JERUSALEM AND ORWELL`S PROBLEM
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The official history of the State of Israel is full of myths, as anyone who has taken the trouble to analyse events since it was created in 1948 will know.

The greatest of these myths is that the blame for the Israel-Palestine conflict that has left an indelible mark on the history of the Middle East and the Arab World lies with the Palestinian people, due to the refusal of their leaders to recognize the State of Israel and the right of the Jews to live in the land of their ancestors; an assertion that is false. In fact quite the opposite is true.

Another of the great myths about Israel is that it is the only true democracy in the Middle East, a claim that is often used to justify everything it does and to demonize all who dare to criticize it. This statement may be true in part, but it is absolutely untrue for the Arabs who live in Israel; neither does it apply to those who criticize the inhumane nature of many Israeli policies, and even less when it comes to respecting the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. Israel holds the record for breaches of United Nations resolutions and international law, and also for attacking and invading its neighbours, destroying lives and livings under the slightest pretext and at times completely destabilizing other countries, as happened in the Lebanon. There is however a fundamental difference between Israel and the Arab countries. Israel is a country that is progressing in economic terms, with a high standard of living and an impressive capacity for technological
innovation, something that cannot be said for the Arab states which have governments that are largely unrepresentative, and are normally led by autocratic leaders who seek to hold on to power indefinitely often by passing on the mantle to their sons or other relatives. These leaders have failed to increase the living standards of their fellow citizens, to modernize their countries and develop them in social and economic terms. Sometimes the Israel-Palestine conflict has been used as an excuse to justify their resistance to political and economic change. In Israel on the other hand, it has acted as a spur, as a lever to drive forward economic growth.

The third great myth is that the United States has made great efforts to bring peace to the region, an assertion belied by the fact that the Americans have always supported Israel and have worked to strengthen its military power, in detriment of the stability of the region, the people of Palestine and even the interests of the United States itself.

It would appear therefore that today there is little room for optimism. The situation has deteriorated to such an extent that a solution seems unlikely, especially given that the Israeli government and society appear disinterested in reaching agreements with the Palestinians. The hopes placed in recent years on negotiations between the two sides, such as at the Conference of Madrid in 1991, in the successive Oslo Agreements or the Road Maps have all vanished.

In an article published in the Spanish newspaper El País on 9th August 2010, Shlomo Ben Ami, once Israeli Ambassador to Spain and later Minister of Foreign Affairs said: “Now that the Israelis are taken up with
their booming economy, emboldened by the recent commitment by President Barack Obama that he will never abandon Israel and convinced of their capacity to defeat Palestinian terrorism and prevent Hamas from embarking on another war (sic), they have lost all sense of urgency with regard to the Palestinian problem.” He went on to add the famous quote by Moshe Dayan who once said that “The only peace negotiations are those where we settle the land and we build, and we settle, and from time to time we go to war”.

Israel today has the most reactionary Government and indeed society that it has ever had. It is dominated by the fanaticism of orthodox Rabbis, extreme settlers and ultranationalists, who hold sway over a society in which large numbers of new, radical immigrants from far-off countries have increasing influence. They have little or nothing in common with those first settlers, who despite all their contradictions, sought to create a new society based on socialism and solidarity, in which Jews and Palestinians could live side by side.

Today it would be impossible to imagine a demonstration like the one in Tel Aviv on 25th September 1982, in which about 300,000 people (about 10% of the Jewish population at the time, as stated by Eugene Rogan in his excellent book *The Arabs*) marched to protest against the sordid role played by the Israeli Government in the tragic massacre of Palestinian refugees in the camps of Sabra and Shatila, repudiating the actions of their leaders and even accusing them of participating in the crimes. One example of today’s completely different approach is the incredible conclusions reached by the Commission set up to investigate the attack on the Turkish flotilla that tried
to break the blockade of Gaza. The Commission found that the Israeli soldiers killed nine Turkish peace activists in an act of “legitimate defence” and that the blockade on Gaza is in accordance with international law.

It is not only Israeli society that has changed, the perceptions and attitudes of the western world have also shifted and it is much less committed to a solution than it was before. Globalization has not led to the strengthening of the struggle for human rights and solidarity between nations, and instead has brought about a constant quest for economic development without worrying too much about the type of society we are building. Today the Palestinians do not have the real support they need to help them achieve their legitimate rights, at least not in the West. Perhaps this support will come however from other more distant quarters. The world is “de-westernizing” itself, shaking off the hegemony of the Western powers. The political centre of gravity is shifting, a transcendental change which is already affecting international relations. We are moving, in spite of all the turbulence and tragedies that may befall us, towards an international order in which it is difficult to imagine a place for societies based on apartheid.

To some extent, Israel has come out on top in the image battle, due to its cohesion, its economic, technological and military strength and its influence in the media. The success of Israel has also been fuelled by Islamic extremism, the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, those in Madrid, London and many other places, the regime of terror imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan, the aggressive, militant Shiism of Iran, the murder of Christians in a number of different countries, and of others such as the Governor of Punjab Salman Taser in Pakistan and the incredible
demonstrations in support of his assassination, which show that the country is running headlong towards the abyss and into the hands of religious extremism. All of this fills the West with fear and rightly so, a fear that it must also be said is based on a long tradition of negative perceptions in the West about the Muslim, Arab world, about which we are often ignorant or ill-informed.

This has helped create the climate that led to the invasion of Iraq, and helps to justify the aggressive actions of Israel, a country considered by the West as a bulwark against Islamic extremism. It also makes it easier for Israel to escape sanctions and less likely that an international peace force will be sent to Palestine.

However the State of Israel has committed too many abuses, too many outrages that cannot be allowed to bear fruit. To some extent it has become one of its own worst enemies by betraying the values that made the Jews a people worthy of admiration. No country and no Government can feel satisfied with itself when it does not respect the human rights of the different communities that live within its borders. Unfortunately the State of Israel has taken on the role of “policeman” of the Middle East. The Palestinians must be aware that there are many emerging and developing countries that are making their voices heard around the world and are beginning to play an important role in the concert of nations. Many of them have themselves suffered the colonialism and imperialism of the great powers. These new countries and nations in Latin America, Africa and Asia are changing the global geopolitical framework, and will undoubtedly ally themselves with Palestine and any other country that wants to live in decent conditions, as there is no reason for one country to oppress another.
Benjamin Netanyahu recently proclaimed that Jerusalem no longer has a settlement problem, in that the city is the holy capital of Israel and can never be surrendered and therefore any negotiations or concessions are completely out of the question. According to Avi Shlaim in his book *The Iron Wall* Netanyahu joined the battle for Jerusalem on 19th February 1997 with a plan for the construction of 6,500 houses for 30,000 Israelis in Har Homa in annexed East Jerusalem. “The battle for Jerusalem has begun”, he declared in the middle of March when Israeli bulldozers entered the fray to free up the space required to build a Jewish quarter near the Arabic village of Sur Bahir. “We are at the very heart of the matter and I am not prepared to lose”. Har Homa was a hill with pine trees, to the south of the city on the road to Bethlehem. Its Arabic name is Yabal Abu Ghunaym. The place was chosen in order to complete the chain of Jewish settlements around Jerusalem and to cut off the Arab side of the city from inland areas of the West Bank. It was a clear example of the Israeli tactic of *fait accompli* on the ground to advance their position ahead of any negotiations”. Throughout his long political career, Netanyahu has always opposed any concessions to the Palestinians and promised to consolidate total control over Jerusalem rejecting any form of compromise over the holy city. The members of his cabinet have taken things even further. The Minister of Transport, Israel Katz, stated that the Israeli Government would never accept the suspension of legal settlements in Judea and Samaria. The word “legal” is of course a contradiction in terms and in essence means “illegal but authorized by the Israeli Government with the complicity of Washington”. It would be better not even to mention the words of the Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, a symbol of the Israeli extreme right, who would surely have been excluded from any democratic Government in
the West, given his racist attitudes and his totally unacceptable public statements. It is curious to note that certain European dignitaries and diplomats have accepted to meet him, whereas as far as we know none have dared to do the same with the leaders of Hamas, many of whom have more conciliatory positions. It is surprising therefore that Lieberman has just recently and for the first time mentioned the possibility of a Palestinian State. Perhaps this is due to his concern about the recent initiative by the Palestine Authority that their State be recognized internationally, a proposal that worries the Israeli hawks as certain emerging countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Ecuador have responded quickly and recognized the Palestinian State. This initiative is an important step forward which will be difficult for Israel to block. As Henrique Cymerman, the correspondent in the region for the Spanish newspaper La Vanguardia said “The forum of seven in the Israeli Government led by Netanyahu have been debating for weeks about their response to the diplomatic challenge presented by Ramala”. It is possible that the Israelis may now try increase the pressure by continuing their fait accompli policy to expand their territory as far as possible and take in the whole of Jerusalem.

Numerous, countless articles, books and essays by intellectuals from all sides of the political spectrum have described the tragedy and suffering of the Palestinian people. These include works by intellectuals of the stature of Edward Said, Tony Judt, Mahmud Darwish, Rashid Khalidi, Juan Goytisolo, Ian Buruma, Ilan Pappe, Robert Fisk, Suad Amiry, Amira Hass, etc., etc. We have an exhaustive knowledge of what has happened and what continues to happen, but it seems to serve little purpose. The real situation
is often denied and in important sections of the media that claim to defend freedom and human rights it is presented in a totally distorted manner. This has had a huge influence on people all over the world.

Hence the reference in the title of this lecture to Orwell’s problem, or in short “How is it possible that something that is so obvious turns out not to be so?” or as Noam Chomsky so lucidly put it “How is it that something so well-known and well-documented appears not to exist or not to be true?” In the end this is another new “hidden and ignored question”.

The State of Israel was created thanks to the persistence of a number of Zionist leaders who were determined to achieve, at whatever price, their own homeland, a nation for the Jews of the world in the lands of their forefathers. They did not give up when faced with obstacles, and no means were spared in their struggle to achieve their ends. They even used force and violence against the British Empire, without whose support it would have been very difficult for them to proclaim the State of Israel.

Right from the beginning it was clear that their aim to establish a nation and a Jewish State in Palestine could not be reconciled with the natural rights of the Palestinians, the native people of the area, to the sovereignty of their own country in which they had lived for centuries. The first Zionists were aware of this problem, which they referred to as the “hidden question”. Something which as Avi Shlaim points out in his powerful book *The Iron Wall. Israel and the Arab World* soon became an open debate and a source of conflict.
The Zionist solution to this problem was presented in very strong, direct fashion by Zeev Jabotinsky, a radical Russian Jew, who argued that the only way to solve the problem was to create an “Iron Wall” that could not be destroyed, or in other words an army that could not be defeated, and in this way impose the Jewish state. Jabotinsky even went so far as to suggest that “no native population will accept being colonized if it has any chance of preventing a foreign people from settling on its land”.

And in spite of appearances, it is this harsh, inhumane policy that has guided the strategy of the State of Israel, and it has borne fruit. All its leaders, doves or hawks, have with time come to support the “Iron Wall” ideology and only a few rare exceptions have been prepared to stand up for the rights of the Palestinians, so that they can live decent lives in their own native land. Most Israeli leaders that defended some form of peaceful coexistence ended up being rejected, marginalized or even, in the case of Yitzhak Rabin, eliminated. Others have gradually signed up, for different reasons, to the cause of intransigence, as has happened with the former leaders of the Labour Party. Today Israel is a fully consolidated State and the Palestinians have almost no space in which to live out decent lives in their own land.

This process of radicalization has a lot to do with the most powerful institution in the State of Israel about which little is heard, but which in recent years has dictated Israeli policy, namely the Tzahal, the Israeli army. It is difficult to think of another country in which the armed forces have so much power. No important decision can be taken without the approval of
the military. Army and government are almost one and the same thing, as perhaps is normal in all countries that consider themselves at war, that feel threatened and have made security the cornerstone of all policy decisions. In her book, *Israel-Palestine. How to end the war of 1948*, the Israeli journalist, Tanya Reinhart, says that “In 1999 the Army returned to power thanks to the politician-generals, first Barak and then Sharon”. She explains that the armed forces played a fundamental role in undermining the Oslo Agreements and blocking the subsequent peace negotiations, and were constantly looking for new wars to fight, and wooing the support of the United States. “In Israel,” she went on “unlike the United States, the design of strategies and the setting of priorities is not only the responsibility of the political institutions but also of the men in uniform”. She said that according to the British newspaper “The Observer” by the end of September 2001 “the plans that Rumsfeld had put to the President of the United States included taking the war beyond Afghanistan and making military incursions into Iraq, Syria and the part of Lebanon in which Hezbollah had its bases”.

One of the initial principles underpinning the Iron Wall ideology was that once the State of Israel had been secured against possible destruction, meaningful negotiations would begin with the Palestinians. However given this backdrop of military power it is little wonder that this idea has sunk without trace. Today’s leaders do not even contemplate this possibility. The concessions made over the years by the representatives of the Palestinians, firstly the PLO and more recently the Palestinian Authority have achieved nothing. The recognition of the State of Israel in 1988, the rejection of violence and the renouncement of the right of refugees to
return home have all been in vain. All these concessions have been made without receiving anything in exchange and this has led to both traditional and lay leaders becoming discredited, and has created an enormous, justified sense of frustration amongst the Palestinian people, a frustration that logically has favoured the position of Islamist factions such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Not only has it played into the hands of these parties, it has also upset the fragile balance in the region by strengthening the power of Shiite extremism throughout the area. Without the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, it would be difficult to imagine that today Hezbollah would be part of the government of the country, once respected as a model of integration and coexistence between different ethnic groups, peoples and religious confessions that could have been an example to the rest of the region.

The experience of history shows us that it was in Israel’s interest to play a waiting game, a fact that old Israeli leaders such as David Ben Gurion and Yitzhak Shamir were well aware of. All of which led them to make no concessions of any kind, as a means of dividing the Palestinian political forces, who incomprehensibly seem incapable of presenting a united front to demand their rights and other claims. With time, Israel has managed to ensure that the large Arab nations stay out of the conflict, and they are more concerned with the situation in their own countries and the ideological, political and religious divides that separate the Muslim world today.

The important changes at a geopolitical level that I referred to earlier suggest that the tide may be beginning to turn against Israel. It is difficult
however to see any significant shift in the thinking of its main backer, the United States. Some may have thought that this new, more promising era had perhaps begun when Barack Obama came to power, an event celebrated by all men of goodwill as a historical opportunity for change. However the hopes and excitement raised by his election and his speech in Cairo were soon dashed. In fact apart from the spectacular nature of his speeches, the Obama administration has followed the traditional policy of all-out support for Israel come what may. It seems a long time since May 1989 when James Baker, Secretary of State to the first President Bush addressed AIPAC, the powerful Zionist lobby organization in the United States, and said that the time had come for Israel to abandon its unrealistic view of a Greater Israel, call a halt to the settlements and consider their Palestinian neighbours worthy of political rights. Bush Senior himself supported these statements and obliged the Israeli Prime Minister Shamir to come to the negotiating table, after holding back a ten-million-dollar loan that had been requested by Israel. This is something which President Obama has not even to dared to contemplate with regard to the important, continuous supply of economic and military aid that the United States grants Israel every year. As Noam Chomsky argues, if Obama were serious when he says that he is opposed to the settlements, it would be easy for him to take specific measures, such as reducing U.S. aid. On this question, members of the Obama Administration told the press that measures such as those taken by Bush Senior “were not open to debate” and announced that any forthcoming measures would be essentially “symbolic”.

There is little more to be said about Barack Obama’s performance: he remained silent during Israel’s deadly attack on Gaza. He has said nothing
really about the need for a complete halt to settlements, except for a few vague, empty lines such as “I will sustain an active commitment to seek two states living side by side in peace and security”. According to a recent article by Chomsky, in one of his press conferences Obama said: “Let me be clear, America is committed to Israel's security. And we will always support Israel's right to defend itself against legitimate threats”. Chomsky goes on to add that Obama said nothing about the rights of the Palestinians to defend themselves against the much more extreme threats they suffer every day in the Occupied Territories with the support of the United States. But unfortunately this has become the norm.

It is true that there were times in the past when it seemed that peace was within reach. Then Israel was governed by parties that wanted to reach agreements with the Palestinians and were prepared to stand up to the reactionary sections of the population. At times perhaps some of the Palestinian leaders were lacking in vision or a decisive approach. The radical Palestinian factions also did nothing to support the peace process and a lot to bring it down. However the main reason for failure lies in the stubbornness of the Israelis, who emptied the agreements of any serious content and made them unacceptable to the Palestinians. In the end all these negotiations failed. Each failure allowed Israel to increase its power and each military victory enabled it to seize more land and extend its settlements. At all times it rejected the creation of a Palestinian State, for which now there is hardly enough physical space in which to develop.

Today in Israel, security takes priority over all other questions, and those who support peace and coexistence with the Palestinians and their demands
for their own State with a capital in East Jerusalem, are a minority of whom most of their fellow citizens disapprove. What Benjamin Netanyahu said about Jerusalem may therefore be more than mere words, and he may wish to accelerate the complete annexation of the city so as to obstruct any possible move back.

Despite all this, the people of Palestine must not give up hope because they are not going to lose the game. They have fought and suffered too much and too long and in spite of all the refusals and the injustice of the Israelis they will eventually have their own State and be the masters of their own destiny. They must be united, convinced that they can achieve their goals and not make concessions that make their objectives impossible and dash their hopes. As the Russian President, Dimitri Medvedev, said recently the time has come for a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. They must go to the United Nations and gather the direct support of the international community and get a large number of countries on their side. They must demand an international peace commission and they must be totally clear, despite any alternative options that the government of Benjamin Netanyahu may wish to impose, that they have a legal right to self-determination.

And finally they must be aware that the balance of history now seems to be tipping in their favour.

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