

## **ONE ARAB-JEWISH STATE: THE OTTOMAN EXPERIENCE AND AFTER**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The text below was a paper submitted to an international conference at Lausanne University (Switzerland) on "One Democratic State in Israel/Palestine." The theme of the conference and my paper were both responses to the painful failure of the ill-fated Partition resolution of the U.N. General Assembly, some six decades ago. The recommendation itself being largely the product of election strains in the domestic politics of the United States, the leading victorious power after the war, it was scrutinized then by a number of leading intellectuals, including some prominent Jews. Past experience in the historic land having brought bloodshed, mass exodus and wars, today's circumstances urged many more thinkers and writers to accentuate the need for a single state, in one form or another, that will embrace all those living in the whole Palestine. As the paper underlines, such coexistence was a reality during the Ottoman centuries. Although many sorrowful events accumulated since then, it is an alternative, realizable either by the conciliation of the majorities on both sides, or through a democratic process to be based on the votes of the Palestinian Arabs, whether Muslims or Christians, who will constitute the majority in some future date on that land.

### **KEYWORDS**

Palestine, Israel, the Ottoman experience, the Middle East, Zionism.

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The Ottoman Administration in Palestine, which spans some four centuries (*de facto*, 1516-1917), demonstrated that the Muslim or Christian Arabs, the Jews and other peoples can coexist in peace in the Holy Land, traditionally known as "Palestine", under the roof of one state. According to the "*millet*" (Arabic: *milla*) system then, the government in Istanbul recognized each religious group and the main Christian denominations within them (the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Catholic and Protestant), bestowing to each separately the right to designate their own leaders, run their own affairs, use their own language, and exercise the requirements of their own religion or sect. Not only the Grand Rabbi (*Hamam Başı*), the Patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox, Gregorian Armenian and other churches and the Grand Mufti (*Shaikh-ul Islam*, Chief Muslim Juristconsult) enjoyed permanent positions in state hierarchy, but the distinguished followers of all these communities often held high offices in the central and local governments, while their peoples freely engaged in business, crafts and professional work.

Likewise, the Arabs, the Jews and other peoples lived together in the land of Palestine in harmony, none of the bloodshed that we now most deplorably observe every day, or even every hour in Israel/Palestine ever occurring in the long stretch of those four centuries. There were of course rules that regulated this harmony for the benefit of all citizens. For instance, the Jews were reminded by a single *ferman* or *irade* (edict) that they should lower their voices while praying in front of the Wailing Wall during the Muslim call (*ezan*) to the mosque, five times a day at particular hours, so that the announcement from the *minaret* could be heard properly by the believers in Allah. There were no confrontations or conflicts between these two communities, and no violence or bloodshed.

When the Ottomans established a Parliament (*Meclis-i Mebusan*) in 1876 and once again in 1908, the Palestinians and the Jews were also represented there. For instance, in the second Parliament there were 147 Turks, 60 Arabs, 27 Albanians, 26 Greeks, 14 Armenians, 4 Jews, 10 Slavs and one Vlah (Rumanian). Those Arabs coming from Jerusalem, Jaffa and Nablus were Palestinians representing their communities in those cities.

As a matter of fact, the whole history of Palestine, including the Kingdoms of Israel and Judaea, were far more indicative of multinational societies than an ethnocentrist Jewish entity that came to existence much later. Even Theodore Herzl envisaged a state with a Jewish president and an Arab vice-president.

This accord of togetherness and balance changed as soon as the British Commander General E.H.H. Allenby entered Jerusalem on 9 December 1917, during the latter part of the First World War. Although he considered the entry of the British army into this Holy City as the end of the Crusades and was promoted to the rank of Field-marshal and made a Viscount, the Palestinians, Muslim and Christian, lost all their rights and never gained them back again.

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But neither Britain, nor the League of Nations could rightfully deny the Palestinian entity, nor annul their rights of sovereignty. It is true that the Balfour Declaration (1917), which had mentioned a "national home" (not a state) for the Jews, also promised them "political" rights while the same it seemed to guarantee only civil and religious rights for the "non-Jews". By the latter, the Declaration meant the Palestinian Arabs, who constituted then slightly over 90% of the total population. The overwhelming majority was alluded to in such marginal terms that an average European might be induced to presume that Palestine was actually a Jewish home while a few faces of non-Jews were occasionally seen in some corners. This is not unlike describing the English, deliberately careful not to use the proper word, as the people living across the *République Française*, north of the Basque territory and beyond the Channel in between. The mandate for Palestine, designated under 'Category A', implied that it could expect independence earlier than the other categories. The League or the Mandatory Power could not alienate the sovereignty of Palestine.

Israel was created, nevertheless, following the U.N. General Assembly resolution, not legally binding but with the value of a mere recommendation. Although it did not consult the Palestinians, the final voting, postponed a number of times, was under the undue influence of the circumstances of approaching American elections

and the Jewish lobby operating in that country. Moreover, the U.N. Organization, no matter in what capacity and through which organs it may function, cannot deprive the Palestinians of their sovereign rights. If the voting on the draft resolution seeking advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice, would have been the other way around, instead of 21 to 20 rejecting the move, many breathtaking dramas, such as the acquisition of land through war, of the later periods could have been avoided. Turkey, where I come from, knew from first-hand historical experience that a two-state solution would not work in the long run, and hence voted against the Partition recommendation, in spite of pressure from some quarters.

But Israel came into existence, and grew after the 1948 and the 1967 Wars. The new country was flooded by immigrants from more than one-hundred states. The Jewish *jishuv* (settlement) was a consequence of the Holocaust in Europe, a series of crimes on a continental basis with which the Arabs were in no way connected. The by-standing Palestinians were made to pay for a genocide carried out in the Christian West. It led to the culmination of a Jewish settler strategy, both to establish command over the Palestinian economy and physically possess most of the land and resources. A corollary of both policies was the idea of chasing away the indigenous Palestinians.

A Jew born in far away foreign lands had the right to settle in Palestine while the descendants of the indigenous Arabs, whose ancestors might have lived there for centuries, were denied the same right. The latter, many of whom were driven away a number of times, were rendered a numerical minority in historic Palestine. Those who remained, isolated from economic and political power, are not even acknowledged as a national minority. The "non-Jews" include, not only the substantial Muslim or Christian Palestinians, but also various Christian sects, small communities like the Circassians, the Druzes and the Baha'is, as well as foreign workers.

Expulsion of the Palestinians constituted the major part of a premeditated strategy. With the end of the 1948 War, about 750,000 Palestinians became refugees, and the 1967 War forced another 300,000 into exile. In 1982, Israel killed 19,000 of them in Lebanon. In the meantime, it had annexed East Jerusalem, controlled all water resources and changed the demographic balance in the Occupied

Territories. Apart from living in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Palestinians scattered mostly all over the Arab countries and also the rest of the world. The refugees and their descendants now number over four million individuals.

After Israel's 1948 victory, those Arabs who remained were put under military government, a regime abandoned in 1966 to treat them as cheap labour to help Jewish economic expansion. It was also Israeli policy to destroy their independent economic viability. The so-called "absentees" are those Palestinians, around 200,000, who live within Israel but who have been denied their right over their lands, dwellings, shares, bank accounts and the like. The Absentees Property Law (1950), the World Zionist Organization/Jewish Agency for the Land of Israel Status Law (1952) and the Jewish National Fund Law (1953) are still operative in Israel. The Israeli Lands Administration denied access to close to 93% of the territory even before 1967. Jewish settlements, armed and subject to Israeli law, which began in the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and in the rest of the West Bank, violate the Fourth Geneva Convention regarding the protection of civilian populations under occupation. There are Jewish-only settlements and their safe roads even within Palestinian territory.

In addition to the Palestinians, Israel does not have a single universal citizenship for all of its citizens. It is the state in Israel, similar to the *apartheid* policy of the former South African regime, that enforces racism through the means of its legal system. Today, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon uses Palestinian workers to build that *apartheid* wall. Israel can remain a "Jewish state" only through *apartheid*. Political Zionism was certainly "a form of racism and racial discrimination", as expressed by the U.N. General Assembly Resolution 3379 of 10 November 1975. The circumstances of the so-called Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid (October-November 1991) lead to the repeal of the former determination. Many more will now agree that Zionism is brought into play as another kind of *apartheid*.

Although the laws discriminate against the non-Jews, there is also a division between the Ashkenazi Jews of European (or Western) origin and the Mizrahim (or Oriental) Jews from Africa and Asia. The Sephardim are the Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. While

Israel's Laws of Return and Citizenship grant any Jew the automatic right of residence and citizenship, the religious authorities in that country recognize, in practice, a person as a Jew only if he or she was born of a Jewish mother and conforming to *halacha* (the requirements of religious law). Less than 15,000 Karaites reject the oral Talmud tradition and accept only the Torah as a source of divine law. Conservatives and the Reform Judaists are not even identified as Jews by the state. Recent Russian immigrants, not born of Jewish mothers, are not also considered as Jews. The Samaritans, only a few hundred who claim descent from before the Assyrian exile (722 B.C.), live in Holon (near Tel-Aviv) and in Nablus.

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Much earlier than the creation of Israel, a number of Jewish thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber and Judah Magnes predicted conflict over the creation of an exclusive Jewish state, which now embraces 78% of Palestine. Communal violence in the Holy Land, unheard of during the long Ottoman years, now occurring too frequently, is harming the psychies of both groups. The world witnessed in agony sieges of public buildings, indiscriminate assaults from tanks, helicopters and military watchtowers, assassinations of selected targets, growing number of civilian victims including children, suicide bombings, burnt down agricultural complexes, devastated livestock, destroyed crops, bulldozed water wells, uprooted trees, arrest campaigns, prolonged detentions, and now a new concrete separation barrier, with deep ditches and high-voltage electric fences, snaking into Palestinian-owned lands.

Even the U.N. idea of a Jewish state, much different from that of the Zionist framers, was based on compliance with democratic laws and international standards. More than half a century of experience with Israel confirmed just the contrary. Moreover, it now distinguishes itself as the only *apartheid* state left in the globe. It is the same state that possesses strong conventional armed forces, in addition to an arsenal of WMDs. Its neighbour, a demilitarized Palestinian State, is surrounded by the only nuclear power in the whole Middle East. A militarized frontier isolates and segregates the Palestinians. On one side of the *apartheid* wall, there is a racist state whose criteria of citizenship are blood and religion. This imbalance

may throw some Israelis up in clouds on a premise of expulsion and occasional extermination, but the Palestinians are not going to abandon their homes this time. Neither the Israeli Jews, nor the Arabs need to leave. The bloody clashes will probably continue, bringing both communities, in a way, closer and closer to search a second alternative.

The so-called recent "peace proposals" as well sanction separation, with no attempt at reconciliation. The present Israeli Government has been treating the Palestinian people and its leadership as enemies. All previous governments either did not want to evacuate Jewish settlements or they could not do so even if they wanted to. Assuming for a moment that they might not be any change for the better in the future, the children of the Jews and the Palestinians, who do not have the same chances in life, may not even see each other. Such a rapport, or lack thereof, cannot go on.

Some objective phenomena already shake the foundations of the alarming status quo. The increase of the Palestinian population inside and outside of Israel cannot be prevented. Their birth rate is twice as high as the Israeli Jews. Eventually, there will be a Palestinian majority between the Mediterranean coast and the Jordanian border. One-man-one-vote is equally unavoidable. In about two decades or so, it might mean the end of the Jewish state, through the democratic process. Yasser Arafat had once said: "The womb of the Arab woman is my best weapon!" There are many Palestinians and many Israeli Jews who still believe in two separate states for two peoples. Even many of those who now stand up for the one-state idea would perhaps accept the two-state model only if they see that it can be satisfactorily implemented. However, if the majority of the Israeli Jews keep opposing the "one-state" solution, it may be forced on them when the demographic balance eventually tilts the other way.

The reality over the birth rates and its inevitable consequences have started to catch the attention of the Israeli right-wingers as well. The fear of losing the majority compelled the Israeli authorities to entertain projects of increasing the Jewish birth rate and extend voting rights to Jews outside Israel. The Israeli advantage in sooner action in favour of some sort of reconciliation will be its opportunity to influence in framing the new rules. The earlier the Jewish community openheartedly discusses another alternative of peaceful

co-existence, the higher chance it has to help create a new form of governance in which their rights and aspirations may attain a better place. If another alternative is imposed on them, even though with their inevitable concurrence, some decades later, the Palestinians stand to gain from a better bargaining position. The consequences of the second alternative will not entail, however, driving the Jews to the sea or slaughtering them in their homes. Even the birth rate among the Palestinians cannot be expected to spiral indefinitely since it will be necessarily curtailed in a new environment of urbanism, education and democracy.

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The Partition experiment in Palestine that costed a lot in material and human values reached an impasse. It is obvious that the two-state formula, based on two very unequal entities, cannot work anymore. It brought recurring wars and daily bloodshed. The peoples of the two countries cannot afford to stay split up. The idea of "Greater Israel" now threatens the Jewish state itself. Israel needs to be transformed into something else.

The time has come to seriously consider a single Israeli-Palestinian state to replace the Jewish one. The present situation is a conflict between a society of immigrants and one of natives. More and more people are ready to reconstruct their societies so that all can mature into native sons and daughters. The hope seems to lie in a multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-religious democratic state for all citizens. A bi-national state alternative emerges as the only promise for a just and peaceful society. It is a reasonable solution, whether the form will be unitary, federal or confederal, embracing all Jews, Arabs and others inhabiting the same land. There are peace camps among the Palestinians and the non-Zionist Jews. Some Israeli soldiers may be shockingly fast on the trigger, but some others refuse to obey criminal orders of superiors. A number of life-long Zionists have started to give the nod to the one-state solution.

The South African leaders, foremost among them, President F.W. de Klerk, brought the old system to an end and negotiated a transition to a new rule. He and Nelson Mandela received the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize. More importantly, their reconciliation helped both

peoples to overcome the unpleasant past. Without abandoning their identities, the Jews and the Palestinians may live together and work in a democratic and secular society with equal rights. Refusal means the continuation of bloodshed for two more decades or so until both sides realize that they should build their own future as partners.

Various names have been suggested for the new state. The unified country may be named "Palestine", which was the name of this land for centuries. If this epithet is not acceptable to one of the parties, "Isratin" or the "Republic of Jerusalem" have also been proposed. Whatever the name may be, the difficult questions of borders, Jerusalem, settlements, the use of land and waters, and the Wall will be solved once the citizens are united in full equality, and the soil serves them all. The new state has to hold general elections and draft a brand-new constitution, which should guarantee a democratically elected parliament and government, a judicial and legal system based on the rule of law, non-discrimination, separation of religion from the state, and the creation of united army, police force and education. The mixed administration should allow maximum autonomy for various communities. More than one language may be the official tongue –no doubt, Arabic, Hebrew and Yiddish.

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The Zionist alternative, applied since 1947-48, has failed. It nurtured rejection, caused wars, unceasingly shed blood, and promised nothing but confrontation. Either the stronger neighbour will suppress the weaker one and face unending enmity, or both will join hands for full but single sovereignty. One cannot be blamed for probing into alternative models in order to suggest a better future. The two communities can live in peace together, as they had done during the Ottoman centuries, and as the two races in South Africa have been able to bury the past. The United States continues to be one country even after a sanguinary Civil War. Both should feel that the whole land actually belongs to them all. Both own this approach to their coming generations.