fate.

Although the exact wording is yet to be decided, the referendum’s backers appear concerned solely with the status of the West Bank.

An Israeli consensus believes Gaza has been free of occupation since the settlers were pulled out in 2005, despite the fact that Israel still surrounds most of the coastal strip with soldiers, patrols its air space with drones and denies access to the sea.

The same unyielding, deluded Israeli consensus has declared East Jerusalem, the expected capital of a Palestinian state, as instead part of Israel’s “eternal capital”.

But the problem runs deeper still. When the new campaign proudly cites new figures showing that 58 per cent support “two states for two nations”, it glosses over what most Israelis think such statehood would entail for the Palestinians.

A survey in June found 72 per cent do not believe the Palestinians live under occupation, while 62 per cent told pollsters last year they think Palestinians have no rights to a nation.

When Israelis talk in favour of a Palestinian state, it is chiefly to thwart a far bigger danger – a single state shared with the “enemy”. The Decision at 50 poll shows 87 per cent of Israeli Jews dread a binational conclusion to the conflict. Ami Ayalon, a former head of the Shin Bet intelligence service and a leader of Decision at 50, echoed them, warning of an “approaching disaster”.

So what do Israelis think a Palestinian state should look like? Previous surveys have been clear. It would not include Jerusalem or control its borders. It would be territorially carved up to preserve the “settlement blocs”, which would be annexed to Israel. And most certainly it would be “demilitarised” – without an army or air force.

In other words, Palestinians would lack sovereignty. Such a state exists only in the imagination of the Israeli public. A Palestinian state on these terms would simply be an extension of the Gaza model to the West Bank.

Nonetheless, the idea of a civil war is gaining ground. Tamir Pardo, the recently departed head of Israel’s spy agency Mossad, warned last month that Israel was on the brink of tearing itself apart through “internal divisions”.

He rated this a bigger danger than any of the existential threats posited by Mr Netanyahu, such as Iran’s supposed nuclear bomb.

But the truth is that there is very little ideologically separating most Israeli Jews. All but a tiny minority wish to see the Palestinians continue as a subjugated people. For the great majority, a Palestinian state means nothing more than a makeover of the occupation,

penning up the Palestinians in slightly more humane conditions.

After many years in power, the right is growing in confidence. It sees no price has been paid, either at home or abroad, for endlessly tightening the screws on the Palestinians.

Israeli moderates have had to confront the painful reality that their country is not quite the enlightened outpost in the Middle East they had imagined. They may raise their voices in protest now but, if the polls are right, most will eventually submit to the right's realisation of its vision of a Greater Israel.

Those who cannot stomach such an outcome will have to stop equivocating and choose a side. They can leave, as some are already doing, or stay and fight - not for a bogus referendum that solves nothing, but to demand dignity and freedom for the Palestinian people.

A version of this article first appeared in the National, Abu Dhabi.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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