

Zionism – A Major Obstacle

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In this article I would like to explain why Zionism, as a political ideology, is a major obstacle to resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.

Let me stress that I am concerned here with Zionist *ideology* rather than with the *practice* of the Zionist project. That the latter is an absolute obstacle to resolution of the conflict is self-evident: it is a colonizatory project, an implantation of settlers, which has – necessarily – been implemented at the expense of the mass of indigenous people and by denial of their national rights. Indeed, the Zionist project is the root cause of the conflict.

Zionist ideology is clearly unacceptable from the perspective of the Palestinian Arab people. But here I propose to consider the case against Zionism from a somewhat less obvious perspective – that of the settler nation.

How may the conflict be resolved?

Let us first ask ourselves what we mean by 'resolution of the conflict'.

I have argued elsewhere¹ that the Zionist colonization of Palestine – unlike the colonization of southern Africa, for example – was not based on exploiting the labour power of the indigenous people, but has aimed, quite consciously and deliberately, at their elimination.²

In several other settler states belonging to the same species of colonization, the settlers have succeeded in eliminating the entire indigenous population or in reducing it to small and relatively insignificant remnants. The conflict between colonizers and colonized ended with the overwhelming and virtually total victory of the former, and was in this sense 'resolved'.

Such an outcome is very unlikely in the case of the Israeli settler state. To be sure, the historical record suggests that Israel's Zionist leaders will exploit any opportunity (*she'at kosher* in Zionist parlance) for further territorial expansion and ethnic cleansing. Moreover, the more daring among them will attempt actively to create such opportunities. But however far this process may realistically be pushed, Israel

¹ See my article *Is it Apartheid?*, November 2004; posted in various websites, e.g. <<http://www.pamolson.org/ArtApartheid.htm>>.

² In Zionist parlance, this ethnic cleansing is referred to as 'transfer'. On its planning and early stages, see Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948*, Washington, 1992

will always find itself surrounded by Arabs, by the Arab nation, of which the Palestinian Arab people is a constituent part.³

In the end, the conflict in this case can only be resolved by accommodating the two national groups directly involved: the Palestinian Arabs and the Hebrews.⁴ And no accommodation can be a true resolution unless it is based on equality of group (collective) rights between these two national groups (as well as equality of individual rights to all). This is a minimal necessary condition because its absence means, by definition, that one of these groups will be underprivileged and oppressed. National oppression inexorably leads to national struggle – the very opposite of resolution.

Note that I am not specifying any state-institutional framework for an equality-based resolution. In principle, many alternative frameworks are possible. I do not wish to enter here into the controversy between those who support the so-called 'two-state solution' and those who advocate a single 'secular' state.⁵ In my opinion, this controversy, in the way it is actually conducted, is a diversion. Given the present balance of power, no true resolution is possible in the short or medium term. In these circumstances a 'two-state' settlement is bound to be a travesty: a nominally independent Palestinian 'state' that is in reality a disconnected set of Indian Reservations policed by corrupt elites acting as proxies for a dominant Israel – a regional hegemonic nuclear super-power, in its turn a local hatchet man for the global hyper-power. A one-state setup will be no better: an extension of direct military occupation and subjugation.

The regional context

But no balance of power lasts forever. A proper resolution will become possible in the longer term, given a radical socio-political transformation of the Arab world and some form of unification of the Arab nation (of which the Palestinian Arab people is a component). In such circumstances a resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict will necessarily be embedded in a regional constellation, a confederation including the entire Arab East. For this reason

³ This is quite different from the case of, say, the US, which was able to fulfil its 'manifest destiny' by occupying and ethnically cleansing the whole space from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

⁴ The latter are commonly called 'Israeli Jews'. I have long preferred the term 'Hebrews', because 'Jew' is an ambiguous term, which can denote religious rather (or as well as) ethnic affiliation. On the other hand, the Hebrew nation is most clearly characterized by its use of the Hebrew language as a common means of everyday and cultural discourse.

⁵ For a discussion of the ideology coded by the term 'secular' in the slogan 'Secular Democratic Palestine', see below.

it is, in my opinion, an error to think of a resolution of the conflict within a framework confined to the borders of Palestine/Israel (whether as a single state or as divided into two states) in isolation from its regional context.

The impossible as enemy of the difficult

Let me return to the main theme: an accommodation of the two national entities, based on equality of collective national rights.

We must not underestimate the enormous difficulty of such accommodation.

The Hebrew nation will have to give up its long-standing dominance and the privileges that go with it. That this is just doesn't make it easy. Indeed, it can only become realistic given a balance of power very different from the present one.

But precisely in such circumstances it will be very difficult for the Palestinian Arabs to accept that the Hebrew nation, created in the Palestinian homeland as a consequence of Zionist colonization, ought to be accommodated and granted equal national rights.

The great difficulty that this represents for mainstream Palestinian nationalism is made clear by arguments put forward by Fateh (the dominant component of the PLO led by the late Yasir 'Arafat) as far back as 1970, advocating its call for a 'Secular Democratic Palestine'. By that time, mainstream Palestinian nationalism was coming to terms with the painful realization that the Israelis were there to stay, and had to be accommodated in a future free Palestine. But it denied the highly inconvenient fact that Zionist colonization had given birth to a new Hebrew nation – a fact that is indeed an enormously complicating factor in the conflict. The adjective 'secular' in the formula 'Secular Democratic Palestine' encoded this denial. In a programmatic article – unsigned, but to my certain knowledge written by Nabil Sha'ath (then one of the main Fateh ideologues and now a senior minister in the Palestinian Authority) – Fateh explicitly rejected the idea of a *bi-national* Palestine as a 'misconception': '[t]he call for a non-sectarian Palestine should not be confused with ... a bi-national state'. It argued that in the reality of Palestine 'the term bi-national and the Arab-Jewish dichotomy [are] meaningless, or at best quite dubious'. Moreover, the article stresses that '[t]he liberated Palestine will be part of the Arab Homeland, and will not be another alien state within it';

and looks forward to '[t]he eventual unity of Palestine with other Arab States'.⁶

In the programmatic formula '*Secular Democratic Palestine*' proposed at that time by Fateh, the adjective 'secular' was inserted not in opposition to 'theocratic' (a theocratic democratic state is in any case a nonsensical concept) but in opposition to 'bi-national'. The intention was to present the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in *religious* terms and to propose a future Palestine in which Jews would have individual equality and freedom of religious worship in a country whose nationality would be Arab.

Yet without accepting the fact that a Hebrew nation exists, and without according it national rights equal to those of the Palestinian Arab people, the conflict cannot be resolved. Let me repeat: inequality is oppression, the opposite of resolution. It will be the delicate task of the most progressive political forces among the Palestinians (and in the region as a whole) to persuade the Palestinian masses of this.⁷

It is at this point that Zionist ideology constitutes a major obstacle. For Zionism – like a father denying the existence of his unwanted child – denies the existence of a Hebrew nation, newly created in Palestine/Israel. It shares this denial with mainstream Palestinian nationalism (as illustrated by the programmatic article quoted above), but for a very different reason. According to Zionist ideology, all the Jews around the world constitute a single nation. The true homeland of every Jew is not the country in which s/he may have been born and in which his or her family may have resided for generations. The homeland of this alleged nation is the Biblical Land of Israel, over which it has an ancient inalienable – indeed God-given – national right. Non-Jews living in the Jewish homeland are mere foreign interlopers. Zionist colonization is justified as 'return to the homeland' – a right possessed by Jews but denied to those foreign interlopers, the Palestinian refugees, who have been legitimately evicted from the Jewish homeland. There is no Hebrew nation but merely members of the worldwide Jewish nation who have already returned to their homeland, an advance guard of their brethren in the Diaspora, who have a right – indeed a sacred duty – to follow the vanguard and be 'ingathered' in the Land of Israel.

Now, my argument is quite simple. In an eventual accommodation, in the framework of a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Hebrew nation can

⁶ 'Towards the Democratic Palestine', *Fateh* (English-language newspaper published by the Information Office of the Palestine Liberation Movement) Vol II, No. 2; 19 January 1970. My emphasis.

⁷ The Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP), the most left-wing faction of the PLO, has indeed gone a long way towards accepting this idea.

legitimately claim acceptance as an actually existing nation. The only justification of this difficult claim is the pragmatic one, that otherwise the conflict cannot be resolved. But it cannot possibly make and justify this claim while it is in thrall to an ideology that denies its own national existence and instead claims a right over the whole Land of Israel on behalf of an alleged worldwide nation. No accommodation, no resolution, will be possible so long as Israelis subscribe to a claim that demands from the Palestinians (and from the Arab nation as a whole) not only retroactive legitimation of past Zionist colonization, but, in effect, an acceptance of an alleged *continuing* right to future further 'ingathering' – which implies further colonization and expansion. Such an impossible claim precludes a true resolution of the conflict.