

Speaking up

BY ANATOL LIEVEN

Success in the war on Iraq depends on an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, and the only voice powerful enough to demand compromise is that of America's Jews. Only they can fight self-defeating Israeli nationalism from a position of unquestionable loyalty to Israel. Their silence now would be disastrous

TONY BLAIR HAS declared "I do not believe there is any other issue with the same power to reunite the world community than progress on the issues of Israel and Palestine." He is right; and these words, coming from America's only serious ally in this present war, pose a moral challenge to all Americans.

Above all, however, they are a challenge to members of the Jewish liberal tradition, both in America and in Britain. This challenge is not only to live up to the internationalism of that tradition, it is to support what anyone, not blinded by nationalism, must surely see as the real long-term interests of Israel itself.

Blair could have added that progress towards an Israeli-Palestinian settlement is critical to three other things: any chance of even partial long-term success in the Iraq war; limiting the threat of Islamist and Arab terrorism; and preserving the alliance between Britain and the US. For at the time of writing, ten days into the Iraq war, it is apparent that several of the key goals of this operation could already be on the way to being lost. The US and Britain will certainly conquer Baghdad and kill or capture Saddam Hussein, but the resistance they are facing is likely to make the level of required bombardment, and thus civilian losses, extremely high. Assuming that this feeds still further mass support for the guerrilla and terrorist campaign we are already witnessing, then far from leading to the democratisation of Iraq, US and British forces may be drawn into a typically ugly anti-partisan operation, with everything that this would imply, not only for moral squalor and human suffering, but for the stability of the middle east.

If US policy towards Israel does not change, Washington is likely to find that the situation in the middle east after Saddam's fall is much more dangerous than the years of his containment. For the future

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US presence in Iraq will then be seen by most Arabs, rightly or wrongly, as an agency of US-Israeli hegemony over the region. This would be a recipe for throwing the full weight of Arab nationalism behind Islamist terrorist groups, perhaps now armed with the remains of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Questions of international law aside, there are two main indictments of this war. The first is the military frivolity and the racist arrogance with which it has been planned by the US administration; the second is the lack of any wider political strategy for the middle east. Central to this lack is the absence of real commitment to a just peace between Israel and Palestine.

Bush's pre-war statement of support for the Israel/Palestine "road map" was an insult to the intelligence of the global public. Not merely was it the most obvious sop to Blair, but it repeats the similar "commitment" made by Bush before the Afghan war 18 months ago—a commitment followed by no real action at all. (And even this new commitment was preceded by the acquiescence of the US administration in Ariel Sharon's wrecking of the British-hosted conference on Palestinian reform in January.)

In the short term, the degree of anger that American high-handedness will provoke in Britain will depend largely on the level of British casualties in this war. But even if these are not too high, the political sacrifices made by Britain have already been immense, and British pride is unlikely to tolerate indefinitely a situation in which the alliance with the US requires Britain to make such sacrifices for US and Israeli strategies over which Britain has no say.

So an enormous amount is now hanging on renewed moves towards an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. And despite the Bush administration's inadequate commitment to this process to date, it is not impossible that the period after "victory" in Baghdad will, in fact, see certain moves in this direction. For Colin Powell remains committed to seeking peace and, hopefully, his political stock will rise as the war

reveals the full extent of the miscalculations by Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Cheney and the other hardliners. Equally important, the more deeply embroiled the US becomes in actually trying to run a large part of the Arab world, the more apparent will become the disastrous role of the Arab-Israeli conflict in undermining America's position in the region.

But such moves must be supported *politically*. Powell and others who now want to push ahead for a final settlement lack support in Congress, the media and the US public at large. Meanwhile, the opponents of any serious concessions to the Palestinians have immensely strong and passionate support. They do not merely occupy key places in this administration, but are backed by one of the most formidable foreign policy lobbies in the US, with an immense capacity to shape the media debate and put pressure on the administration and Congress—especially in what will soon be the run-up to yet another US election.

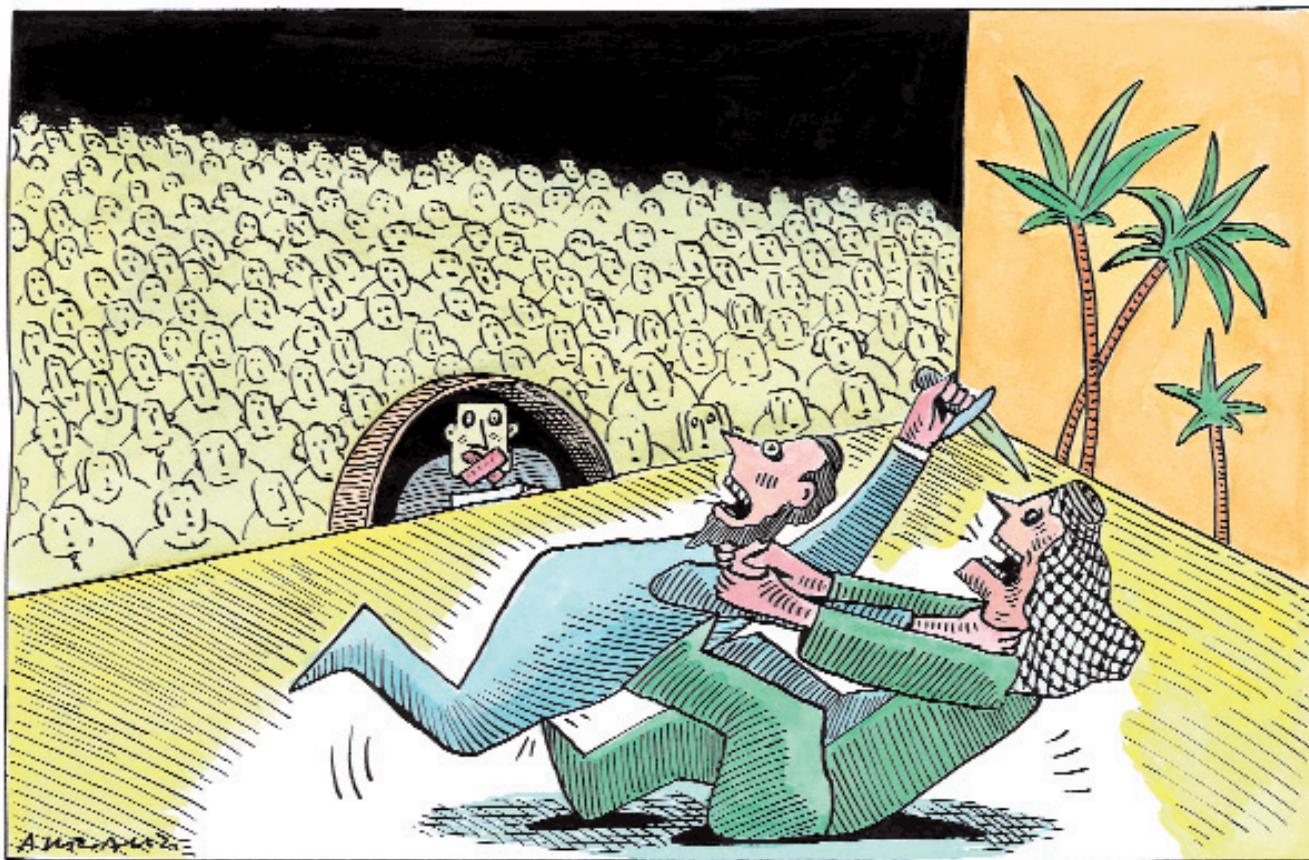
Any US pressure on Israel would therefore require a major domestic political impulse from within America. And this would have to mean first and foremost active support for Powell or his successors by Jewish Americans and, above all, Jewish liberal intellectuals, politicians and journalists, encouraged by those of Britain. Only they are in a position to fight the nationalist right in the Israeli lobby from a standpoint of unquestionable loyalty to Israel. Only they can initiate a truly frank, open and widespread debate

in the US concerning Israel's real security needs and the proper goals and tools of US policy towards Israel. Above all, only they can finally get US policy-makers to focus on the disastrous role of the Jewish settlements in radicalising ordinary Palestinians.

By far the most cogent and determined critique of Israeli policies has, in fact, been mounted by Jewish intellectuals (often Israeli) in places like the *New York Review of Books*. Regrettably, they remain a distinct minority. The wider Jewish liberal community has tended to lapse into silence, or even to defend Sharon.

Again and again in both public and private conversations, all too many Jewish colleagues who accept the illegitimacy of the settlements, and the need to withdraw many of them and establish a state border roughly along the "Green line" of pre-1967, have drawn no connection between these beliefs and the duty to express them politically. (One exception is Americans for Peace Now—US supporters of the Israeli Peace Now organisation—which is the only mainly Jewish group to lobby on Capitol Hill to link US aid to Israel to stopping settlement growth.)

Central to this failure is a deep unwillingness to accept the logic of such a stance, which would mean support for the employment of US pressure on Israel to change Israeli policies. In other words, the threat of a reduction or termination of US aid to Israel, if US wishes in this regard are not met. This is one of three issues on which it is essential that Jewish liberals take



a public stand. The second is that the settlements must be treated not as bargaining counters but as moral and political disasters, which should never have been created in the first place and which should be removed, even without a full peace settlement.

The third issue concerns the extent of the peace which can be hoped for. It must be recognised that in the case of Israel and Palestine, as in other conflicts of a similar kind, a truly final settlement and a complete peace *cannot* be achieved. Nor can there be a total separation between Israelis and Palestinians, unless the Palestinian minority in Israel is ethnically cleansed.

Some historical events continue to leave their baleful mark not only on subsequent generations but on subsequent eras. Four centuries after the Gaelic Irish of Ulster were dispossessed under Elizabeth I and James I and replaced with English and Scottish settlers, Britain was still paying at the hands of Irish nationalist terrorism. The British withdrawal from southern Ireland did not completely end the terrorism by diehard Irish nationalists; and Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza will not end terrorism by Palestinian diehards.

It should not, however, take too giant a leap of historical imagination to see how infinitely worse IRA terrorism would have been in recent decades if Britain had gone on trying to rule not only Ulster but the whole of Ireland. It is unlikely that British democracy could have survived such a struggle.

UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT for Israeli policies threatens the American liberal tradition from within. There is a logic to the way former liberals like Charles Krauthammer have been drawn towards extreme right-wing and chauvinist positions. If no legitimacy whatsoever is to be accorded to the Palestinian cause, if every Palestinian claim and complaint is to be regarded as utterly false, then it follows that all those who express any sympathy for that cause, must be either utterly misguided or wicked—and therefore beyond serious discussion.

This tendency contributes to the demonisation of Arabs and, to a lesser extent, Europeans, which is now visible across large parts of the US media and public life. In fact, the refusal to look more openly-mindedly at one of the fundamental causes of Arab and Muslim hostility to the US makes it very difficult to conduct any serious discussion at all in America concerning the middle east and US policy there.

In one striking but by no means untypical example, an American conference that I attended on US relations with the Muslim world included not a single Muslim—one reason being that the organisers feared that this would lead to the Israeli-Palestinian issue being raised, and the discussion degenerating into a shouting match. The result was that many of the discussions were characterised by a surreal, almost Soviet-style irrelevance to middle eastern reality.

This is very dangerous in the context of the Iraq war and its aftermath. Open, deep contempt for the opinions of the overwhelming majority of Arabs is a strange foundation for the hopes of democratising the middle east; and, more widely, it risks not only leaving the US without a single ally in that region or in western Europe, but pushing American public culture further in the direction of chauvinist prejudice.

Such thinking has helped to foster the much discussed alliance between Israeli chauvinists and some of the most irrational elements in the American Christian right. The latter not only hate Islam and believe that Israeli rule over the whole of biblical Zion is part of God's plan for the apocalypse; their ideology is directly hostile to the entire tradition of the Enlightenment, to which Jewish intellectuals over the centuries have made such an immense contribution, and which is the ultimate guarantor of the wellbeing of the Jewish diaspora across the world.

Surely the whole of modern Jewish history must show the dangers of allying oneself either with such forces or with the kind of nationalism that now dominates US politics. Aspects of contemporary America recall the *unions sacrées* which brought together liberals—including Jewish liberals—with conservative nationalists in the European states of 1914.

The danger in this regard was emphasised for me by a conversation with a diplomat from one of the Baltic states. Like her government, she has adopted a position of unconditional support for the US administration, including on the question of Israel and Palestine and, in consequence, has been heavily influenced by the new rhetoric of the American nationalist right. Challenged concerning the illegality of the Israeli occupation and the national rights of the Palestinians, she replied that international law was meaningless when compared to national power, and that the struggle against the Palestinians was part of a war of civilisations between the west and Islam. Such language should make any Balt, and any Jew, tremble. The first argument could have been used by any Soviet official as the Balts battled for independence. The second has been used repeatedly—including by Baltic chauvinists—to argue that Jews are racial and cultural aliens and thus without rights.

In the words of the historian of the Austrian Jewish tradition Steven Beller: "The great gift that the central European émigrés brought to their countries of exile in the west was a renewed appreciation of the merits of civic liberty, individual rights, and the power of education to enhance tolerance of others' views... The dominant strain was pluralist and anti-nationalist." That strain is, of course, challenged by another which argues that the "international community," international law and conventions, did not save Jews from centuries of persecution, culminating in the Holocaust. Law is no substitute for physical force and the will to use it, whether in Israel or America.

This conservative, pessimistic strain has been reinforced by the horrendous attacks by Palestinian suicide bombers, the baleful attitudes of so many Muslims, and the tinge of antisemitism to at least some of the criticisms of Israel around the world.

Certainly, there should be no place in mainstream politics for those who question Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. But in this context several things need to be pointed out: first, while the Holocaust is the moral foundation of a special attitude to the circumstances of Israel's creation, it is logically, morally, historically and politically irrelevant to the issue of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip. The moral justification for Israel's right to exist does not detract from the extent of the Palestinian tragedy which resulted. Any serious person is obliged to seek a balance between these two moral imperatives.

Secondly, calling for a viable Palestinian state more or less within the borders of 1967 is not treachery to Israel and does not imply any support for threats to the existence of Israel; it is, on the contrary, the highest form of loyalty, just as those who accepted an Irish state after 1918 were better servants of British interests than those who called for continued British rule over the whole island.

Thirdly, the fact that Israeli citizens are threatened by suicide bombers and that many extremist groups throughout the Islamic world want to wipe out the state is no excuse for the exaggerations of its vulnerability that are commonplace in the US media. Daniel Pipes, for example, in the February 2003 issue of *Commentary*, wrote: "In 2002... the existence of Israel appeared imperiled as it had not been for decades." This is simply not true. For most of its history, Israel was threatened by militarily powerful Arab rejectionist states backed and armed by the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union not only removed this threat, it released a huge flood of Soviet Jewish emigrants, securing Israel's demographic position within the borders of 1967—although not, of course, if the occupied territories are included.

The approach typified by Pipes is part of a systematic attempt to maintain a permanent psychological state of emergency and threat. It is all too reminiscent of the ruling elites of Wilhelmine Germany and other nationalist states of Europe's past.

As to the argument that law did not save the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s and that therefore Israel has to be strong; this is incontrovertible as far as it goes. No one with any sense of responsibility could suggest that Israel should disarm, or, for that matter, abandon the nuclear weapons which are its ultimate guarantee against destruction by Arab states.

But strength can be intelligent or stupid, and the

present cult of strength on the part of Israel and some of its supporters has profoundly stupid aspects. One of them is the belief that Israel can indefinitely pursue policies of ruthless national egotism without this producing echoes elsewhere—for example, in the economic policies of European states towards Israel.

Finally, the use of the charge of antisemitism as a means of intimidating critics of Israeli policies into silence—an approach all too common in the US—should be publicly rejected by all who regard themselves as liberals. Its overuse, whether from cynicism or hysterical conviction, runs the risk of producing a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sooner or later, what should be a charge of crushing seriousness and moral weight will become a mere marketplace insult, and will produce in its targets just a shrug of the shoulders.

Moreover, the widespread use of this charge deals a blow to civilised debate. Because by its nature it can be neither proved nor disproved in most cases, it leads discussion away from the clearly-lit arena of rational discussion and towards the dark corridors of paranoia and conspiracy,

gloomy chambers of the mind in which even Blair's criticism of Israel can be attributed, as one American official recently remarked to me, to "traditional British antisemitism."

All of this is morally and emotionally difficult for

many Jews. But then, no one ever said that civil courage in the face of nationalism was meant to be easy. All over the world, liberal intellectuals have been asked to stand up for the true interests, both of their countries and of world civilisation, against the forces of national chauvinism, and Israel and its supporters cannot claim exemption from this demand.

As for the argument that Israel has committed fewer crimes than Russia, or other states with which the US maintains correct relations—this is true, but the level of US aid to Israel reflects and is seen to reflect a close level of identification between the two countries. This gives US citizens some responsibility for Israeli behaviour in a way that they do not have for Russian behaviour. If the US had been giving similar levels of aid to Russia before the Chechen wars, it would have been morally and politically culpable if it had not used that aid as a lever on Russian policy.

It is time, therefore, that all true friends of Israel begin to ask themselves whether present Israeli policies, and US support for them, are in the real interests of Israel, the Jewish people of the world, and the US; or whether they sustain Arab hatreds and European resentments which, in the long run, risk undermining Israel, crippling America, and destroying the liberal civilisation on which the wellbeing of a majority of Jews in the world ultimately depends. ■

The exaggeration of the existential threat to Israel contributes to a psychology of emergency and threat
