The Mendacity of ‘Missed Opportunities’

By M. Shahid Alam

"There has been Anti-Semitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They see but one thing: we have come and we have stolen their country. Why would they accept that?"

"Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages . . . There is not a single place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population." — David Ben-Gurion (1)

All too often, the failure of Israel and the Arabs to make peace — especially since the creation of Israel — has been described as the folly of missed opportunities. In a discourse that is dominated by the Zionists, the Palestinians are forced to carry much of the burden of this folly.

How often have the Zionists, with delightful malice of the strong, accused the Palestinians — using the words of Abba Eban — that they “never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity?”

The objective of these Zionist accusations is plain: blame the victims. In order to make their accusations stick, the Zionists have elaborated a false but imposing history of their movement. In this history, it is the Jews who have the original, historical, natural, eternal, God-ordained, and Biblical right to Palestine.

The Zionists also invented an entirely new species of claim to our affections — one that trumps all morality and man-made laws — because Jews were the victims of a uniquely inhuman crime.
At the same time, the Zionists have labored hard to represent Palestine as empty, a land that had fallen into decay with the departure of its Jewish owners. The few Arabs occupants of this now desolate land are Bedouins, mere squatters, migrants, with no attachment to the land. They are only part of the wild fauna of Palestine, to be cleared as the colonists take possession of their divine patrimony.

Once their rights had been negated by the incomparably ‘superior’ rights of Jews, the Palestinians would have no ground to stand on. They would be seen as utterly dependent on the mercy of the Jewish colonists. Any scrap the Jewish colonists threw at them would be better than manna from heaven.

Therefore, if the Palestinians rejected these scraps; if they refused to be spirited across the borders of Palestine; if they rejected two-thirds, one-third, one-tenth or some smaller fraction of their country; if they resist apartheid inside Israel; if they reject their dispossession and exile; they could only be acting out of a boundless hatred of Jews.

Whenever the Palestinians reject the scraps offered to them, the Zionists accuse them of ‘missing another opportunity.’ So deep is their spite, their obtuseness, their perversity, the Palestinians now do not know what is good for them: what is the best deal they will ever get.

Occasionally, Israel too is blamed for missing opportunities.

Indeed, Uri Avnery – an octogenarian Israeli peace activist, a former member of the Israeli Knesset, and a one-time member of the terrorist organization, Irgun – argues that Israel enjoys a clear lead in missing opportunities to make peace with the Arabs. (2)

This is scarcely surprising. As the stronger party in its conflict with the Arabs – it is easy to argue – Israel could have shown magnanimity instead of using its strength to gain
new advantages over the Arabs: or after each of its military victories over the Arabs Israel could have offered to give up its gains, and thereby gained the confidence of its adversaries. Yes, these opportunities existed — and Avnery lists several such opportunities — but Israel ‘missed’ every one of them.

In principle, during the war of 1948 the Haganah — the military forces of the Jewish colons in Palestine — could have chosen to limit its conquests to the borders defined by the UN partition plan: or withdrawn to these borders once the conflict ended.

Instead, the Haganah pushed beyond these borders to capture a little more than half the territories that were ‘given’ by the UN to the Palestinians. It also expelled more than eighty percent of the Palestinians in these territories: and forcibly prevented them from returning to their homes.

Had the Zionists ‘missed’ an opportunity for peace here? This question is entirely misplaced: it can only be based on a blatant disregard of the settler-colonial character of the Zionist movement.

Nearly from the outset, the Zionist founders scarcely concealed their intent to create their Jewish state in all of mandatory Palestine – at the least – whose Jewish character could be guaranteed only by evacuating the Palestinians from their lands.

On any honest assessment, the Zionists had merely seized the opportunity for which they had been preparing since 1897. It would have gone against their grain had they done anything else.

Similarly, in terms of possible outcomes, one could argue that Israel, after its creation, could have taken the high road in its dealings with the Palestinians and Arabs. “On the morrow of the war of 1948, in which Israel was founded,” writes
Avnery, “we could have achieved peace.”

Israel could have supported the creation of a Palestinian state; given heed to Nasser’s peace feelers instead of joining hands with Britain and France in 1956 to overthrow him; after 1967, when Israel occupied all of Palestine, Israel could have given the Palestinians a state; and so the list goes on.

Yet Israel took the path that led to escalation of its conflict with the Arabs. This was not the result of the repeated wrong-headed decisions of Israel’s leaders: it was the working out of the dialectic of Zionism.

Once launched, the Zionist project carried within itself the forces that pointed it towards success. Israeli successes would trigger the maximalist ambitions that many of the leading Zionists had cherished from the beginning; they would increase the flow of Jewish colonists to Israel; they would empower the Jewish state to act as the political center of world Jewry, organizing them globally to strengthen Israel, to win allies, and shield it from criticism.

At the same time, Israel’s capture of Palestine, its ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, and its lengthening record of wars against the Arabs would create the Arab and Islamic enemy, whom Israel — with Western arms and money — would very helpfully crush, only to demand and receive yet greater supplies of arms and money from the West.

Once created, the Jewish state would be driven by a powerful, nearly irresistible dialectic to draw the United States — and to a lesser degree much of the West — into a deepening conflict against the Islamic world.

In truth, the Palestinians have never missed an opportunity — to assert their rights against the greatest odds, against a settler-colonial movement aided and abetted by the most powerful states in the West. For their heroism, their endless sacrifices, the Palestinians deserve the accolades of all men
and women who cherish human rights over brute force.

In truth, Israel too has never missed an opportunity — to defenestrate the Palestinians, denude their lives, demonize their resistance, and denigrate their culture. For their unending violations of the rights of Palestinians, the world needs to look the Israelis in their eyes and tell them that their conduct dishonors the victims of the Holocaust, victims they eagerly claim as flesh of their flesh and bone of their bone.

The narrative of missed opportunities is malicious when it refers to Palestinians; or misleading, when it is aimed at Israelis.

-M. Shahid Alam is professor of economics at Northeastern University. He is author of *Challenging the New Orientalism* (2007). He contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com. Contact him at: algalam02760@yahoo.com.

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