

Is Israel Becoming an International Pariah?

Written by Josef Olmert

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/25/is-israel-becoming-an-international-pariah/>

JOSEF OLMERT, FEB 25 2013

These are interesting days in the Middle East. The Arab Spring which started two years ago with so much promise and hope has deteriorated into a series of bloody conflicts, such as the civil war in Syria claiming almost 100,000 lives, near civil war in Egypt, chaos in Libya, anarchy in Tunisia, and impending crisis in Jordan. Yet, the best universities in the western world continue, as if by Pavlovian conditioning, to be engaged, in fact to be obsessed, with their old game plan of Israel bashing. So, old habits die hard, and the habit of blaming Israel and the Zionist movement for practically every evil existing under the sun is very old indeed. It is in this context, that a question such as whether Israel has become an international pariah can even be asked. No, Israel is not an international pariah, nor is it an Apartheid State, neither a colonial implant in the midst of the "Arab and Muslim Middle East".

Let us start with a somewhat technical rebuttal of this slight. On 20 March 2013, President Barack Obama will come to Israel; his first overseas visit in his second term. He will convey to the Israeli people the friendship and support of the American people, which according to the latest public opinion poll from the Pew Research Centre, prefers Israelis over the Palestinians by a vast plurality [5:1].

Just months ago, Vladimir Putin paid Israel a visit, also his first visit abroad in his second term. In between, Israel was a popular destination for many other, less significant world leaders, and P.M. Netanyahu was a welcome guest in many European capitals. In July of 2013, the most popular sports team in the world, Barcelona F.C will be in Israel, playing against a mixed team of Israelis and Palestinians. So, what does the legendary Leo Messi know that other people in Spain or any other country still do not know? A country which attracts so many high-level visits surely cannot be seen as an international pariah, but that is just the tip of the iceberg.

Israel is not an international pariah or an Apartheid State because of so many other reasons. Weeks ago, the Israeli people went to the polls to elect their new Knesset. 15 Arab and Druze members were elected. When the State President entered the chamber, and was greeted with the singing of the national anthem, most of the Arab parliamentarians left in protest, against the "Jewish character" of the anthem. They continue to serve and no action was taken against them. Apartheid? Not really. There is one law in the Israeli book of laws, which is discriminatory; this is the Law of Return, which is not against non-Jews, rather an affirmative action on behalf of Jews, giving them automatic citizenship when they move to Israel, something which is not similarly granted to non-Jews. There is a reason for this. It is called the Holocaust, when 6 million Jews were murdered, and there was no Jewish state that could open its gates and save them. Nor, for that matter, was there was any other state which was ready to do so.

Does Israel treat its Arab minority as it should? Probably not. The first State President Haim Weitzman said, that the Jews, being the eternal persecuted minority in world history, should give an example in their own state, as to how to treat a minority. There are problems, and they should be dealt with seriously by Israel, however Arabs are represented in the Knesset, their per capita income is much higher than that of nearly all the Arabs in neighboring countries, and so is their level of literacy and medical services. But there is of course something else to be discussed in this regard. With the establishment of Israel in 1948, many Arabs remained within the new state's boundaries, and their number rose from 160,000 then, to almost 1.5 million in 2013; all are citizens of the state. Jews, on the other hand, who lived in territories occupied by Arab armies, were either massacred or forced out; see the case of the areas occupied by Jordan, which became known as the West Bank.

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Apartheid? Yes, but by the Arab side. Add up to that, the expulsion and forced departure of nearly a million Jews from Arab countries after 1948 and their absorption in Israel. Is it just a coincidence that no Jews are left in Arab countries, while so many Arabs live in Israel, and their number constantly grows?

Here again, it goes without saying, that in 1948, there were gross injustices caused to many Palestinians, who were deported by the Israelis. No need to deny that, and it is in the democratic context of Israeli life, that it can be said, and people do not risk their life in saying it. Every injustice should be corrected, that which was caused to Arabs, but also that which was caused to Jews. This is how the double refugee problem of both Arabs and Jews can be resolved, by mutual recognition of injustices, by reparations, and not through one-sided solutions which will put in danger the very existence of Israel. Thus the future independent Palestinian State, which will hopefully be established as a result of negotiations and a final peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, should absorb Palestinian refugees, exactly as Israel did so successfully with Jewish refugees of the conflict, ever since 1948.

In the absence of this desirable peace solution, Israelis and Palestinians are living side by side in the disputed territories of the West Bank/Judea and Samaria. This is a taxing reality for both groups. A complete separation between them is impractical and immoral. To be sure, there are the Palestinians and their supporters in the world who want that these territories to be *Judenrein* (the Nazi term for an area without Jews). This is the essence of Apartheid, and this is advocated by those who blame Israel for doing exactly that. In any solution, Jews and Arabs will remain side-by-side in these territories. Palestinians will have to accept a novel concept that Jews can live amidst them. Jews will have to accept an unpleasant, though unavoidable reality, whereby they will maintain their undisputed historic and human right to live where they are, and yet be subjected to Arab rule; that of the independent Palestinian State which will have to respect them as a minority. We have a bad precedent though, one which should lead people of good will to wonder if this expectation from a Palestinian Government is realistic; Gaza. There are no Jews left there, but also no peace, as the experience of two bloody confrontations indicates. There are hardly any Christians left there, and homosexuals are physically harassed, yet the knights of Justice in many Western Universities somehow choose to ignore all that.

Furthermore is the allegation that Zionism is colonialism. Usually, the histories of indigenous peoples are the ones buried under the rubbles, forgotten in time. But even a superficial visit to Jerusalem reveals what history has been buried for so long, the history of the Jewish people, who are, and have always been, the real indigenous people of the land. There is a name to the land in Hebrew, a very old one, *Eretz Israel*; but not one in Arabic. Palestine is not an Arabic word, and the name *Falastina* was given to the land by the Romans after they destroyed the Jewish state in the year 70 A.D., and the following Bar-Kochba rebellion of 132-135 A.D.

It is arguably the case, that many in the West, particularly old and neo-Marxists, as well as deranged anti-Jewish bigots of all stripes, cannot grasp the reality of Jewish nationalism, aka Zionism. Yes, it is a unique phenomenon in world history, including the non-stop attraction of the exiled Jews to their homeland, the revival of their national language and the ingathering of the scattered, oppressed Jews from four corners of the world in their never forgotten homeland. When people are confronted with a reality so much at variance with their fixed ideological bias, they tend to negate the very existence of this reality, its existence, and its right to be. So, what is so new about that? Jews have been subjected to opposition to their very existence for 2000 years. This is the longest recorded hatred in human history, and it is expressed nowadays through anti-Zionism, reference to Israel as an Apartheid State, or as an international pariah, with the obvious bottom line of negating the right of Jews for statehood and nationhood.

The term pariah is not so nice, to put it mildly. In fact, I can come up with a long list of real pariahs in our world, and they are not necessarily Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. I refer to all those so-called pro-Palestinians in the world, who are located far away from where the conflict takes place, but they do their best/worst to keep the conflict going, to keep the fire, to perpetuate the suffering and bloodshed of both Israelis and Palestinians. They do it also by boycotting Israel, by calling for its elimination as the nation state of the Jewish people, by talking about Apartheid and pariah states. They are failing, but they cause damage. They encourage militant Palestinians to believe that Israel will disappear, only because they want it to happen. They encourage ultra-nationalist Israelis to believe that the entire world is against them, like it was throughout history. Both conclusions are wrong.

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It is about time for another narrative, one which does not play up the fears of people, rather one which promotes their hopes, and in a climate of hope, there is no place for pariahs, boycotts and old hatreds, even if expressed in modern terms.

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