



Israel, Palestine and the middle east Reversing recolonisation

An interview with Michel Warschawski

How much impact have the revisionist 'new historians' made on the Israeli people with their questioning of the official narratives about 1948 and 1967?

The period between the Lebanese war [of the 1980s] and 2000, almost two decades, was extremely important in raising a self-questioning of Israeli society and its elites. The feeling of being in real danger declined very much, the feeling of being a big power took its place. And also there was a generational phenomenon, a new generation that was not directly involved in the Nakba. This opened the way for very deep self-questioning: a lot of articles, discussion on the TV, a kind of intellectual and political renaissance, framing questions which had been erased or marginalised before. It became part of the main discourse, with one exception: the concept of colonialism, which is key to understanding everything. On the factual level, there was definitely a very serious repositioning of the Israeli self-perception, opening doors to the future: What kind of relationship do we want with the Palestinians? What is a Jewish democratic state? Can there even be such a thing? All of this ended in 2000-1, with the reappropriation of the old discourse of 'the whole world is against us', only now it was the whole Muslim world that was against us, internalising the idea of a 'clash of civilisations', Israel as the front line of civilisation threatened by the barbarians, having to protect itself and the whole civilised world. The war of reconquest of the achievements of the Palestinians was perceived by the Israeli people as a war against a major global threat to their existence. So the old discourse came back, in a new way but fundamentally the same as before.

Obviously the transition that you're talking about was directly related to the collapse of the Oslo agreement and the Camp David talks. Ehud Barak and Bill Clinton have maintained the line since then that Arafat was offered a fair deal, a viable Palestinian state, and so Israel had no choice but to turn to repression when he turned it down.

I think this argument of Barak after Camp David is maybe the biggest lie since the burning of the Reichstag. It was a constructed, planned propaganda war intended to put the blame on the Palestinians. It was not a misunderstanding or a disagreement at Camp David between the Palestinians and the Israelis as to who was not soft enough or flexible enough. Barak was opposed to the Oslo process from the very first day when he was chief of staff. Rabin had to say: 'Shut up, you are military, we don't ask your advice.' All the prime ministers after the assassination of Rabin (except the short time of Peres, which is insignificant) were against the Oslo deal: Netanyahu, Barak, Sharon. They all had a plan to destroy this process, not to get a better deal. There was a clear intention from the Israeli government since 1996 and the coming to power of the Israeli neo-conservatives to end the parenthesis of decolonisation and replace it with recolonisation. This policy started with Netanyahu, and at Camp David everything was done consciously, cynically, to make it fail.

It was argued at the time by many people who were prominent in support of the Palestinian cause, like Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, that the Oslo agreement could never work, that it was simply a case of transferring policing of the occupied territories to Arafat and the PLO while retaining control over borders and resources. Do you think there was ever a chance that it could have led to an independent Palestinian state?

This is an old debate, and I don't think it can ever be truly answered. Unlike the method of Noam, which I've discussed with him for twenty years, I don't think generally in politics everything is planned from the beginning. You have inner contradictions in each plan, you have inner contradictions in each person. Rabin is a classic example: hesitating always, looking for advantages and risks, finding it hard to take decisions. Sometimes one individual can change the course of events. The process was fully supported by the economic elites of Israel because they saw huge material opportunities. They had this kind of racist dream of the middle east being a sort of desert where the Israelis will come, now there is peace, and plant their high technologies, not trees this time but computers. There were very strong vested interests – not only a very strong popular feeling that peace is better than war and that an agreement can be a way to a better life – but also a clear interest. The army and the settlers were the resisting force to these forces, and Rabin hesitated between these trends. So in that sense I disagree with the Noam Chomsky kind of determinism that it was doomed to fail from the beginning. History does offer crossroads where you can take one way or another.

I would add another dimension which can explain the whole peculiarity of this period. The very end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century is a global turning point. It is the end of the long period of decolonisation and the beginning of a new period of recolonisation launched by Bush and the neo-conservatives. Oslo came at the hinge of these two periods. It was the last moment for decolonisation of the 20th century, maybe too late, at a time when the trend is beginning to turn. Rabin acted on the very well-established conception in Israel that occupation has to be ended some day (this was even an idea held by most of the right wing). Most of the Israeli public and its leaders considered occupation as something un-natural. Then after the murder of Rabin, you had the coming to power of the neo-conservatives. So it could have been the very last decolonisation, and instead it became the first recolonisation.

Not only is this recolonisation trend reversible, you can see already the trend reversing. This strategy went into trouble in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon. This unilateral behaviour of the US state has been extremely harmful, it has provoked disasters, and not achieved its goals. This is why we have the Baker-Hamilton report from within the American establishment, senior US figures saying: 'We are losing more than we are gaining', and I can see already the change coming. Of course, a big power like the US turns like a truck, not like a bicycle: it takes a while.

Up until the 1980s, the dominant political currents in many Arab countries tended to be secular and often left-wing. The main rivals to Fatah in the Palestinian movement were the left-wing groups. Now Hamas has replaced the PLO left, Hezbollah in Lebanon has completely sidelined the Lebanese Communist Party. Even if there is a shift towards a more pragmatic stance in Israel or the west, is it possible to have a dialogue with groups like Hamas when their own ideology makes it much harder to do so?

My answer is yes, clearly yes. Firstly I think, in the same way it's absurd to speak about the secular camp when talking about the west, where you have Sarkozy as part of the secular camp, but you also have the radical left – it's not a camp, it's an artificial concept imposed from outside – it's the same thing with Islam. There is nothing in common between the party in power in Turkey and Al-Qaeda, even though they are both 'political Islam'. Second, this is part of the racist perception of Islam, that political Islamists are always seen as fanatics. A party like the AKP in Turkey, a part at least of the Republican Party in the USA, is a hundred times more fanatical than them. They are no more or less pragmatic and influenced by social realities than any other party.

Take Hamas. The evolution of Hamas reminds me very much of the evolution of Fatah, saying 'We will sit in a government that recognises *de facto* the state of Israel, without saying

we accept the legitimacy of Israel.' Hamas has recognised for two and a half years now its unilateral ceasefire. Politically, it has signed the Mecca agreement, supporting totally the line of Abu Mazen and the PLO leadership, giving them *carte blanche* for negotiating with Israel. Hezbollah is much more interesting. In my opinion it is a national liberation movement with an Islamic ideology, a Lebanese mass party, recently very much influenced by the left, with a firm connection with the Lebanese Communist Party that has had an enriching influence on both of them. I think it would be very much exaggerated to say that Hezbollah is an example of Muslim liberation theology, it is still very far from that, but I would say there is a trend that way within Hezbollah, which could develop. In Lebanon it will be very much part of any kind of movement or coalition from the left, which is not going to happen with Hamas for sure.

Do you think that's likely with Hezbollah? I read the book you co-authored with Gilbert Achcar, and he had a much more sceptical view. He made many of the points you would have made about Hezbollah, that it was a pragmatic movement, but he thought it was unlikely that it would evolve in a progressive direction. Do you think those tendencies are stronger than he might think?

I have a slight disagreement with Gilbert on that issue. Anyway, because it is a mass movement, rooted in the most important popular community, the poorest Shia communities – when you analyse a small radical group you can talk strictly about ideology, but when a movement is rooted in a society, what happens in the society cannot help but have an influence on it, for the worst and for the best. Hezbollah is certainly not a party with a socialist orientation. There are wealthy people in the movement, in the leadership, among the cadres of the party. But it is also the party of the poor, and this in itself is a matter of crisis, of positive crisis within Hezbollah. I have no idea how it will happen, or if it will happen. I think Gilbert is more on the side of emphasising the bourgeois reality of the party. I tend to pay more attention to the other aspect.

In the same book, you made the point that over the last two decades Israel has become one of the most neo-liberal societies on earth. Do you think there are any currents in Israeli society that can resist that?

The state of Israeli society is extreme atomisation, on every level. There is no party, no union confederation, no movement that can pretend to express the support of even a part of the popular sectors.

At the time of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Peace Now was able to organise huge demonstrations against the war. There were demonstrations last summer against the attack on Lebanon, but they were much smaller.

I regret so much the time when we were running after Peace Now. Now we are leading and they are following, they are the smallest bloc on the demonstrations. The peace movement in Israel was made up of a big wheel and a small wheel. The small wheel was made up of the more radical, principled groups, who opposed war by principle simply because occupation is bad and Palestinians have the right to self-determination. The big wheel was Peace Now. The small wheel was gradually moving the big wheel. Now we are more cohesive, more clear about what we have to do, but we have no big wheel. If you want to move the bicycle, you need the small wheel to move the big wheel, otherwise you don't move. Peace Now disappeared, and I don't think it's a victory. They vanished because they tail-ended public opinion, they were too close to the Labour Party.

Do you think if the will was there from the Israeli government that Hamas would do a deal and they would stick to a two-state solution? Can Hezbollah co-exist with Israel?

Yes, certainly. There would be a split in Hamas, some extremists would not accept it, but

they would make a deal. Hamas is not the problem, the problem is with Israel. As far as Hezbollah is concerned, they are a Lebanese movement fighting for Lebanese national sovereignty. Hezbollah is not conducting a war against the existence of Israel, it's conducting a war for Lebanese sovereignty. Clearly Hezbollah doesn't want to fight the battle of the Palestinians, it is not part of their programme or strategy.

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This interview was carried out shortly before the Hamas takeover in the Gaza Strip and the collapse of the Palestinian unity government. For Warschawski's take on those events, read his article 'The Crisis in Gaza: Made in Israel' at <http://www.alternativenews.org/blogs/michael-warschawski/the-crisis-in-gaza-made-in-israel-20070618.html>.