



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

The future of Palestine

A two-state solution looks increasingly unlikely – and, for Israel, unnecessary

In late October, my wife and I were in Jerusalem for a week, where I was lecturing to a selected group of 30 Israeli university students at a biannual seminar series organised by a new think tank – the Friedberg Economics Institute. Amongst the other lecturers was Poland’s former finance minister, the architect of its post-Communist reforms, Leszek Balcerowicz. I had last been in Jerusalem in the late 1970s and was interested in seeing how it had evolved since then. My wife, though an American Jew, had never been in Israel. Her reaction – an inexplicable sense of belonging in this Jewish homeland – reminded me of the deep emotional currents underlying the continuing Palestinian imbroglio.

One of the issues that I was interested in was the feasibility of the two-state solution, which had always seemed to me to be the only answer to the mess the British had made during their post-World War I Palestine mandate, with the contradictory and irreconcilable promises made to the Jews and the Arabs in the Balfour Declaration. An incredible “security tour” of Jerusalem that a South African-born Israeli had organised for the lecturers at the seminar soon disabused me of the credibility of this solution. The tour started at Ammunition Hill – an iconic landmark of the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six-Day War that had given Israel *de facto* control of a unified Jerusalem. In the museum, we saw a movie of the tough fight for this strategically important site.



DEEPAK LAL

It was, however, the view from the top of two other sites – Nebi Samuel and Hussein’s Palace – that were crucial in understanding the strategic significance of Jerusalem to Israeli security. Looking east from these hilltop outposts one could see Amman across the Dead Sea, with Ramallah to the north and Bethlehem to the south, and looking west Tel Aviv and Gaza were visible close by. The narrowness of the strip of land separating all these areas astonished me. Without controlling the heights of Jerusalem, any armoured invasion from the West Bank and Jordan cannot be stopped in time.

We then drove through the Arab and Jewish settlements, interlocked cheek by jowl in East Jerusalem, separated by the meandering separation Wall. At a checkpoint near the Arab settlement of Kafr Aqab, our guide used the VIP presence of Mr Balcerowicz in our car to get an

armed police patrol to escort us to Hussein’s Palace, as he had heard of stone-throwing by Palestinian youth in a nearby Arab settlement. In 1967, King Hussein had constructed the foundation and part of the structure of his palace in East Jerusalem that looked directly across the West Bank to Amman. But with Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem after the Six-Day War, the palace remains in ruins. Our guide’s plan to drive through the Arab settlement was cut short as the police car escorting us had to leave to deal with a disturbance in the settlement.

Only on returning to our hotel in the Jerusalem

hills did we learn that an Arab youth had driven a car into a group of American tourists killing a baby at the Ammunition Hill stop of the tram linking East to West Jerusalem, where we had been just a few hours before at the start of our tour. Since then there have been numerous violent incidents – most often involving lone Arab youths – the most notorious being the attack on a synagogue in West Jerusalem. In this atmosphere, it is difficult to imagine that the Israelis would be able to trust the peaceful protestations of any Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem. For various Arab terrorist groups would be located only across the road from Jewish Jerusalem, and would compete for its “liberation”.

There were two other surprising things I learnt. I had assumed that given the insecurity of life in Israel because of the ongoing conflict with the Arabs, the young would be ambivalent about staying on in Israel, particularly as with the information technology revolution many of them have set up transnational enterprises like the young engineer Michael Eisenberg, who spoke at a dinner at the seminar. He has set up an early-stage venture-capital fund that has financed numerous internet ventures, and lives and travels regularly between Israel, New York and Silicon Valley. But the young students were all committed to staying on in Israel. They had all been or were in the army, and particularly after the success of the anti-missile Iron Dome in fending off 95 per cent of the missiles Hamas had hurled in the recent war in Gaza, were not too concerned about their security under the current *status quo*.

The second surprise was to find that most of them came from large families. One of the fears that had underwritten the Israeli acceptance of the principle of a two-state solution, I had assumed, was demographic. Given the higher Arab birth rates compared with the Jews, the Jewish majority would be swamped by Arab fertility. But as the demographer Yakov Faitelson has argued, an “analysis of long-term demographic developments leads to quite the opposite conclusion. In the long run, a strong Jewish majority, not only in the state of Israel – as the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics recently reaffirmed – but also in the Land of Israel [the areas of Mandatory Palestine west of the Jordan river] is quite possible” (“A Jewish Majority in the Land of Israel: The Resilient Jewish State”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2013).

These factors explain why the Israelis are unlikely to be moved by various European Parliaments urging that oxymoron “the international community” force Israel to accept the two-state solution to the Palestine imbroglio. The situation today is analogous to the frozen Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir, and like the Indians, the Israelis have now turned their backs on any international interventions in this conflict. It remains a historical irony that the messy unwinding of the British Empire should have left frozen conflicts in Palestine, the Indian subcontinent and Cyprus, where partition was thought to be the answer to ethnic conflicts, but where the stronger contestant is no longer willing to listen to pleas to undo the purported injustice done to the weaker one by the post-imperial settlement.