

STATE-BUILDING AND THE QUEST FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The nation-state has dominated the history of the last two centuries, both as an idea and as a reality.

As an idea, it seems to satisfy a deep human need: to belong to a large group, to identify with a nation's distinct culture, language and history, whether real or imagined. The feeling of belonging to a "we", as distinct from "them", provides the individual with a sense of certainty and security. This is true whether the "I" is required to submerge itself in the "We", as in totalitarian societies, or the "We" is deemed to be an extension of the "I" in a democratic one.

At the beginning of the nationalist phase of Western civilization, the medium-sized nation-state was a good match for the technological, economic and military realities. It provided the new industrial economy with a minimum necessary local market, enabled society to keep up with the new technological development and created the military capabilities necessary for an efficient defence in the age of mass armies.

No wonder, then, that no competitor could replace nationalism as the dominant ideology. Marx's dictum that the proletariat has no fatherland died on the battlefields of World War I, when the proletarians of all nations killed each other with great enthusiasm. Communism failed dismally in its effort to supplant nationalism. In the former Soviet Union, after 70 years of an unrelenting internationalist education, communism just disappeared and the old blatant nationalism raised its head again, as if nothing had happened in the meantime.

In the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, nationalism conquered the world. Starting from countries like France and Germany, it took hold of the host of small peoples in Eastern Europe. Poles, Czechs, Lithuanians, Serbs and all the others rose up and demanded nation-states of their own, breaking up first the old multi-national dynastic empires and then the new communist ones.

From Europe, nationalism expanded to Asia, Africa and the Americas, until no nation in the world remained immune from it. In some countries, nationalism assumed communist forms, as in China and Vietnam, in others it has a strong religious component, as in Iran. But it was nationalism that gave all these movement their irresistible power.

In a way, this is ironic. The material circumstances that provided the basis of the classic nation-state have already made way for new realities, rendering the nation-state obsolete. A country like France, Germany or Spain no longer provides a sufficient base for a modern economy, an efficient defence, technological and scientific progress and communications. For these, much bigger, regional (or, indeed, global) units are needed.

Yet the nation-state remains. The material reality may change rapidly, but human consciousness changes only slowly, if at all. Nationalism flourishes, even as the nation-state is losing many of its functions to multi-national structures.

After World War II, when Europeans realized that they had to unite in order to compete with giants like the United States of America and the Communist bloc, it would have been logical to create a United States of Europe. Instead, Charles de Gaulle's formula of a "Europe of the Nations" was adopted. The various nation-states remain in existence, each with its own flag and government and football team, while economic and military decision-making is transferred more and more to the European Union, NATO and even the United Nations.

(An interesting side effect of this development is the claim for autonomy or independence by smaller and smaller peoples. In the heyday of nationalism, Bretons and Corsicans in France, Scots and Welsh in the United Kingdom, Basques and Catalans in Spain realized, or were compelled to realize, that they needed to be part of a larger nation-state for economic and military reasons. Since these affairs are now in supra-national hands, some parties among these smaller peoples see no reason for remaining in a state dominated by a different people. They think they can be part of the European Union, for example, as a separate unit, and enjoy the feeling of independence.)

The conflict in the Middle East must be viewed against the background of these worldwide developments. It is a unique conflict, resulting from a unique historical process that I will not go into now (much as I am tempted to). Suffice it to say that now there are two nations living in the small country that until 1948 was called Palestine, locked in a conflict that started 120 years ago and which continues in an unbroken cycle of bloody violence.

In 1947, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution – more intelligent than most – to partition Palestine between a Jewish and an Arab state, 55% for the Jews, 45% for the Arabs. The Jewish party accepted the decision, the Arab party rejected it, and in the ensuing war the new state of Israel took possession of 78% of the country. The Arab Palestinian state did not come into being, falling victim to the ambitions of other Arab states and Israeli machinations.

Already 54 years ago, my friends and I warned that this state of affairs would prevent peace as long as it lasted. We felt sure that the Palestinian nation would never make peace without attaining what every other people in the world desires: a sovereign, independent and viable state of their own. This warning was rejected until recently by all Israeli governments. They simply denied the existence of a Palestinian people (much as the French government insisted in the 1950s that there was no Algerian people.)

Why do Israeli governments deny the Palestinians a state of their own? Israel has no fixed borders. From its inception, it has refused to define them. The reason is that important elements in Israel, led now by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, want to include all of Palestine in Israel, leaving to the Palestinians, at best, some isolated, Bantustan-like semi-autonomous enclaves.

On the Palestinian side, the demand for a state of their own is now stronger than ever. Thirty-six years of Israeli occupation have not blunted this desire, on the contrary, the more brutal and inhuman the occupation has become, the stronger and more violent the resistance. This could easily be foreseen. Indeed, my friends and I warned many times that this was bound to happen.

In 1988, the Palestinian National Council, led by Yasser Arafat, declared its readiness to set up the State of Palestine in only 22% of their historic homeland - the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with its capital in East Jerusalem. Since then, the clash between this moderate demand and its rebuff by all Israeli government is at the centre of the conflict, though there are also several other bones of contention.

Thirty years ago, support for the so-called “two-state solution” was restricted to some dozens of people throughout the world. It was dismissed by the “national consensus” in Israel, by the Palestinian liberation movement and by practically all world powers. I vividly remember trying to canvass support for it in Washington and European capitals, and meeting a wall of resistance.

Now there is a worldwide consensus in favour of “two states for two peoples”. Public opinion polls show that a majority of Israelis, as well as the overwhelming majority of Palestinians, support this idea, which has now officially been adopted by the “Quartet” consisting of Europe, the United States, Russia and the UN, in the framework of the so-called Road Map.

During times of hopelessness, all kind of weird ideas thrive. Some intellectuals have recently resurrected the old and discarded idea of a “bi-national” state – meaning that neither Israelis nor Palestinians will have a nation-state of their own, but will live peacefully together in a joint state.

This flies in the face of all historical experience, including the most recent in the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, the former Czechoslovakia, Cyprus and many other places. It is unthinkable that this or the next generation of Israelis will give up their own national state, for which they have fought so hard. It is even more unlikely that the Palestinians, after all they have suffered, will give up their dream to live, at long last, under their own flag.

Peace will come when a real State of Palestine comes into being next to the State of Israel. This will lead to some kind of joint economic structure, perhaps involving Jordan, and, beyond that, to some Middle Eastern association on the lines of the European Union. Some decades ago I proposed calling this the “Semitic Union”.

This is not the best solution; it is the o n l y solution. It will not come about easily; it will need a huge commitment of idealism as well as dedicated practical work. In the completion of this historic task, we of the Israeli peace movement are ready to shoulder our share.