

Israel's Palestinian 'problem'

Like the blinded Samson, Israel has suddenly found itself eyeless in Gaza. Rioting and bloodshed erupted in Gaza and across the occupied West Bank this week as Palestinians rose up in the worst internal violence to hit Israel since 1948.

It was one of Israel's darkest nightmares come true and the way security forces responded made Israel look very much like a Jewish Syria. Until this week's violence, the 967,000 Palestinians on the West Bank and the 541,000 crammed into Gaza's slums, had been kept quiet. This was done by a combination of tough control by Israel's internal security service, the Shin Beth, through residence restrictions and by surrounding Arab areas with Jewish settlements.

Until recently, many Israelis described their rule over the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights — all seized during the 1967 War — as "benign." The 1.5 million Palestinians in these areas have no political rights, live under military rule and provide Israel with a source of cheap, mental labor.

Liberal Israelis have fretted for years that by holding on to the occupied territories, Israel would inevitably turn into another South Africa. Demographic studies sharpened such fears: In another 16 years, Arabs, who have a high birthrate, may slightly outnumber Jews inside "Greater Israel."

Israel has four choices: Outright apartheid; expulsion of 1.5 million Arabs; giving up Gaza and the West Bank; or continuing the present charade of pretending it has not really annexed the occupied territories. The latter allows Israel to deny Palestinians any political or economic rights by using the fig leaf of military rule without having to legally admit doing so. A 1978 version of "Benign" rule over Gaza and the West Bank vanished

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this week in a haze of gunsmoke as Israeli soldiers shot down rioting Palestinian teenagers in the streets. Between 16 and 40 Palestinians, including children, have so far been killed by Israeli gunfire and at least another 100 wounded. Israeli authorities made only feeble attempts to quell the demonstrations by using non-lethal riot methods; instead, Israeli troops and Shin Beth agents fired their automatic weapons directly at rock-throwing Palestinian youngsters.

If this had happened in South Africa, there would have been a firestorm of outrage. Yet even in that nation's black townships, police use rubber bullets and buckshot when rioters get out of hand. In Gaza and the West Bank, soldiers simply stood back and shot to kill. The message to the Palestinians was clear: You are "cockroaches" and "terrorists." Keep demonstrating and you will be shot down like dogs.

How ironical it is that all the loud voices that denounce South Africa have had so little to say about what is now happening in Israel. Hardly a peep of protest has come from the U.S. or Canada. Editorial writers wax indignant over Soweto but seldom, at least until recently, about Israel's version of Soweto. How many westerners know that Gaza Arabs are

not allowed to sleep in Israel proper but must be bused back to their shanty towns each night? While South Africa is fast eliminating such ugly forms of apartheid, Israel sadly seems to be instituting them. Nor is much ever said about the exceptionally high number of Palestinians who have been jailed.

It's troubling to watch Kurt Waldheim, no matter how unattractive, being pilloried by Israel's North American supporters while they turn a blind eye to Israeli troops shooting down unarmed Palestinian youths — or to Israeli courts formally permitting the Shin Beth to torture prisoners. Something is dreadfully wrong.

The wrong is, of course, that Israel, for all its brilliant accomplishments, cannot escape the Palestinian problem. Israel's right still believes that an iron fist will keep Palestinians under control. The far right even wants them expelled. Israel's moderates worry while the left advocates returning the occupied territories.

This week's shocking events make it clear that something must be done. A new generation of Palestinians is being inspired more by Iran's suicide fighters than by the diplomatic arabesques of Yasser Arafat. Unless Israel gives up most of the occupied territories, it faces the very real prospect of becoming a police state with an increasingly violent, enraged Palestinian underclass. Arthur Koestler, the brilliant Jewish writer, saw this coming and warned that Israel risked turning into a "nasty, little Sparta."

It's time Israel's North American supporters bring potent pressure on the Israeli government to stop the killing and get on with real Mideast peace talks. The Israel we have seen last week is certainly not the Israel of Theodor Herzl or Chaim Weizmann.