

of its leading members decided to join what pundits have described as a centrist party (the name *Kadima* means “forward,” deliberately invoking the memory of early twentieth-century radical movements). But what Kadima offers is not necessarily a third-way solution to the main dilemma that has haunted Israeli politics since 1967: the future of the Occupied Territories. Rather, it is a reflection of the changing social realities in Israel and the overwhelming desire among the Israeli public to disengage from the Palestinians and maintain Israel’s Jewish majority and character.

The idea of separating from the Palestinians realigns the Left-Right dichotomy in Israeli politics. The new Right, now under Ehud Olmert’s leadership, uses fear to ground its desire to disengage, blaming foreigners for Israel’s current economic and social crisis. This new Right wants to resurrect certain elements of Jabotinsky’s Zionist vision: creating an iron wall to protect Israel, though placing this wall well short of Jabotinsky’s Greater Israel boundaries, and behind that wall continuing the policies of the free market.

Now under the leadership of former Histadrut chief Amir Peretz, Labor views the disengagement as an opportunity to define the limits of Israeli sovereignty: to create a sphere where the state can re-engage in social matters and provide the means and institutions to support all those members of Israeli society who did not enjoy the fruits of the economic expansion of the last four decades. Peretz wants to revive some of the collectivist values of the old Labor party to counter trends that created enormous wealth and opportunities for some Israelis, yet at the same time increased social and economic divisions. In the aftermath of the March 2006 elections, it is still evident that the Right, in its new guise, is the hegemonic force in Israeli politics. But the Right’s own evolution might suggest deeper changes in Israeli society that would lead it on a new path towards greater collectivism and social commitment. ■

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The Electronic Intifada

Pushing the Envelope with Ali Abunimah

A TIKKUN INTERVIEW

IF YOU LISTEN TO NPR AND THE BBC as frequently as the editorial staff of *Tikkun* does, in all likelihood you’ve heard the British-accented voice of Ali Abunimah.

The editor and publisher of both the *Electronic Intifada* (www.electronicintifada.net) and *Electronic Iraq* (www.electroniciraq.net) since 2001, Abunimah has established himself as one of the single most influential Palestinian intellectuals in North America. Multitasking as both an activist and a social science researcher at the University of Chicago, Abunimah has contributed essays to various noteworthy collections covering Middle Eastern politics—including *Iraq Under Siege* (2000) and *The New Intifada* (2001)—delivered countless lectures on

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and participated in numerous political debates.

In every possible sense of the word, Abunimah is a revolutionary. Even if you don't agree with all of his political opinions, his intelligence, wit, and capacity to engage in serious dialogue with those who consider him their opponent is worthy of the utmost respect. Fresh from having completed his first collection of essays, *One Country* (forthcoming in September from Metropolitan Books), Abunimah spoke with *Tikkun* about his preference for a one-state solution, and why he contends that Israel, through the Occupation, has ironically embraced this concept as well. What transpired was a remarkably spirited and thought-provoking conversation.

TIKKUN: This Spring, *Left Curve* published a widely circulated "state of the movement" article concerning the struggle against the Occupation. Titled "Challenging the New Apartheid: Reflections on Palestine Solidarity," the authors provide an overview of the advances made by Palestinian activists within the North American Left since the start of the second Intifada. One of the piece's main points is that there has never been more sympathy with the Palestinians among domestic progressives than there is now. Do you agree?

ALI ABUNIMAH: To some extent. But I don't think sympathy within the North American Left is what's going to make the crucial difference. Understanding and sympathy across American society—not just within the Left—is important, but it's a paradoxical situation. Palestinians do have a great deal of sympathy, but they keep losing on the ground, so that sympathy is not being translated into political power. Having said that, I don't want to minimize the enormous suffering that Israel is inflicting on Palestinians.

I see Israel as being in retreat and ideologically totally bankrupt. I don't think that Israel in its present form has a long-term future. The entire peace process was structured not to bring peace, not to end the conflict, not to bring justice, but to preserve Israel as a so-called Jewish state with a Jewish majority at whatever price. That price was to be paid by the Palestinians. However, this effort has failed, and now Israel is in a desperate rear-guard effort to save itself physically and ideologically. I don't think it will succeed.

TIKKUN: What's your basis for that claim?

AA: The Protestant state in Northern Ireland collapsed in 1972. It was set up on exactly the same terms as Israel. The British fostered the partition in order to create a fake Protestant majority in part of the country. However, it was resisted from day one. That Protestant state was ruled by and for the Protestant minority without any regard whatsoever for the rights of Irish Catholics, and it collapsed. Since then, Ireland has been moving more and more toward reunification—if not formally, then in practice.

The apartheid state collapsed in South Africa, where it was also a state set up for the minority. Once that state became morally untenable, they tried to use partition. They tried to create fake states—bantustans—in order to make it appear as though whites were the majority. That failed. And now Israel's in a situation where sixty years after it was created, Palestinians are once again the majority and Israel is desperately trying to impose partition by force in order to preserve a gerrymandered entity with a Jewish majority. There's no sign whatsoever that this is going to be accepted by the Palestinians. So if I were an Israeli Zionist, I would be very pessimistic. This doesn't mean we [Palestinians] should be optimistic either. It also doesn't mean that the alternative is a happy ending, because this could just portend more chaos and endless bloodshed. However, in its present form, Israel does not have a future.

TIKKUN: Based on how you've portrayed the present situation between Israelis and Palestinians, what specifically do you see happening?

AA: In a way, it's up to us. I have a book coming out in September that argues forcefully that a single state is really the only viable way out, but that it is by no

means inevitable. Like South Africa, there could be a happy ending to the story. This is not to say that contemporary South Africa is by any means utopia. By “happy ending,” what I mean is a chance for a normal life and a politics based on universal values, which is what you have in South Africa. Granted, South Africa suffers from massive income inequality and high levels of HIV among its population—every social problem that every African country has to deal with—but they have a political system that allows South Africans to deal with these issues through normal channels. So that would be the happy ending.

On a less optimistic note, there could also be a permanent stalemate like that which exists in Northern Ireland, which though by no means ideal is still much better than the current situation in Israel/Palestine. Or there could be a bloodbath and a failed state where the whole thing breaks down into war. I think that we have a say in the outcome because if we start talking about happy endings and start giving people an alternative, then we increase the chances that it will happen. I base my reasoning on the understanding that a lot of the madness and cruelty in Israeli policy is in part based on fear. I’m not saying the Israelis are merely traumatized and have no agency. However, I think that Israel’s leaders know exactly what they’re doing. A lot of ordinary Israelis go along with the current situation because they don’t see an alternative. They’re told that they have to preserve Jewish majority or they will all die. Of course it’s a lie, which is why we have to offer an alternative.

TIKKUN: So your alternative is a one-state solution?

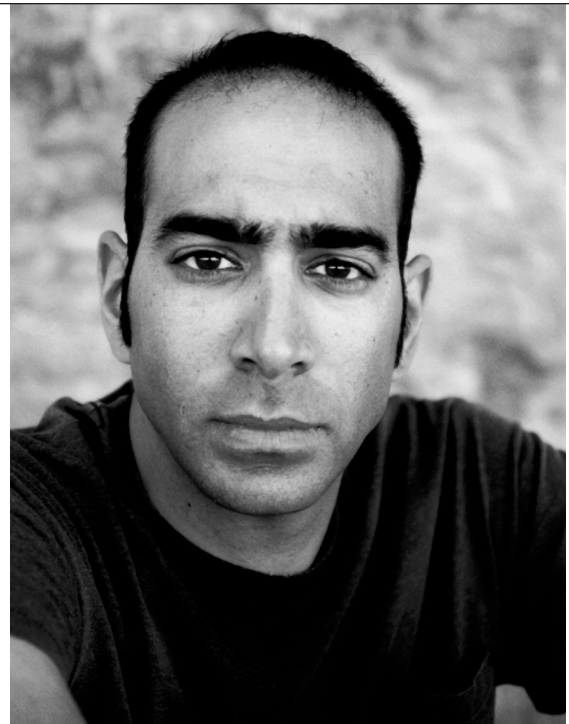
AA: Yes. I don’t have any particular dogmatic view of what that state should look like. There are all sorts of ways it could be organized. In my book, I go into that a little bit, but my discussion is by no means comprehensive. I’m simply trying to start the discussion in order to say that there are all sorts of states in the world that face these kinds of divisions. We just need to start a discussion about it and stop this ridiculous discourse that a nineteenth century–style nation-state where everyone is homogeneous is the solution to the Middle East’s problems, because that is what has been the problem, not the solution.

Zionists believed that they could create such a state in a country that had a majority of people who lay outside the boundaries of the nation that Zionism defined. That’s where the problem started. There was no conflict between Jews and non-Jews in Palestine prior to the Zionist claim of Jewish sovereignty. We need to move beyond that. Unfortunately we’re stuck in a situation where even raising the issue creates panic, when the reality is that the model of partition was never a good idea. Even if partition was at one point the solution, it certainly isn’t now. The solution is equal rights, not trying to draw boundaries between people. That is the most banal and mundane idea in every other context except this one.

TIKKUN: To what extent do Palestinians still accept the idea of partition?

AA: Palestinians accepted it only to please Israel. They said, “Okay, if we accept a Jewish state, and retain only a fraction of our country—the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—our state, will you leave us alone?” Palestinians naively thought that Israel would accept this, but then discovered that Israel didn’t. It’s not about what Israelis said or did not say. It’s what they did.

Israel built massive colonies throughout the West Bank with the stated intent of making a Palestinian state impossible, and they haven’t reversed that. They continue to build new settlements today. So the Israelis have made it clear that they want a



We need to stop the ridiculous discourse that says the solution to the Middle East’s problems is a nineteenth century–style nation state where everyone is homogeneous, because that is what has been the problem.

one-state solution, but they want it to be a Jewish Zionist state in which Palestinians have no rights. So in effect, Israel chose the one-state solution. Israel has given us this reality of a state in which there are two inseparable populations. However, it's really an apartheid state.

Thus, the Palestinian response has to be, "Fine, it's a single state, but it's not going to be an apartheid state; it's going to be a state based on modern universal principles."

For the past several decades, the entire Palestinian leadership signed up for the two-state solution, and they brought a lot of the public with them. Despite that fact, opinion polls have shown consistently that support for a single state varies between a quarter and a third of all residents of the Occupied Territories. It's probably much higher among refugees and people outside of the country, but we don't know that for a fact. Remember that there is no prominent Palestinian leader calling for a single state. If the question were to be placed on the agenda, it would very quickly gain support among a lot of Palestinians.

I also think that the one-state proposal has the potential to be adopted by Israelis. However, we have to stop being fearful of offending Israelis by questioning the sacred cow of a so-called Jewish state, which is clearly untenable. You can't have a Jewish state in a country where the majority of the country is not Jewish. We have to deal with reality, not with wishful thinking. I'm sure that Israelis wish that there was a Jewish majority in Palestine, but the reality is that there isn't.

TIKKUN: How would you counter the charge that no such state is possible under present circumstances because the respective political leaderships of both Israel and Palestine are committed to ideas of the state that are ethnically and religiously exclusive?

AA: These respective leaderships are to a large extent the consequence of an insoluble contradiction. The Zionist parties and the whole notion of disengagement are based on the failure of Zionism: that Zionism intended to take an Arab Muslim country and turn it into a Jewish country. That failed, and now they're trying to salvage what they can, based on the same idea that you need a territory and you need a majority. The Israelis are just trying to reshape the territory, which is the result of the absence of an alternative discourse base on a different kind of values.

There's very little support for a theocratic state among Palestinians, and Hamas has not made theocracy part of its program. I think Hamas is actually very pragmatic. Just look at its rhetoric and statements. Its leaders played by the rules of democratic politics and they've bent over backwards to try to include the defeated parties in their government. (I don't like to say government because it gives the impression there's a state, and there isn't, but you know, "government.")

It's important to remember that it was Fatah that rejected taking a role in the Palestinian government, not Hamas. Hamas leaders are the ones who tried to bring in everyone else, and they were rebuffed. Hamas has every right to lead the Palestinian Authority on its own. It won the elections with a crushing majority. I think it's very important to remember that their leaders consistently have made statements which emphasize that they're willing to come to terms with an Israel that's limited to the 1967 borders.

The irony of this, of course, is that Israel has no interest in limiting itself to the 1967 borders. So again, you have a Palestinian leadership that, like its predecessor, accepts Israel within its 1967 borders and limits its territorial ambitions to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Unfortunately there is no one on the other side willing to accept that very far-reaching offer. Amongst the current Israeli leadership, there remains a consensus for keeping the vast majority of the settlements, annexing east Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley, building the Separation Wall, and denying the rights of refugees.

In effect, this remains a consensus against a two-state solution because it undermines the existence of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. ■