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## Freedom and equality are at the core of the Palestinians' struggle

[Hussein Ibish](#)<sup>[2]</sup>

November 30, 2013

Writing recently in the New York Times, former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad cited Nelson Mandela as his personal inspiration and the embodiment of the essential attributes of the Palestinian cause. It was a perfect choice.

Mr Mandela, he wrote, has become a “universal symbol of the struggle for self-determination and human equality”. The essence of the Palestinian struggle is exactly that: a quest for establishing that Palestinians are equal human beings to all others. They are no better and no worse, but equal.

The only viable means for Palestinians to attain and assert this equality is through the establishment of a fully sovereign, independent Palestinian state. Through this state, Palestinians will be first-class citizens in a country of their own for the first time in their modern history. For the first time, they will be able to exercise self-determination. And, for the first time, they will be equal to Jewish Israelis, and all of their Arab neighbours, as citizens of equally sovereign, independent states that will have to coexist in peace and security.

Equality of the kind envisaged by Mr Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr, Mohandas K Gandhi, and invoked by Mr Fayyad, doesn't involve a highly regimented, nihilistic vision of non-differentiation, such as has been advocated by some radical Maoist and other extreme utopian groups. It understands that each individual is different, and that there will be many differences between societies as well. It doesn't seek to smash everyone into a tiny cubbyhole of conformity and standardisation.

Instead, it seeks to free the creative and self-empowering energies of every individual and society. For a national collectivity like the Palestinians, this means freedom from occupation and for the equal right – along with all other peoples – to establish their own state and pursue their independence as they see fit.

It does not and it cannot in the real world mean perfect justice, which is, by definition, unattainable. But it does mean relieving an extreme

form of injustice: the occupation that leaves over four million Palestinians stateless in their own land.

Mr Fayyad and other serious Palestinians understand that this means compromises with Israel. Israel, too, must rein in the overweening ambitions of its settler and annexationist movements and make serious compromises on politically difficult issues such as Jerusalem, which will have to be a shared city if the conflict is to end.

Mr Fayyad is absolutely right when he points to “the fundamental asymmetry in the balance of power between occupier and occupied” as the primary obstacle to Israeli-Palestinian peace. It is simply too easy for the Israeli public to ignore the problem of the occupation and pretend, in effect, as it did in its last election, that it simply doesn’t exist.

But the world has a stake in resolving the conflict by ending the occupation, and the two-state solution is the stated policy of virtually every government in the world, the preference of the majority of Israelis and Palestinians in every survey and the only outcome explicitly endorsed by international law. The global consensus is practically unanimous: Palestinians deserve a state alongside Israel, which is already a United Nations member state.

Moreover, Israel has no other vision or real options for what to do with these millions of stateless people whom it cannot formally incorporate while remaining in any sense “Jewish”, nor can it continue to repress them indefinitely. Having successfully imposed a fait accompli on the Middle East and the world in 1948, some Israelis now feel they can do the same in the territories occupied since 1967.

They cannot.

The demographic realities, international standards and norms and the long-term repercussions of annexation, expulsion or the indefinite continuation of the status quo are untenable.

But, as Mr Fayyad points out, there is also a powerful moral dimension here. The cause of Palestinian independence is, more than anything, an ethical one, and a long-overdue expression of the principle of fundamental human equality.

This cuts both ways. Israel, he writes, should reciprocate the Palestine Liberation Organisation’s 1993 recognition of Israel by accepting “an internationally mandated date for ending its occupation, and a mutually agreed-upon path for getting there”. For their own part, Mr Fayyad has always insisted, especially as prime minister, that Palestinians must “build our state and deepen our readiness for statehood”. He rightly demands that Israel refrain from impeding these efforts.

Mr Fayyad cites Mr Mandela as being the exemplar of “resisting the entrapment of victimhood and overcoming the burdens of injustice”. His is a powerful double message: the Palestinian cause is a quest for justice, and the world must recognise its overwhelming moral authority.

At the same time, Palestinians must shake off the trap of a victimhood mentality and act purposefully, systematically and strategically to build their own society while non-violently resisting the occupation to achieve not merely independence but actual liberation.

A quick glance around the contemporary Arab world shows what independence without liberation can sometimes look like. Palestinians must have an independent state. And in that democratic, pluralistic and tolerant state, Palestinians must individually be equal citizens under the law.

These twin moral imperatives – freedom from Israeli occupation and a Palestinian society based on equality and the rule of law – are what Mr Fayyad is invoking Mr Mandela to advocate.

Mr Fayyad’s plea – and Mr Mandela, Dr King and Gandhi’s examples – all simply boil down to this: every individual and every people deserve the simple recognition of human equality.

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