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Hurling Towards the Next Intifada

An Interview with Jonathan Cook

by Andrea Bistrich

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This is an edited version of an interview published in German in the newspaper Die Junge Welt on July 1, 2006 between Andrea Bistrich and the British journalist Jonathan Cook, based in Nazareth, Israel, about his new book *Blood and Religion: The Unmasking of the Jewish State* (Pluto Press, 2006) about Israel's plans for the further dispossession of the Palestinians. The interview was conducted before Israel's attack on Lebanon.

Andrea Bistrich: Your book has been released in Britain and is about to come out in the US. Already it is widely praised by various experts and academics related to the Middle East. Why does the "Jewish and democratic State" need to be unmasked?

Jonathan Cook: I chose the word "unmask" because it was the term Ehud Barak used about Yasser Arafat after the failure of the Camp David negotiations in June 2000: he said he had unmasked the Palestinian leader as no partner for peace. But in fact the reverse happened: the Camp David failure and Israel's subsequent actions during the second intifada unmasked those like Barak who claimed that Israel was a partner for peace.

The nature of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is irreconcilable as long as Israel sees itself as a "Jewish and democratic" state. This is the premise of my book. The Jewish and democratic myth keeps Israelis both from examining the essentially undemocratic nature of their state — what social scientists often term an ethnic state or an ethnocracy — and from finding a peaceful solution to their conflict with the Palestinians.

AB: Can you explain the problems of a "Jewish and democratic state" in more detail?

JC: Most educated Israelis are made uncomfortable by the idea that Israel is simply a Jewish state; it sounds a little too like an Afrikaner state or a Catholic state. So the "democratic" is added as a kind of public denial that Israel is an ethnic or religious state. The Jewish and democratic idea is crucially important to Israel and Israelis; it is, for example, the central tenet of the 1992 Basic Law on Freedom and Human Dignity, the nearest thing Israel has to a Bill of Rights. This document defines Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and, in contradiction, also excludes equality as one of its principles. That's because most Israelis believe that equality applies only to Jews inside Israel, not to the one in five Israeli citizens who are not Jewish but Palestinian.

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These one million or so Palestinians are the remnants of the Palestinian majority that once inhabited Palestine. They have been given citizenship but are treated as a sort of abscess — or cancer, as they are often referred to — in the Israeli body politic. Israel has not tried to integrate or assimilate them. Why? Because, as non-Jews, they threaten the Jewishness of the state. So they have to be kept apart, separate, as pseudo-citizens. Although usually ignored in discussions about the regional conflict, Israel's relationship to its Palestinian "citizens" is, I think, revealing about what Israel wants to be and how it sees itself. For Israelis, "Jewish and democratic" means democratic for Jews only. The opposite of a Jewish and democratic state would be a "state of all its citizens" (what we think of as a liberal democracy), which has been the main campaign platform of Israel's Arab political parties since the Oslo agreements were signed in the 1990s. These Arab parties want every Israeli to be treated as an equal citizen irrespective of ethnicity. Such a platform is technically illegal in Israel, and parties and candidates can be banned for promoting it.

In other words, the overriding concern in Israel has nothing to do with being democratic and everything to do with being Jewish — at all costs. This is backed by polls of Israeli Jews which show an overwhelming majority reject the idea of Israel being a liberal democratic state.

All of this is the context for my main argument, which is that the recent developments in the conflict have been almost entirely driven on the Israeli side by concerns about demography, about Palestinians becoming a majority in the region and Israel being compared to an apartheid state like the old South Africa. The question facing Israel has been how to ensure the Jewish state remains entirely in the hands of Jews, and how to distort the reality entailed by this so that Israel can continue to claim it is both Jewish and democratic.

The disengagement from Gaza last year and now the convergence plan for the West Bank are about two things: protecting Israel as a "Jewish and democratic" state in the sense that Palestinians, citizens and non-citizens alike, will be excluded from any say in its future; and emasculating the region's Palestinians by locking them up in a series of ghettos so that they pose no threat to the Jewish state because they are powerless to assert their rights as a single national people and their historical rights to most of their own land. Israel is hellbent on achieving these two goals because in fact they are inseparable: the more space in what was once known as Palestine Israel takes for itself, the weaker the Palestinians will become. In that way, Israel thinks — wrongly, I believe — its future as a Jewish state is more secure.

AB: What are your major conclusions?

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JC: I explain how Israel presented a distorted image of Palestinian behavior during the intifada, and then used that image to justify certain policies, in particular the Gaza disengagement and the building of the West Bank wall. I place — and to the best of my knowledge no one has done this before — Israel's Palestinian citizens at the center stage of the conflict in terms of understanding what has been going on during the last six years of the intifada.

When Israel went to Camp David to offer the Palestinians some sort of state, we know from Barak's advisers that it did not meet the minimal expectations of the Palestinians: it was a very shrunken state, and it did not include East Jerusalem, which any Palestinian state needs as its capital. The breakdown of the talks led directly to the Palestinian intifada, the outpouring of anger from ordinary Palestinians. Israeli military intelligence knew a lot about the intifada's causes: that it was because of Palestinian frustration at being denied a proper state; it was a popular, grass-roots rebellion; and that Yasser Arafat was largely caught unawares by its ferocity. We also know now, because of leaks from the generals in charge of Israel's military intelligence, that this information was misrepresented to and entirely ignored by the political leadership in Israel.

The politicians, notably Barak and Ariel Sharon, argued instead that the intifada was long planned by Arafat and that it was last-ditch attempt by him to defeat the Jewish state. At the Camp David talks, they claimed, Arafat insisted on a right of return to Israel for the millions of Palestinians living in refugee camps outside Israel and occupied territories so that Israel's Jewish majority would be decimated. When his demands were rejected, he chose another weapon: an armed uprising, the intifada.

Both, Barak and Sharon believed Arafat had a second weapon: a Trojan horse inside Israel that he hoped to use to subvert the Jewish state from within. The Trojan horse was, of course, the one in five Israeli citizens who are Palestinian. Arafat, they said, was secretly conspiring with the Palestinian minority inside Israel to destroy Israel as a Jewish state.

Israel's leaders also believed, or at least claimed to believe, that the country's Palestinian citizens had a twin-track for defeating Israel. First, they could step up their political campaigns for a state of all its citizens to end the Jewish dominance of the state; in Israeli eyes that was simply a prelude to engineering a right of return for the Palestinian refugees. And if they failed in this strategy, they could try to erode the Jewish majority by marrying Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and thereby winning them citizenship.

As a result we have seen in the last few years two major policy changes to negate both of these supposed threats:

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First, the establishment of the final borders of an expanded Jewish state through the Gaza disengagement and the building of the West Bank wall, designed to exclude Palestinian claims inside an enlarged Israel. If these borders are completed, Israel will be able to dismiss Palestinian political demands inside Israel, even from its own citizens, by arguing that Palestinians have their own (ghetto) state next door in which they can exercise sovereignty.

Second, the banning of marriages between Palestinians from the occupied territories and Israelis, meaning in practice Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, to prevent a "right of return through the back door", as Israelis like to call it.

These policies are meant to remove once and for all any demographic threat the Jewish state faces from the Palestinians.

AB: You use the term "glass wall" in the book. Can you explain what you mean by this?

JC: I contrast the idea of the "glass wall" with the famous revisionist Zionist philosophy of the "iron wall". The Revisionists argued that the Palestinians would never agree to their dispossession so the Jewish state's leaders must force them to submit with an iron wall of force -- a sort of "might makes right" philosophy. I argue that in practice Israel developed a different strategy for dealing with the Palestinians: what I call the glass wall. Israel separated the two ethnic populations, Jews and Palestinians, both inside Israel and in the occupied territories, and for most of its history managed to make this division invisible to the world. The separation walls existed but you couldn't see them. This is what I call the glass wall. In the occupied territories, for example, Jewish settlers lived next to Palestinian communities in a way that made it possible to believe they were simply neighbors. But of course in practice the settlers had full rights under Israeli civil law, both in the occupied territories and inside Israel while the Palestinians were governed by a much less benign military law. Movement was unrestricted for Jews but not for Palestinians. Water resources were provided to the settlers but were severely rationed to the Palestinians. In this way Israel maintained the pretence of a benevolent occupation for a couple of decades. Much the same has happened inside Israel for the country's Palestinian citizens.

That all began to crumble in the occupied territories in the late 1980s when the Palestinians refused to have their lives and the occupation's image managed by Israel. The first intifada forced Israel to convert the glass walls into concrete and steel walls: first the Gaza strip was sealed off from Israel and now the same is happening to the West Bank. That has been very damaging to Israel's image as a Jewish and democratic state, and the political leadership is now desperately trying to recover the high ground. The completion of the West Bank wall, I think, is the key to succeeding. If Israel can create

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the appearance of a Palestinian state without the reality of one, then it is simply erecting again the glass wall as cover for the real concrete and steel walls around the West Bank and Gaza. It is making a series of prisons look like a state. That is the real point of Olmert's convergence plan.

AB: What exactly is behind Olmert's "disengagement" or "convergence" plan?

[Author's note: Since Israel's failure to defeat Hizbullah in south Lebanon, Olmert has been forced officially to shelve his convergence plan. However, the author believes this is merely a postponement of the completion of the physical separation program begun with the signing of the Oslo accords. None of the demographic pressures on Israel have abated. With his reputation battered, Olmert does not currently have the political support to dismantle even the small number of Jewish settlements on the wrong of the wall required by the convergence plan. But pressure will mount for the wall to be completed at some stage in the future, whether it is because Palestinians begin demanding political rights inside Israel or because they relaunch their suicide attacks. Either way, given its view of the conflict and its refusal to stop being a Jewish state, Israel has no choice but to pursue separation.]

JC: Let's be clear: Olmert's plan isn't about a disengagement. The word in Hebrew is hitkansut. The English equivalent is something like "convergence," "consolidation," "ingathering." There are important differences from the Gaza disengagement last year, which is why Olmert has used a different term. This plan is really about consolidating Israel's Jewish population wherever it has managed to entrench itself over the four decades of the occupation, including the majority of some 430,000 settlers who live on Palestinian land in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, both of which were occupied by Israel in 1967. Only a tiny number (maybe 60,000 settlers, maybe far less) will have to move from their homes, usually those in isolated, remote settlements. They will be mainly relocated to the large settlement blocs, the long fingers of which probe deep into the West Bank severing it into a series of cantons or ghettos, each physically disconnected from the next.

Also, there is much talk of "consolidating" the Jordan Valley, the long flank of the West Bank that is the border with Jordan. Even though it's sparsely populated with Jews, this huge stretch of land was annexed de facto by Israel many years ago: the main road connecting the Galilee in northern Israel to Jerusalem, and open only to Israelis, runs much of the length of the Valley; Palestinians who don't live in the Jordan Valley need special, almost-impossible-to-obtain permits to enter the area, even if they have family living there. So the Jordan Valley is a sort of closed military zone as far as Palestinians are concerned. If Israel keeps the Jordan Valley under its convergence plan, which seems almost certain, then we are talking about some 40 per

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cent or so in total of the West Bank being out of bounds to most Palestinians. (And remember even if the Palestinians got all of the West Bank and Gaza, they would have only 22 per cent of their historic homeland.) So let's first dispel the myth that Israel is suggesting that it will disengage from the West Bank.

The point of the convergence is for Israel to add a veneer of legitimacy to the annexation of the main Jewish colonies in the West Bank, and to imprison the Palestinians in the space left behind, in the hope that eventually they will grow so desperate they will leave. It is about the theft of some Palestinian land now, and all the Palestinian land later.

AB: So you don't think the occupation is about to end?

JC: Israel and the international community may claim that the occupation is coming to an end, but let's look at the facts. If Israel controls the eastern flank of the West Bank, the long border with Jordan, and has a series of long territorial fingers of settlement blocs behind a fence-cum-wall dissecting the West Bank in at least three strategic points on its western flank, how exactly has the occupation ended? Who will control the borders and movement between the West Bank and Gaza and between the West Bank cantons? Israel, which will doubtless continue the checkpoints and pass systems it evolved in the 1990s. Who will control the scarce water resources? Israel, because its settlements blocs have been positioned to sit over the main aquifers. Who will deliver services, such as electricity and water? Israel, which can use the supplying and withholding of these services as forms of collective punishment. Who will control the airspace, including flights in and out of the West Bank? Israel again. And the radio frequencies. And of course there is no possibility that the Palestinians will be allowed their own army. So what we are talking about here is a reinvention of the occupation. It's a bit like a prison that through technological advances dispenses with the need for guards. Cameras control the doors of the cells, and machines deliver the food. Would we say that such an institution is no longer a prison? Well, the same goes for the occupation, I think.

AB: Israeli peace activists such as Jeff Halper from the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions are quite clear that "the two-state solution is now dead." Would you call this estimation too pessimistic?

JC: Not at all, they are right. It died years ago, only the international community didn't notice or was too afraid to point it out. I think there are clear reasons why Israel fears a two-state solution. Remember Barak and Sharon were both profoundly opposed to the Oslo agreements because they saw them as creating a proto-Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza under the government of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. They feared that with a fledgling Palestinian state emerging on Israel's doorstep, the Palestinian

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leadership could assert its rights not only inside the Palestinian state but also inside Israel, through the subversive activities of Israel's Palestinian citizens.

Of course, I think they were entirely wrong in that reading of Palestinian intentions. The reason Israel's Palestinian citizens were demanding "a state of all its citizens" was that they wanted civic equality, they wanted an end to discrimination.

AB: There have been numerous proposals and agreements attempting to address this conflict — Geneva conferences, the Mitchell Plan, Camp David Accords, Oslo Accords, Camp David Summit — but they all have failed. What are the reasons for these constant failures?

JC: The reason for the continuing failures is the false assumption that Israel is acting in good faith in the peace negotiations. But as I've pointed out, it isn't. It doesn't want a real Palestinian state and any agreement that sets that as a precondition will either be rejected by Israel or manipulated, as the Road Map has been, so that in practice the deal is worthless.

AB: What role and responsibility do you see for the international community and the UN to end this conflict and to deal with Western hypocrisy?

JC: Absolute responsibility. Israel has no will to end this conflict and the Palestinians have no power to end it. So a solution must be imposed from outside. The problem is that the US, the world's sole superpower, is in charge of determining the outcome of the conflict, not the UN or the Quartet, as the Israelis understand only too well. Washington portrays itself as an honest broker when in truth it is exactly the opposite. It is fully committed to supporting Israel, wrong or right. So for the time being any international solution appears to mean an Israeli solution. That is why unilateralism is now the name of the game.

One can ponder the reasons for Washington's blind loyalty to Israel. It may be that the Israel lobby is phenomenally powerful and wealthy, and American politicians are afraid of it; or it may be that Israel is a very useful ally in the region to the US. That is another debate. But the upshot is that Washington has so far refused to put any real pressure on Israel to reach a fair accommodation with the Palestinians.

AB: Ultimately, you conclude, there will be a third, "far deadlier intifada." Could you specify the reasons that led you to this prognosis?

JC: Vladimir Jabotinsky, the early leader of revisionist Zionism, coined the phrase the "iron wall", meaning the use of unremitting force against a Palestinian population that he believed would never submit to their national dispossession and enslavement. Well he was

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right about the Palestinians refusing to submit willingly, I think, but a little optimistic that simple force would be enough to subdue them for good. You can't steal from a people, then lock them up in prisons if they demand their possessions back, and expect them to keep quiet for ever. Israel can seal the Palestinians into a series of ghettos but that will not contain them indefinitely. Sooner or later they will find a way to fight back, even from behind their walls. My guess is that the next intifada will be called the Qassam intifada after the homemade rockets Palestinians fire out the Gaza Strip to try to hit Israeli communities. We are going to see more of that kind of resistance.

Also, my view is that in the longer term the convergence plan will envision sealing Israel's Palestinian citizens into their own ghettoes, some severed from the new borders of the Jewish state and others corralled into areas where they will become effectively guest workers. So Israel is creating common cause among the region's Palestinians, whether those in the occupied territories or those currently inside Israel. That raises the stakes on both sides considerably.

AB: What are the prerequisites for both sides in this conflict in order to achieve a genuine and durable peace?

JC: To be honest, nothing less than the eradication of Zionism as Israel's national ideology. In the current circumstances, you can no more have a Zionist state committed to peace-making with the Palestinians than you could an apartheid South Africa ready to make peace with its native black population. Maybe Zionism at an earlier stage in its development was capable of it, but the Jewish state we have today is incapable of making a deal with the Palestinians unless it renounces Zionism or is forced to do so.

Andrea Bistrich is a writer based in Germany.

Jonathan Cook, a British journalist living in Nazareth, is the author of *Blood and Religion: The Unmasking of the Jewish and Democratic State* (Pluto Press, 2006). Visit his website at: www.jkcook.net.

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