

# Rome and its Belligerent Sparta<sup>1</sup>

As a peace enthusiast, I was heavily involved at the end of the 1980s-early 90s in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue when every university, think-tank and political party around the world was organizing a seminar of its own to contribute to a rapprochement they saw as desirable and inevitable. In all those encounters, every possible scenario in peacemaking and its opposite was explored *ad nauseum*. This led many to believe, naively, that when a peace process would finally be triggered, it would be of short duration since much of the preliminary homework had already been done in these *fora*, which, though unofficial, were nonetheless high-powered.

Posted in London, a very exasperating and time-consuming assignment, I was mercifully not engaged in the negotiating process that began in Madrid in October 1991. In 1998, however, I attended three meetings here in London between Yasser Arafat and the American Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright. After one of those encounters, retiring to our hotel depressed because of the absence of any tangible progress, I told Yasser Arafat, "Abu Ammar, we the Christian Palestinians are two percent of society in Palestine and we were two (Nabil Abu Rudeinah and myself) out of eight in the Palestinian delegation: that is 25 percent. The Jewish community in the USA represents also two percent of society, yet it constituted eight out of eight of the American delegation: that is 100 percent. We are either under-represented or they are over-represented."

Before objections start flooding in, I wish to remind readers that when in any analysis of the French and British domestic

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scenes it is said that the Corsicans and the Scots play a disproportionate role, there is no avalanche of expressions of indignation and outrage. Yet their role and status is modest in comparison.

### **The Loss of an Ally and the Loss of an Enemy**

Between 1985-1987, I spent two years as a visiting scholar at Harvard University. Two memories stick out.

- 1) It was obvious then, in academic and political circles, that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a matter of years away. Within the Third World and in some leftist Western circles there was a certain level of disquiet about the possible global and regional repercussions of such a major alteration in the international system. To my surprise, within pro-Israeli circles in America, a worry of a different nature was manifesting itself. Contrary to those who were assessing the possible impact of the loss of an 'ally,' their worry was about the loss of an 'enemy' and what it might mean for the *raison d'être* and the strategic function and utility of Israel in American foreign policy as a bastion and strategic asset in terms of containing Soviet expansionism. It was precisely during this period that the ideological construction of an alternative global threat, the peril of Islam, took shape. This self-fulfilling theory/prophesy/ ideology gained a momentum of its own, rendered more plausible by the shallowness, irrationality, and extremism of some Oriental responses to occidental challenges.
- 2) In magazines such as *Commentary* and *The New Republic* there was an acute awareness that one day a peace process would have to get started and a number of serious articles explored the avenues that might best suit Israeli interests. The architecture and the choreography of negotiations, it was said, had to reflect the "non-centrality" of the Palestinian problem in the Middle East and there was a need to de-couple the different negotiating tracks to make it difficult to link and to synchronize progress. The American role had to be limited to convene the parties to the ne-

gotiating table, but not to be decisive towards achieving a certain finality. The outcome would be "as agreed upon by the local negotiating sides" as though the US had no international commitments in the United Nations, no international responsibilities necessitating leadership and guidance, no regional interests and friendships that such a complacent attitude towards the Israeli territorial appetite might jeopardize.

When after the Gulf War of 1991 the US Administration felt the need to invite for a peace conference (out of fidelity to the Arab members of the coalition, to confer retroactive respectability to the war in the Gulf by showing sensitivity also to the endless ordeal of the Palestinians etc.), that was the model of negotiations suggested. It was considered an offer Israel could not refuse precisely because it corresponded to its preferred negotiating strategy. It was called "the only game in town," "the only deal around." Negotiations started in Madrid at the end of October 1991 and then predictably stagnated in Washington until August 1993 when a parallel and secret track witnessed a breakthrough the Americans were not involved in.

### **The Decline of the Arabists**

Henry Kissinger has had an enduring impact on American foreign policy beyond his years of service. He was, as National Security Advisor, the one who undermined in 1970 the Rogers Plan by repeating to whoever cared to listen that it was precisely only that: a Rogers plan. Once dear Henry succeeded in supplanting Rogers at the State Department, he proceeded to purge the Arabists because, as far as he was concerned, they were infected by 'localitis' and gradually replaced them by staff who had acquired their political experience working in the many organs of the pro-Israeli lobby. Their influence varied depending on the personality of the Secretary of State. It was immense during the time of George Schultz, Warren Christopher, and Madeleine Albright, who were after all employees of the President not belonging to the inner circle but contained with James Baker who was a close friend and behaved as a partner to George Bush Sr.

## **A Messenger without a Message**

Dennis Ross emerged as the most influential of the pro-Israelis among the senior civil servants, not because of his powerful intellect, but because of his survival capabilities and hence his durability. For 12 years, he was a frequent visitor to the area. He incarnated the self-inflicted impotence of the only remaining superpower. He was the most distinguished representative of the strategy outlined in *Commentary Magazine*. He advocated this approach tirelessly, and he practiced it unwaveringly. I called him on BBC World "a messenger without a message" since he never came with any original idea or any American proposal not cleared in advance with the Israeli Government, but always conveyed and explained the Israeli position. The USA, the only global superpower, thus neutralized, had abdicated its role and status in favor of its regional *protégé* Israel. History will record that if Dennis Ross had nothing to do with the diplomatic breakthrough of 1993 he was heavily guilty of the breakdown in 2000. His name will always be associated with bias, partiality, and the absence of American even-handedness in the quest for peace in the Middle East. The way Dennis Ross conducted himself the Palestinians were reduced to negotiating at the mercy of a very asymmetrical balance of power. He allowed the Israeli side to indulge in the illusion that the diplomatic outcome will reflect Israeli power and American alignment on the Israeli preference and that Israeli 'generosity' will decide the territorial contours of the agreement.

## **Rome and Its Belligerent Sparta**

The study of American-Israeli relations has fascinated, intrigued, occupied, and preoccupied two generations of scholars. Two competing schools of thought have addressed the 'who wags whom' debate. The first school spoke of "an American Israel" with the United States dictating to the local ally what its regional policy should be in accordance with the American global vision. Noam Chomsky wrote two decades ago that Washington was the contemporary Rome and Israel its regional belligerent Sparta.

The second school, meanwhile, projected the image of 'an Israeli America,' a complex relationship where the global superpower simply adopts the regional policy of its client state and integrates it in its global strategy. This was considered a result of the powerful pro-Israeli lobby that succeeded in turning Capitol Hill into another Israeli occupied territory.

I have always believed that both schools of thought were correct but at different moments in history, depending on a variety of considerations such as the electoral and intellectual strength of the American President, on how comfortable he is in the country and in Congress, and on how comfortable the US is in the world.

After the horror of 9/11, when the predictable retaliation was being discussed, the pro-Israeli lobby immediately emerged as the 'maximalist school,' which wanted to expand the theater of operations beyond Afghanistan to engulf more countries. America now prepares itself to wage an attack against Iraq that nothing justifies except Israel's regional hegemonic inclinations. The lobby has really grown accustomed to using one muscle too many and to going one pressure too far. The satisfaction among the rightwing Israeli establishment is immense now that the US appears to be Israel's regional belligerent Sparta.

### **The Two Americas**

In today's administration, the pro-Israeli lobby, in alliance with the Christian fundamentalists and their delirious theology, has totally dominated and confiscated the debate around American foreign policy in the Middle East. During a recent quick visit to America on the third and fourth of July, I was dazzled to watch on all TV channels the artificially imported Israeli discourse on insecurity and terrorism, which gave the impression that the US was under massive attack on Independence Day. Colin Powell and the State Department still represent a pocket of resistance, aided occasionally by the distant voices of Jimmy Carter, Brent Scowcroft, and Zbigniew Brzezinsky. When Ariel Sharon waged his reinvasion of the Occupied Territories, I believe that Presi-

dent Bush expected the withdrawal to take place "now," "immediately," and "without delay" but had to retract because of massive pressures in Washington. Bush was defeated even before Powell departed for his slow motion trip to the area. Again, it turned out that the lobby does not suffer from dual loyalty. When, on the rare occasion the President happens to differ with an Israeli Prime Minister, the lobby does not side with the President. Both Bushes, the father and the son, have experienced that in less than a decade.

When Vice-President Cheney passed through London in March on his way to the region I published in *The Guardian* an open letter in which I wrote the following: "The Arab World has no ideological dispute with the USA. Our belief is that there are two Americas, two political cultures, two historical memories. There is the America of the early settlers who, on discovering the New World, clashed with the indigenous population and almost totally exterminated them. The America that established slavery and had an elastic conception of its frontiers expanding shamelessly at the expense of Mexico. This is the America with which Ariel Sharon always seeks an alliance. When 'the shared values' are invoked, it is in this national experience that the common traditions are deeply rooted.

"But there is another America. The America of the War of Independence against the colonial power. The America that took the painful decision to undergo a civil war to abolish slavery. The America of Woodrow Wilson that came to the Versailles Conference upholding the principle of self-determination. The America of the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King's dream. It is this America that we Palestinians appeal to and seek an alliance with. These two Americas do not coincide with Democratic America and Republican America. The two historical memories cross this political divide."

I could have added the America of Dwight Eisenhower who in 1956-57, just after the Suez War, obtained through 'friendly persuasion' Israel's withdrawal out of the occupied Sinai in 24 hours. Israel, then, was governed by Ben Gurion and, unlike President Bush, Eisenhower obtained Israeli acquiescence without having the 'reward' of the Saudi initiative, which enjoys

Palestinian blessings and now has been endorsed by the Arab Summit of Beirut.

## **Choices**

Decision-makers in Washington always had a choice between a foreign policy that will make America loved and respected around the world or a policy that will make it feared and hated. They now have to decide what the unfinished business on the international agenda is: disciplining Israel diplomatically or crushing Iraq militarily. In the meantime, Dennis Ross, after a 12-year stint in the State Department, is back home in the pro-Israeli lobby as Director of the Washington Institute for Near East policy. In the new administration, the center of gravity of the pro-Israeli lobby has moved from the State Department to the Department of Defense. Ross frequently appears on all TV channels on both sides of the Atlantic as the peacemaker *par excellence* pontificating in the most irritating fashion as though he is an equidistant third party. He indulges the character assassination of Yasser Arafat, trying to demolish politically what the military campaigns of Ariel Sharon did not succeed in achieving.

In a very gloomy situation, the birth of the new structure of the Quartet – US-UN-EU and Russia – is the only source of optimism in the immediate future. It has the double advantage of reintroducing important players who were deliberately excluded or marginalized because, as Kissinger wrote, their presence might "raise Arab expectations" and of strengthening the more reasonable and decent school of thought within the American Administration. With the vision of the Two-State solution, we now have the light. The Quartet could be the missing tunnel.

I have always believed that the Arab-Israeli conflict is a test between moral courage and political cowardice. Having encountered cowardice so frequently, I still hope that we may soon have a rendezvous with history.

