

Too late for a Palestinian State?

by GWYNNE DYER

Ten more countries are recognizing Palestine as a sovereign state in the course of this week. That merely brings the total up from 147 to 157, but it's a big deal nevertheless because for the first time it includes quite a few big, rich Western countries (France, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia). But it is not unified and it still controls no territory.

The cascade of recognitions at the United Nations General Assembly's annual session in New York is pure gesture politics. What drives it is belated sympathy for the Palestinians as they face a disaster even worse than the naqba (catastrophe) that drove most Palestinians out of what is now legally the State of Israel in 1948.

The new naqba got underway last week, with the big Israeli offensive to drive all the surviving Palestinians in the Gaza Strip down to a tiny southwest corner, far too small to accommodate the Strip's surviving two million people even in the most miserable conditions. There they will be offered free trips into exile with enough money to start anew nowhere near their homeland.

The governments of the countries that are now offering token recognition to a purely virtual Palestinian state know very well what Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu intends.

They suspect that he will then exploit violent reactions by the three million Palestinians in the occupied West Bank to expel them as well and complete the conquest of all of Palestine.

They know all this, but they dare not try to stop it so long as Donald Trump maintains his unstinting, unquestioning support for the present Israeli government. The Palestinian state is probably about to become even more virtual, in the sense that hardly any Palestinians will still live there.

It all feels inevitable now, but once it wasn't. There was a time when the 'two-state solution' was quite possible. All that it required was a real Palestinian state ? and it was Arabs, not Israelis, who sabotaged that possibility.

Palestine fell into British hands when the victors carved up the Middle East after the First World War. During the war Britain had promised to create a 'Jewish homeland' in Palestine to attract financial support from wealthy Zionists. Afterwards, it found itself caught between the anxieties of the resident Arab majority and the ambitions of would-be Zionist immigrants.

By 1948 the British empire was crumbling, Palestine's Jewish population had soared, and they were demanding independence. In fact, Jewish terrorists (Irgun and the Stern Gang) were killing British soldiers. The war-weary British dumped the problem in the lap of the United Nations, which decided Palestine must be partitioned into two states.

The history is complicated, but the salient fact is that sovereign states were offered to both the Jews and the Arabs in 1948.

It was a more or less equal division ? about 50-50 ? and the Israelis (as they would now be called) accepted at once. Why not? Their population had grown more than tenfold in thirty years, they were now one-third of the total population, and they got half of the good land.

The Palestinians, for equally obvious reasons, rejected it. They assumed they would win in a war, although they had no army and hardly any arms themselves. The armies of much bigger Arab countries around them ? Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq ? would do the fighting and 'drive the Jews into the sea'. Stories about driving out the Crusaders got some play too.

The Arab armies lost, of course. All those countries were just emerging from British or French colonial rule, their kings had been chosen in London or Paris, and the main job of their armies was holding the local peasantry down. They were easily defeated by the

Israelis, who ended up holding five-sixths of the country.

The other one-sixth was what we now call the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which gave shelter to most of the Palestinian refugees driven out by the Israelis. No Palestinian government had been formed, so the decisions stayed in the hands of Jordan (the West Bank) and Egypt (Gaza). And this was when the Great Mistake was made.

Neither Egypt nor Jordan showed any interest in using that remaining land as the base for the Palestinian state that had already been authorized by the UN. Yes, it would have been severely truncated, but it would be celebrating its 77th anniversary this year. Instead, Jordan simply annexed the West Bank, and Egypt did nothing useful in Gaza.

Both those areas were conquered by Israel in the 1967 war, so Palestine might now have a government-in-exile if that war had also happened on the alternate timeline. But nothing could be as bad as the fate Palestinians face now. No actual state has been erased from the map by violence since 1945, but virtual doesn't count for much.