

## **INTIFADA, SPANISH-STYLE**

Hillel Halkin, THE JERUSALEM POST Feb. 10, 2005

Schadenfreude, the Germans call it. In Hebrew we say simha le'eyd. Unfortunately, there's no word for it in English - "malicious pleasure" is about as close as you can get. I wonder if there's one in Spanish.

Because it's Spain that's giving me the pleasure. And its Basques. You may have read about it in the papers last week After Basque regional president Juan Jose Ibarretxe proposed a new relationship of "free association" between the Basque region and the rest of Spain, with the future option of full Basque independence, the Spanish parliament in Madrid voted overwhelmingly to reject the plan.

Spain, declared Spanish prime minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, would never agree to an independent Basque state, even if that's what a majority of Basques wanted. Spanish territorial integrity would never be compromised.

This, mind you, from a country that has been, like all its enlightened European neighbors, preaching to Israel for years about the need for Palestinian statehood. How could we Israelis be so obtuse as to thwart the Palestinian right to national self-determination?

It turns out that what's urgent for the Palestinians is out of the question for the Basques. How come? Because the right to national self-determination, apparently, does not apply to Europe.

Of course, you might want to argue if you were a Spaniard that there's a logic to this. Unlike the Palestinians, the Basques aren't oppressed; they live freely in their homeland as full and equal citizens of Spain, without roadblocks, without checkpoints, without humiliation, without tanks and army patrols roaming through their cities. The Palestinians need a state because life under Israeli rule is intolerable for them. What do the Basques need one for?

Yet quite apart from the fact that the right to national self-determination means that it isn't the Spaniards' business to tell the Basques whether they need a state or not, one can easily turn this argument around. Precisely because of the Palestinians' bitter grievances against Israel, an independent Palestinian state, situated in Israel's biblical heartland and a third Israel's size, might constitute a grave danger. It could become irredentist and lay claim to parts of Israel proper; it could arouse separatism and sedition among Israel's Palestinian citizens; it could make alliances with other Arab countries against Israel; it could allow terrorists to strike at Israel across its borders. There are many good reasons for Israel to fear it.

Spain, on the other hand, is a huge country. The Basque region is a tiny and remote part of it. An independent Basque state could not by any stretch of the imagination jeopardize Spain or harm its vital interests. What possible reason, besides pigheaded nationalist Spanish pride,

or the worry that someone else (the Catalans, say?) might be encouraged, God forbid, to want self-determination too, do the Spanish have for opposing it?

One can go further. The Arabs of Palestine are no different in language, culture, and religion from the Arabs of Syria and Jordan, who are themselves not that different from the Arabs in many of the world's 20-plus independent Arabic-speaking states. One more such state is hardly needed to ensure the survival of the characteristic features of Palestinian life, which are not, so to speak, ecologically endangered.

The Basques are the exact opposite. They speak a language that is unique (although some linguists think it is distantly related to Burushaki, which is spoken by a few thousand people in an isolated valley in Pakistan) and have a history that is unique, too, being directly descended, according to current theories, from the first homo sapiens to inhabit Europe some 40,000 years ago. All other European peoples are Johnny-come-latelies by comparison; when you see a Basque, you may be looking at the progeny of Cro-Magnon man.

Already today, the Basque language is not spoken by most Basques; Basque culture and folklore are in danger of disappearing, too. If the Basque region continues to be an appendage of Spain, they are likely to vanish entirely. What is the one thing that can save them? A Basque state, in which all the institutions of government - the bureaucracy, the educational system, the media - are put at their service. It is a sad fact that without such institutions behind them, languages and cultures have little chance in the modern world.

And who is categorically against a Basque state? The same Spain that never tires, like the rest of the world, of calling for a Palestinian state!

Needless to say, this revolting hypocrisy isn't just about Palestinians and Basques. An independent Kurdistan? Nothing doing - even though the 25 million Kurds of the Middle East have been systematically discriminated against and sometimes militarily brutalized by every country they live in, especially Turkey and Iraq. (The Turks, too, of course, have shamelessly attacked Israel for denying the Palestinians independence while threatening to go to war to deny it to the Kurds.) An independent Tibet? Absolutely not - even though the Chinese are determinedly engaged in destroying Tibetan culture and swamping Tibet with Chinese (that sounds better than "Jewish," no?) settlers.

The fact of the matter is that Europe doesn't give a damn about national self-determination, and never has. All it cares about are its own political and economic interests, which it cloaks, as nations always do, in the language of political morality when it can.

I must confess that I would experience no little Schadenfreude if, on April 17, the day picked by the Basque regional government for new elections following the Spanish parliament's vote, the pro-"free association" forces won by a big margin. What will the government of Spain do

then? Pronounce the Basque vote illegal? Move to dismantle the newly elected regional government? Send in the army and declare military rule?

True, even Schadenfreude has its limits. If the Basques were to vote at some future date for real independence, and Spain tried forcibly to quash it, the inevitable results would be the vigorous revival of the Basque terror that has been quiescent in recent years and the outbreak of mass violence - in short, a Spanish-style intifada. Enjoying the spectacle of that would mean adding more malice to my pleasure than I'd like. Meanwhile, though, I can't wait to see what happens next. There's nothing like seeing a hypocritical country hoisted by its own petard.