Israel and the Right of Self-Determination

The term ‘self-determination’ has been bandied around so often in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that it appears to have lost any real meaning or substance, save for the ones imposed by whomever may be invoking it. As of late, certain proponents of BDS (as I’ve mentioned before, it is not certain that all BDSers are interested in the dismantling of the Jewish state) have framed the term both as a legitimate call for Palestinian civil, political and human rights, while simultaneously proclaiming that Jewish self-determination need not be understood solely as sovereignty. On a superficial level, this argument seems perfectly acceptable; despite the acceptance and usage of the term as a synonym for independence, international law does not stipulate that every ethno-national entity on the planet receive a state of its own.

Rather, as detailed in the U.N.’s International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”. Nowhere is there language of sovereignty mentioned in any of these articles. This, anti-Zionists declare, is ample proof that Jews can have their communal needs within the confines of a binational state without fear of discrimination or reprisal. Yet, unsurprisingly, further inquiry reveals that the endorsement of such lofty universalist principles apply primarily to one state currently in existence.

The Global Left, of which BDS considers a member has taken great pains to declare its antipathy towards nationalism, viewing such movements as inherently chauvinistic. As such, the notion that the Zionist enterprise must make way for a state ostensibly devoid of ‘national’ character is not, by default, discriminatory, but simply naïve; we would assume, however, that such antipathy would extend to other national aspirations, many of which remain unfulfilled. Yet this ire is reserved for one and only one national movement: Zionism. It is not enough that Israel as it currently exists be erased; it is the very desire for a state defined by a Jewish ethno-national character that must be opposed, even if that state commits itself to a democratic agenda, respects minority rights and rids itself of an oppressive
military occupation. It matters little as to where that state may be located, whether in historic Palestine, Uganda, or on some far-flung island in the Pacific; the very existence of such an entity is a stain on the human conscience.

Yet, by this standard, we should see an equally vigorous condemnation of Czechs, Slovaks, Croatians, Slovenes, Serbs, Pakistanis, and various other nationalities for their insistence and maintenance of ethnic or religiously defined states at the expense, sometimes quite violently, of multinational ones. One would expect, then, a demand from activists to reassemble the former states of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR, as well as the departitioning of the Indian subcontinent. Yet only Israel is expected to return to the ante bellum state of affairs, bearing sole responsibility for the destruction of the utopian dream that was meant in its place. Additionally, we would also assume that the numerous European separatist movements would also be viewed as dismissively as Jewish national self-determination, particularly when certain manifestations of said nationalism have taken on blatantly racist undertones, as evidenced by groups like the Flemish Vlaams Belang and the Italian Lega Nord.

No doubt then, these proponents are most likely to claim their right to single out Zionism for delegitimization stems from the displacement of Palestinians in the wake of Israel’s creation; the right of return of those Palestinians wasting away in refugee camps is, after all, defined as the ultimate form of justice. Yet those who are even remotely familiar with the history of the former half of the 20th century, know that the establishment of new states, even those with a supposedly spotless European ‘pedigree’, are hardly free from the stain of such crimes; numerous members of the EU, in fact, owe their ethnic homogeneity to multiple wars, ending with the wholesale destruction of entire communities. Had these activists done even a bit of research they would become instantly familiar with the plight of the millions of souls displaced in campaigns of war, ethnic cleansing, and euphemistically titled ‘population swaps’, oftentimes committed in the name of national self-determination.

Following this line of reasoning, should the millions of Indians and Pakistanis and their descendants who lost their homes, property, and livelihood during the partition of the Indian subcontinent (the very same year as the partition of Palestine) be allowed to return to their places of origin? Surely they must be aware that the near homogeneity of the Czech Republic came at the price of destruction of its centuries-old German minority, who, after being stripped of property and citizenship was sent “home” to languish in transit camps in Germany? What of the tens of thousands of Bosniaks expelled at the barrel of a gun in pre-war Bosnia to make way for the ethnically pure Republika Srpska?

The examples listed only touch upon the tip of the iceberg of various other incidents in the 20th century in which innocent bystanders were unjustly exiled from their homes. It thus begs the question why the displacement of the Palestinians, as tragic and deserving of an immediate solution as it may demand, should then confer illegitimacy on the Jewish state. Such statements
sound cruel and relativist; they are not meant to justify or belittle the loss that understandably continues to knaw away at the Palestinian people, or the feeling of helplessness and justified anger that statelessness and military occupation engender. Nor are they to justify some of the actions taken by the Haganah in 1948 that is in part responsible for the predicament that Palestinians find themselves in today. But a Palestinian demand of justice must be pragmatic, not absolute. Just as these groups have accepted the reality that they will not return to their pre-existing communities, so too must the latter understand that a right of return must entail a return to an a free State of Palestine, established on the basis of the pre-1967 borders, financial compensation, and some form of acknowledgment of at least partial responsibility by Israel.

The notion that self-determination does not confer automatic statehood is a simple truth; but to use such facts as a means of denying one group in particular the very right to voice its desire that such a state should exist, and to call such a state, whether real or virtual, a racist blight on humanity is flagrantly discriminatory, and to say otherwise is shockingly dishonest. The usage of universalist rhetoric by some BDS proponents to attack Jewish particularism would not be so cynical if the promotion of universalism were actually its goal. To insist on Israel and Zionism’s illegitimacy because of some of its actions smacks of a deliberate selective reading of history on the part of some of its opponents for the sake of political expediency, and does little, if anything at all to further the legitimate goal of true Palestinian self-determination.