Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Shlomo Ben-Ami

The West's Free Palestine movement does the peace process no favors

When Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's then-leader in Gaza, ordered the October 7 terrorist attack on Israel – in which more than 1,200 Israelis were killed, and 251 were abducted – he may well have expected Israel to launch a vengeful counter-offensive with staggering Palestinian casualties, which would horrify international observers. Perhaps that was the point.

The power of Palestinian blood to shape Western public opinion is a lesson Sinwar might have learned from former Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat.

After denying Israel a peace deal at the Camp David Summit in 2000, Arafat faced considerable international criticism.

But, when images of suffering Palestinians in the 2000 Second Intifada – an uprising spurred by Arafat's incendiary rhetoric – made primetime news in the West, he quickly regained outsiders' sympathy. "The daily scenes of bloody clashes allowed the Palestinian issue to regain prominence," wrote Arafat's chief peace negotiator – an "inestimable advantage of publicity."

The West's response to Palestinian suffering in Gaza today almost certainly exceeded Sinwar's most optimistic hopes.

A substantial segment of Western society – including progressive academics, peace activists, leftist groups, students, and celebrities, as well as Islamist elements – has been forcefully protesting against not only Israel's war in Gaza, but also Israel itself.

Hamas's narrative

This burgeoning "Free Palestine" movement normalizes and effectively endorses Hamas's narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which rejects the Jewish state's right to exist.

Had Arafat not been on board with a two-state solution, he never would have become a darling of Western progressives.

And yet, Hamas – a terrorist group that is ideologically opposed to the two-state solution – has become a symbol of resistance against a Jewish state that a growing cohort of Westerners views as an invader and a land grabber, not a legitimate country with as much right to exist as any other.

Those who never reconciled with the anomaly of Jewish power have eagerly jumped onto the "anti-Zionist" bandwagon.

It is perhaps understandable that the "settler-colonial" Israeli state has been deemed to deserve no sympathy in the face of the Palestinians' anger.

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But Israel also received little pity when well-armed Iranian proxies unleashed barrages of missiles on its cities and villages.

Israel's extraordinary success in intercepting these attacks might even have invited more animosity toward it, by reinforcing the image of a Jewish citadel in the midst of a region where it supposedly does not belong.

One might balk at this assessment, arguing that the Western Free Palestine movement is simply a response to Israel's aggressive military campaign in Gaza, which has undoubtedly led to extreme civilian suffering.

This logic helps to explain why, in a 2023 House hearing, the presidents of Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and MIT (one of whom is Jewish) argued that whether calls for the elimination of the Jewish people by campus protesters would violate their codes of conduct depended on "context."

A politically correct form of antisemitism

But, contrary to the claims of Western progressives, anti-Israel movements cannot be tidily separated from antisemitism, especially in light of Russian and Iranian anti-Israel influence campaigns, and Qatar's funding of antisemitic activism on North American university campuses.

Jews, who have been in the forefront of progressive battles, from the US civil rights movement to the LGBTQ+ revolution, are now watching a "politically correct" form of antisemitism penetrate Western public squares.

They discovered that their allies in the progressive front denied them the right to be protected like any other minority, precisely when they needed it most.

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Feeling demonized and exposed – perhaps more than at any time since World War II – many Jews are finding protection only in the anti-Islamist populist right, some of which include the heirs of Hitler and Mussolini.

More fundamentally, they are being forced to choose between disengaging from Israel altogether or throwing their support behind the Jewish state's position as their ultimate refuge. Antisemitism is again the combustible element of the Zionist project.

But the West's "Free Palestine" movement is not doing the Palestinians any favors, either.

That much is clear from its repudiation of US President Donald Trump's 20-point Gaza peace plan, which Western progressives assume is designed to advance a grand US-Israeli strategy to destroy the Palestinians.

That the plan enabled a ceasefire, including the return of hostages, seems not to matter much, even though "immediate ceasefire" and an "end to the genocide" have been among the movement's main rallying cries.

As one Palestinian-American activist put it, the "first step to freeing Palestinians from the horrors of war" may well be to "free them from the 'Free Palestine' movement."

A more realistic approach

Hamas has succeeded at attracting the sympathy of outside observers – many of whom cannot even begin to describe the ins and outs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – thereby bolstering its own sense of historical entitlement and moral superiority.

Was this worth all those Palestinian lives? Is Israel's pariah status sufficient compensation for the perpetuation of the Palestinians' destruction?

If the Palestinians are to have any hope of a better future, they must embrace a more realistic approach - Shlomo Ben-Ami

If it is not, Hamas will be sorely disappointed, since, like Arafat, it has consistently failed to translate Western support into real political gains, and it has given little reason to think that this time will be different.

As the Lebanese-American Middle East scholar Fouad Ajami observed, the Palestinian national movement has long operated on the belief that "the world owes" the Palestinians a state, which "would be delivered to them even when their leaders faltered." As the movement was "carried away by delirium," its politics became "deeds of self-immolation."

If the Palestinians are to have any hope of a better future, they must embrace a more realistic approach.

This means putting their own house in order, forging a united national movement (including by diluting Hamas's toxic influence), and accepting painful compromises for the sake of a peace that might not meet all their just requirements.

The case for Palestinian self-determination is undeniable, but God is in the details, and the gap between imagined futures and tangible realities has become a chasm since 2000.

Treating the impossible as indispensable will only perpetuate the tragedy of the occupied as much as it does the self-destructive behavior of the occupier.

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