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I Don't See How a Palestinian State Can Ever Happen



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Abu Yussef Abu Dahuk is 60 years old. But of course he looks around 75 or 80, because he is a Bedouin and lives under a corrugated iron roof and sheets tied together with string, and because he owns just 120 goats which belong to his 17 children. And because the

Israeli cops and soldiers a couple of hundred feet away are ready to demolish his little slum and drive him away.

The Palestinian had two wives – the first died 18 years ago, and the second serves us the usual scalding hot tea on this scalding hot morning – and has been expelled from his grazing lands three times; first from Tel Arad near the Israeli town of Beersheva and then again after the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank; and then in 1974. Now the Israeli High Court of Justice – and yes, let justice indeed be its name – has decided that the 180 members of the Bedouin Jahalin tribe should be dispossessed once more. They must be moved to an area in Abu Dis not far, as the residents point out, to a garbage dump. Not that you can be dispossessed of rags and a mud school or bits of rusting metal that prop up a plastic roof over shacks.

But it's not that simple. We all know – the Israelis know, the EU which has given €315,000 to Khan al-Ahmar knows, and the Palestinians know – that this is no chance demolition. Just over the hills to the north peep the red rooftops of the Kfar Adumim Jewish colony, and the destruction of Khan al-Ahmar will give its Israeli inhabitants room to move – high court permitting, needless to say – down to the highway and thus destroy the last of the Palestinian villages beside the road to Jerusalem. Another circle of Israeli concrete around the city will be complete.

Abu Yussef Abu Dahuk knows all too well what this means. “The settlement continues to be built and so they must move us out. Now we are not allowed to cross the valley behind us with our goats or the settlers will take our goats. We are not allowed to build proper homes and so we have to use these metal structures. The settlers can build a villa, with electricity and a water source and a garden – and for us in the winter, we can build nothing. We put plastic on top of the metal to stop the water falling on us when we are sleeping.”

But I think Abu Yussef Abu Dahuk may not be sleeping in Khan al-Ahmar much longer. The Palestinian Authority has done little for the Bedouins here and the arrival of two van loads of Palestinian activists with their flags and cameras and feeble but naturally much publicised attempts to block the highway seemed far too theatrical, ritualised and – dare one say so? – cynical, to be of much help to the 180 Bedouins.

The Israeli policemen and policewomen and the soldiers are trying to keep the main road, the famous Trans-Samaria Highway, open but the phone cameras are poised above them – more cameras than cops, I observed – and then the plain clothes cops arrive with their own cameras and everyone is filming everyone else. The only figures who remain out of focus

are the old shepherds and their children who mostly stay behind the front-line ditch on the north side of the highway.

We've watched this stage-play so many times that it has, like so much of the West Bank, become normal. Legal (thanks to the High Court), familiar, usual, timed to the minute – two news agency reporters cheerfully agreed to leave at the same time so that neither can scoop the other if the cops moved in — and utterly outrageous. But the police don't move. They shepherd a few shepherds off the road and sigh with irritation at the shouts of “Free Palestine”, but the Israeli bulldozer which ominously turned up retreats from the wadi and grinds off up the road.

The European parliament has been much exercised about Khan al-Ahmar, warning that the Israelis would be committing a war crime if they demolished the herding village whose goats now wander among the demonstrators. By a 320 to 227 vote, it approved a Strasbourg resolution which demanded Israeli compensation for financial losses incurred by the EU in the little plot of land. Ten EU states are providing humanitarian assistance in Khan al-Ahmar, including a primary school, and the parliament's resolution says that if the demolition and the forcible transfer of its residents takes place, this “would constitute a grave breach of international law”. In other words, a “war crime” under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Correctly, if a little late in the day, Federica Mogherini, the EU's head of foreign policy, told parliamentarians that the destruction of Khan al-Ahmar “would also be a blow against the viability of the State of Palestine and against the very possibility of a two-state solution.” She noted that it's almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain building permits in the West Bank's Area C, thus placing the Israeli claim that the shepherds' shacks had been constructed illegally in its own grim context. Area C is under total Israeli occupation and – so the Jewish settlers say – must be annexed at once. “C” comprises 60 per cent of the West Bank. Why on earth would the Israelis encourage anyone to stay in the land of the ever-expanding Jewish colonies?

Abu Yussef Abu Dahuk talks – of course, of course – about the Balfour Declaration and the curse of its false promise to protect the non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine more than a hundred years ago. Sitting in his pitiful shack, I and my colleagues dutifully apologise for the long dead British foreign secretary. “You created this problem,” the proud but soon-to-be homeless Bedouin says softly. “You know that if they finally move us to Jordan, that will create only more conflict among those communities there. You don't need to apologise for Balfour – it's like water that has leaked from a pipe. You need to put

pressure on the ‘spoiled kid’ [Israel] to stop doing what he is doing. We held out the hands of peace [in Oslo] 25 years ago, and still we are not getting anything back.”

He used to get more food, medicine and help from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, he says, before the Americans announced that they would stop funding it. “Now we get nothing.” And so – how many times do we come up with this insulting question? – I ask Abu Yussef Abu Dahuk if he will ever live in a Palestinian state? “For me, I don’t think so. In my life, I don’t think so. It’s already 25 years since Oslo was signed and nothing has happened. Maybe if the leaders were changed, something would happen... We are an honest people – we are not politicians. But life has taught us a lot of things.”

Mogherini should surely come and talk to this man. For who can believe in a Palestinian state today, let alone “a blow against its viability” as a future state? Its viability is as secure as the plastic sheet over this poor man’s head, its existence a myth whose reality exists only in Strasbourg. Even the goats know that.