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Colonialism or Something Else?

A Comment on Rafael Reuveny's Analysis

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IRA SHARKANSKY

The conflict between Palestine and Israel has been long and frustrating, with no end in sight. Rafael Reuveny (2008) has employed the model of colonialism to describe its history and predict its end. His article is rich and occasionally convoluted. He protects himself at several points from a charge of historical determinism, but his analysis does not take account of important elements that point in other directions.

Reuveny's use of the term *colonialism* is one symptom of an ideological posture insufficiently open to developments that are troubling to his analysis. It is one of the ugliest words available to judge a country's history, and therefore it tilts the analysis heavily toward Israel's fault. It is like Jimmy Carter's use of the term *apartheid* in the title of a book about Palestine published in 2006. Although Carter writes that Israel does not practice apartheid toward its own citizens, his prominent use of the word makes clear how he is judging the country.

Like what may still be a majority of Israelis, I yearn for agreements that will enable the Israeli and Palestinian states to live in peace alongside one another. Unlike Reuveny, however, I put much of the onus for years of failure on Palestinian rejection.

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Now, even more than in the past, that rejection finds strength in the ascendance of an aggressive form of Islam. Religious constraints make it difficult, if not impossible, for Palestinians to accept anything Israel is likely to offer. With Western capitals also nervous about Islam and perhaps more inclined to understand Israel, continued Palestinian rejection will cause the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to go on for a long time.

Reuveny calls Israel the last colonialist. One can quarrel with the designation, however, given the status of Chechnya and other enclaves in Russia, Tahiti and other French colonial remnants, as well as Gibraltar and some other British spots.

In the fuzzy ideology of colonialism, Israel also has a place as a colony of the United States. The implications of that status are numerous and beyond Reuveny's article or this comment. However, if 9/11 has locked the United States into an antiterror mode, Israel's repression of Palestinian violence may continue indefinitely with at least tacit support from Washington.

Among the routes to decolonization that Reuveny perceives is a civil war between Israelis who want to rid themselves of the Palestinian colony and Israelis committed to continued occupation. Reuveny does not deal with the decay of whatever Palestinian unity may have existed at one time. Current internal Palestinian disputes may have reached the status of civil war only after he submitted his manuscript, but nonetheless they amount to an important limitation of his analysis.

Talks between Israel and Fatah Party representatives appear to be concerned primarily with meeting the U.S. government's demands. Neither Israel nor Palestine is in a position to reject pressures that come directly from the White House. However, there is enough room for maneuver in international politics for both Israel and Palestine to pursue their own views of how to respond. Israel has an advantage in linking its activity to the international campaign against "terror." Palestinians seem unable to ratchet down from continued insistence on refugees' right to homes they claim from 1948. Although the Fatah faction asserts its willingness to create a state that will live in peace alongside Israel, the Hamas faction in control of Gaza holds to the program of replacing Israel. Continued attacks with rockets and mortars against Israeli civilians weaken support in important capitals for all Palestinians.

Reuveny does not put a time line on his prediction of colonial demise. Recent events do not guarantee the future, but they suggest a weakening of the Palestinian enterprise. Israeli deaths from Palestinian violence have declined from 452 in 2002 to 214, 118, 42, 32, and 13 in each of the years from 2003 through 2007. Palestinians have been killing one another more than they have been killing Israelis or than Israelis have been killing Palestinians. In 2005, only 4 percent of violent Palestinian deaths were at the hands of other Palestinians. In 2006, the figure rose to 17 percent, and in 2007 to 65 percent.

I have no intention to compete with Reuveny's certainty about the future. However, several scenarios appear no less likely than what he calls decolonialism.

- Hamas might maintain control of Gaza, with continued aid from the United Nations and other international organizations, perhaps ringed with international peacekeepers to minimize its threat to Israel. It would join the list of “failed states” or of “failed places” without the designation *state*.
- Fatah might maintain its imperfect control of cities and villages on the West Bank, with Israel remaining behind its security barrier and checkpoints, occasionally sending small army units into Palestinian space. Palestinian efforts to attack Israeli civilians would continue international tolerance for Israel’s defense measures.
- International events might provide Israel with greater incentive than at present to act more forcefully against Palestinians on the West Bank or in Gaza. These events might include continued Iranian or Syrian provocations, megaterror attacks in Europe or North America, or further Hezbollah actions from Lebanon.
- Hamas might gain control of the West Bank and begin rocket attacks on Israeli population centers. This situation might produce a massive Israeli response, with tacit Western support. One result of this response might be considerable Palestinian flight to Jordan and elsewhere.
- Jordanian reabsorption of Palestinian areas of the West Bank or Egyptian absorption of Gaza currently seems unlikely, but neither can be called impossible in the murky world of predicting international relations. One or both of these absorptions might contribute to the further decline of the Palestinian national movement or to its restructuring out of the Israeli orbit.
- If Jordan became Palestine, this event might lead eventually to a war between that country and Israel. Such an occurrence would be unpleasant, but it would also be something other than a manifestation of colonialism.

Reuveny’s numerous footnotes give his article the appearance of academic research, but they do not compensate for the scent of an anti-Israel ideology that seems to guide his choice of terminology and conclusions. In that way, his article resembles Jimmy Carter’s (2006) misplaced application of the term *apartheid*, as noted earlier, and the doubtful quality of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt’s (2007) claims about the underhanded politics of Israel and its friends. The antipathy that Israel attracts from academics and political activists is disturbing, both for an Israeli citizen and for the quality of what passes as political science.

Israel is arguably the most successful of the one hundred or so countries born in the aftermath of World War II, both in the quality of its democracy and in the extent of its economic development. The World Bank ranks it as one of the world’s wealthiest countries, albeit toward the bottom of that league. All of Israel’s universities appear on a recent list of the 500 best institutions in the world, and half of the country’s universities appear on lists of the 150 best. I know of no old country whose institutions of higher education do as well collectively.

Israeli Arabs score closer to Jews on measures of income, health, and longevity

than do African Americans with respect to white Americans in the United States. Moreover, Israeli Arabs do better absolutely on measures of health and longevity than do African Americans.

Israel's democracy is especially notable for its competitiveness and its openness to internal criticism. Every idea in the writings of Reuveny, Carter, and Mearsheimer and Walt can already be found regularly in the op-ed pages of the country's newspapers.

Israel's leaders muddle through a number of unpleasant alternatives. They cope with attacks on their civilians by applying a limited use of their military power. Among the factors that restrain them is the economic weight of Muslim countries and their votes in international forums that influence the policies of major countries, as well as a concern for humanitarian values that affects Israelis as well as others.

Numerous factors produce the lack of accommodation between Israel and Palestine, and between Israel and other Muslim countries. Forcing all of these factors into a model labeled *colonialism* might be attractive to those who share an ideology that defines Israel as evil, yet the model obscures a history that includes Israel's political efforts to separate itself from Palestinians, and it produces a projection of decolonization that is more promising for the Palestinians than is apparent in recent events.

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