Zionism and its Discontents

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A Century of Radical Dissent in Israel/Palestine

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1

The Bi-nationalist Perspective During the British Mandate, 1917–48

From its early days in the late nineteenth century, the modern Jewish settlement of Palestine faced criticism from within its own ranks as well as from outsiders. Alongside the resistance of indigenous Arabs (initially 'mute' but becoming increasingly vocal over time),[1] it experienced dissent from various Jewish constituencies. Three critical trends were particularly important: religious rejection of secular nationalism; left-wing opposition which elevated universal socialist principles above nationalist aims; and, liberal-humanist critique of the quest for a Jewish state in Palestine, and its associated exclusionary practices, as the ultimate goal of the settlement project.

Even before the formal establishment of the Zionist movement in 1897, these trends had become evident. While the religious rejection of Zionism could be seen as an internal critique, concerned with the implications of nationalism for the traditional definition and practice of Judaism,[2] the other two trends directed attention to relations between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. Although many things have changed since the early days of settlement, the main themes of the critique which were raised initially more than 120 years ago have remained valid to this day.

The liberal-humanist critique – on which this chapter focuses – is associated with the Russian Jewish thinker Asher Ginsberg, better known by his pen name Ahad Ha'am ('one of the people'). In a landmark article, written after his first visit to the new settlements in 1891, titled *Truth from the Land of Israel [Eretz Israel]*, he sharply criticised the nascent settlement project for the unhealthy relations it established between Jewish farmers and Arab workers. He went on to debunk some of the myths involving notions such as 'land without a people for a people without land', which implicitly informed the settlement project:

> From abroad, we are accustomed to believe that Eretz Israel is presently almost totally desolate, an uncultivated desert, and that anyone wishing to buy land there can come and buy all he wants. But in truth it is not so. In the entire land, it is hard to find tillable land that is not already tilled . . . From abroad we are accustomed to believing that the Arabs are all desert savages, like donkeys, who neither see nor understand what goes on around them. But this is a big mistake . . . The Arabs, and especially those in the cities, understand our deeds and our desires in Eretz Israel, but they keep quiet and pretend not to understand, since they do not see our present activities as a threat to their future . . . However, if the time comes when the life of our people in Eretz Israel develops to the point of encroaching upon the native population, they will not easily yield their place. . .

Instead of treating the local population with 'love and respect . . . justice and righteousness', the settlers, who had been oppressed in their countries of origin, suddenly became masters and began behaving accordingly:

> This sudden change has engendered in them an impulse to despotism . . . and behold, they walk with the Arabs in hostility and cruelty, unjustly encroaching on them, shamefully beating them for no good reason, and even bragging about what they do, and there is no one to stand in the breach and call a halt to this dangerous and despicable impulse. To be sure, our people are correct in saying that the Arab respects only those who demonstrate strength and courage, but this is relevant only when he feels that his rival is acting justly; it is not the case if there is reason to think his rival's actions are oppressive and unjust. Then, even if he restrains himself and remains silent forever, the rage will remain in his heart and he is unrivalled in 'taking vengeance and bearing a grudge'.[3]

Ahad Ha'am did not know then that his prophetic warnings coincided with the first documented expression of Arab protest against organized Jewish immigration, in June 1891. Local Muslim and Christian leaders sent a telegram from Jerusalem to Istanbul, the Ottoman imperial capital, demanding a stop to the immigration of Russian Jews into the country and to the purchase of land by them.[4] These two themes, immigration and land, remained at the core of the conflict between Jewish settlers and Palestinian-Arab residents for much of its history.

A few years later, following in the footsteps of Ahad Ha'am, another veteran thinker and activist, Yitzhak Epstein, voiced similar criticism of

Jewish settlement, though with a more political focus. In a 1905 speech, published as an article in 1907 and titled *A Hidden Question*, he addressed the 'one question that outweighs all the others: the question of our attitude toward the Arabs'. It was an important question, he argued, because Zionists tended to 'forget one small detail: that there is in our beloved land an entire people that has been attached to it for hundreds of years and has never considered leaving it'. Epstein's concern was with land acquisition. Given that most land was already cultivated, 'what will the fellahin do after we buy their fields?' he asked. Although Zionist associations bought land legally, the owners usually were large landlords who had acquired their title to it 'by deceit and exploitation and lease it to the fellahin'. It was customary for the tenants to remain on the land when it changed hands, 'but when we buy such a property, we evict the former tillers from it . . . [and] we must admit that we have driven impoverished people from their humble abode and taken bread out of their mouths'.

This practice created local and broader problems and had moral and practical implications. Practically, 'will those evicted really hold their peace and calmly accept what was done to them? Will they not in the end rise up to take back with their fists what was taken from them by the power of gold? Will they not press their case against the foreigners who drove them from their land?'

Even though an 'Arab movement in the national and political sense of that term' did not exist (yet), local resistance would have serious consequences for the settlers. To avoid such consequences, 'when we come to buy lands in Eretz Israel, we must thoroughly check whose land it is, who works it, and what the rights of the latter are, and we must not complete the purchase until we are certain that no one will be worse off'.

Epstein was convinced that by targeting land carefully to avoid dispossession, and showing Arab farmers that their lives would be improved by Jewish settlement, the land would 'support Jewish settlers as well as the fellahin'. The residents will benefit from new scientific farming methods, better health care and education, and will recognize 'us as their benefactors and comforters'. This approach should be based on respect for 'the national rights of every people and tribe'. It will be reciprocal: 'while we try to establish our nation, we will also support the revival of the inhabitants and will reinforce their national feeling in the best sense of the term'. Therefore, Jews must open all their public institutions to residents of the country: hospitals, pharmacies, libraries, banks, schools, kindergartens and cultural activities. The spirit of this exchange, learning each other's language and culture, is opposed to

> Short-sighted and small-minded nationalism that regards only itself . . . [since] our intention is not to Judaize the Arabs, but to prepare them for a fuller life, to refine them, to develop them, to free them from their narrow vision, so that, in the course of time, they will become loyal allies, friends, and brothers.[5]

From today's perspective, these early texts sound patronizing in an Orientalist fashion, yet their prescient analysis is striking, especially when seen against the wilful blindness to the issue displayed by other Zionist observers and activists. Neither thinker discussed political nationalism outright – it did not exist at the time – but rather focused on Arab local patriotism and fears of dispossession. To a remarkable extent their views are in line with recent scholarship which indicates that a full-fledged Palestinian-Arab national identity had begun developing only in the last decade of the Ottoman period, and became dominant with British rule starting in 1917–18.

They operated alongside another group of activists and commentators of Mizrahi and Sephardi origins, whose legacy is less well-known. People like Shimon Moyal and Nissim Malul, writing in Hebrew and Arabic, advocated a more tolerant and linguistically assimilationist approach towards the Arab residents of the country, based on identification with the shared homeland of Palestine within the framework of the Ottoman Empire. Their approach could be referred to as inclusive Zionism, which was attuned to local conditions in Palestine, the co-existence of two peoples in the country, and the need for all of them to live together in the same physical space. In this sense it was a more peaceful and realistic approach than the dominant trend of exclusive Zionism.[6]

Without advocating explicit political programmes these critical voices, although a small minority within their respective constituencies, laid the foundations for the bi-national perspective in the British Mandate period (which lasted until 1948), to which I now turn.[7]

THE BALFOUR DECLARATION AND THE PALESTINE MANDATE

Before the First World War Palestine was not a clearly demarcated political unit. It had been divided into different districts, which were ruled from the regional centres of Beirut and Damascus, as well as directly from Istanbul. The British occupation of the country, towards the end of the war, established the country for the first time in centuries as a distinct political

entity. This was reinforced by the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, in which the British Foreign Secretary conveyed his Government's commitment to 'the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people'. This was based on the understanding that 'nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country'.

The Declaration was incorporated into the Palestine Mandate, adopted by the Council of the League of Nations in July 1922, which went further to recognize 'the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine'. It asserted the need to place 'the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home . . . the development of self-governing institutions, and . . . safeguarding the civil and religious rights of all the inhabitants of Palestine, irrespective of race and religion'. The main issues of contention identified in Ottoman times as of crucial importance – land and immigration – were noted as well, mandating the new administration to 'facilitate Jewish immigration', to encourage 'close settlement by Jews on the land', and to 'facilitate the acquisition of Palestinian citizenship by Jews who take up their permanent residence in Palestine'. In all matters affecting the establishment of the Jewish national home, 'an appropriate Jewish agency' would operate alongside the Government, a role allocated to the Zionist Organization.

In these respects, the creation of Palestine as a political unit went hand in hand with granting Jews and their settlement project a privileged position. Much has been written about the lack of symmetry between the two groups in the country: Jews were mentioned explicitly while Arabs were not. They were not even recognized as a group but rather as a collection of 'non-Jewish communities', and their political rights were ignored – only their civil and religious rights were noted. And yet, the call for developing country-wide self-governing institutions for all residents could have been seen as a counter-balance to the obligation to build the Jewish national home. That neither the meaning of 'national home', nor the powers of and limitations on self-governance, were specified in the documents, was not an accident. There was a deliberate ambiguity there that potentially allowed for creative policies and negotiated spaces beyond the quest of both national movements for exclusive control. It is precisely into this space that the bi-nationalist movement fitted, though it had to confront other interpretations of the Declaration.

Initially, the organized Palestine Jewish community (known as the new *Yishuv*) saw the Declaration as an opportunity to make a political claim on behalf of the entire Jewish people. A late-1918 conference of local representatives demanded that Palestine become a Jewish state[8] and that it be governed by an Executive Committee chosen by the Zionist Organization, working under a British Governor General. It would adopt the name *Eretz Israel*, the Zionist flag and the Jewish days of rest. Hebrew and Arabic would be official languages. These demands were seen as too radical by the World Zionist Organization, which put forward a more modest proposal, calling on world powers to 'recognise the historic title of the Jewish people to Palestine and the right of the Jews to reconstitute in Palestine their National Home'.[9] Having to work in an international arena, contending with contradictory forces and expectations, the broader Zionist movement – unlike the over-enthusiastic local Jewish community – realized that it had to present its case in a way that would minimize opposition and allow it to appear accommodating.

The need to temper Jewish expectations was brought home sharply by the report of the King-Crane commission, appointed by US President Wilson in 1919 to explore the implications of self-determination in the Middle East. The commission recommended 'serious modification of the extreme Zionist program for Palestine of unlimited immigration of Jews, looking finally to making Palestine distinctly a Jewish State', because it was resolutely opposed by Arabs, who were 90 per cent of the country's population: 'To subject a people so minded to unlimited Jewish immigration, and to steady financial and social pressure to surrender the land, would be a gross violation of the principle [of national self-determination]. . . and of the people's rights.' Faced with such local and regional opposition, the Zionist project 'could [not] be carried out except by force of arms'. Only 'a greatly reduced Zionist program' can be attempted, 'and even that, only very gradually initiated'.[10]

The usual Zionist response to such arguments consisted of three core components:

- Palestine was a small part of the overall Arab homeland. Therefore, the rights of Arabs in general were not violated by Jewish settlement and political control in Palestine. They could still exercise their political rights freely in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and so on.
- While Jews were a minority of the population in the country, this was a temporary situation. Impending massive immigration would shift the demographic balance in their favour. When that happens,

'normal' democratic rule would ensue, but until then only national-communal autonomy could be a proper form of governance.

- Local opposition to Zionism reflected jealousy and the narrow interests of reactionary feudal and commercial Arab elites, who used their position to incite the ignorant masses. The latter would benefit, however, from social and technological progress brought about by Jewish settlement.[11]

Without questioning these principles, some Jewish activists saw a need to put forward alternative visions to alleviate fears of Zionist plans. This was especially important in view of the clear rejection of the Balfour Declaration by Arabs, and the threat of violent resistance to its imposition. Among these activists was Haim Kalvarisky, who had already acquired a reputation as a leading settlement official, involved in land purchases and in facilitating a Jewish–Arab dialogue. In 1919 he came up with a formula intended to serve as a basis for negotiation with Arab nationalists: 'Palestine constitutes the homeland of all its residents: Jews, Muslims and Christians are citizens on equal footing.' Its government would not discriminate against anyone, its administration will be open to all, its schools will promote bilingual education, and social services will be provided by the state with no distinction between people on the basis of religious origins. At the same time, the country will be considered a Jewish national home and thus open to Jewish immigration and transfer of capital without restrictions.[12]

Like other Zionist negotiators, Kalvarisky positioned his formula within the context of broader Arab unity, which made the relations between Jews and Arabs asymmetrical: Jews regarded the country as their entire homeland, while for Arabs it was a small part of their overall territory. It was impossible to get the consent of Palestinian Arabs to the Zionist project, as their clash over the country was seen in mutually exclusive terms. But, from this perspective, Arab nationalists outside of Palestine were expected to give up exclusive claims to some land in exchange for other benefits. However, even when they were willing to do so, they were overruled by local Palestinian nationalists. The agreements Zionists were able to reach with other Arabs – members of the Hashemite family in particular – did not carry any weight inside the country, and did not change the nature of the political conflict between the two competing nationalist projects.[13]

Tempering the initial Balfour Declaration euphoria, with a focus on the need to accommodate opponents within the country itself, Ahad Ha'am

discussed in 1920 the difference between two national home formulas. The first consisted of making Palestine the national home of the Jewish people and it meant that Jews could do whatever they wished in the country, regardless of opposition by local Arabs. The second, that of building the national home *in* Palestine, had a different meaning: it implied that the historical rights of Jews to the country could be realized there, but not be used to deny the rights of other residents of the country. These Arab residents had lived there for many generations and they too claimed the country as their national home. The co-existence of two national homes in the same country was possible, he argued, if they had the freedom to run their internal affairs on their own, and run jointly the common affairs of the country as a whole (possibly with an external authority in charge if they did not get along, which would ensure equality).[14]

These positions were not merely abstract statements. They aimed to make local Jews aware that their expectations of becoming politically dominant in the country, despite comprising only 10 per cent of the population, were premature (a fact that the less insular Zionist leadership in Europe understood clearly). The Jerusalem riots of March 1920, repeated on larger scale with a series of armed attacks against Jews in Jaffa and neighbouring settlements in May 1921, brought home the realization that the Arabs would not 'easily yield their place', as Ahad Ha'am had predicted 30 years earlier. This notion encouraged the Yishuv's *Va'ad Leumi* (National Committee) to invite Yitzhak Epstein, as an old expert on 'Arab affairs', to address it on the topic. Epstein called for 'involving the natives in all our activities. In actual practice we must take it upon ourselves – from the points of view of justice and necessity – to involve them in everything'. However, his call for local initiative was met with 'cold silence'.[15] Launching armed attacks against Jewish communities was a powerful way of expressing political grievances, and of making Jews acutely aware of the need to address Arab concerns, but it also made the prospect of getting Arabs involved in 'everything' very unappealing to Jewish residents of the country.

The 1921 riots created an environment that was not conducive for inter-communal collaboration. As the Haycraft Commission of Inquiry, set up by the British to investigate the riots, saw it,

> It has been impossible to avoid the conclusion that practically the whole of the non-Jewish population was united in hostility to the Jews. During the riots all discrimination on the part of the Arabs between different categories of Jews was obliterated. Old-established colonists and newly

> arrived immigrants, Chalukah Jews and Bolshevik Jews, Algerian Jews and Russian Jews, became merged in a single identity, and former friendships gave way before the enmity now felt towards all.[16]

This outcome has been reinforced by every round of violence ever since: expressions of external hostility inevitably led to the consolidation of internal solidarity and to weakening of prospects for crossing boundaries between the two communities. Instead of exposing rifts within the camps, fighting resulted in strengthening the need to stand together to confront the enemy, especially when it made no distinctions between different components of the opposing camp, and offered no attractive alternatives.

THE ROOTS OF BI-NATIONALISM

In a sense, the bi-nationalist associations of the Mandate period charted a course in between Epstein's enthusiasm for total involvement and the organized Yishuv's cold silence. They adhered to a version of Zionism which supported the formation of a Jewish national home, frequently understood as a 'spiritual centre' rather than a political entity. They rarely deviated from the quest for Jewish immigration to the country and settlement on the land, but they distanced themselves from the mainstream Zionist position, which viewed the national home as a prelude to a state (sometimes referred to vaguely as a 'commonwealth') in which Jews would dominate demographically and politically. Their aim was to create a solid basis for the Jewish community in the country, without making it the dominant group. Other Zionists saw that modest goal as jeopardising the entire settlement project: if Jews were doomed to remain a non-dominant minority, in what way would Palestine be different from all other places in which Jews lived at the time?

While the distinction between spiritual and political Zionism was potentially important, it could be seen as largely rhetorical in nature. Advocates of the spiritual approach, such as Martin Buber, proposed to the 12th Zionist Congress of 1921 a resolution that urged Jews to reject 'with abhorrence the methods of nationalistic domination, under which they themselves have long suffered', and renounce any desire 'to suppress another people or to dominate them', since in the country 'there is room both for us and its present inhabitants'. The way forward was to establish 'a just alliance with the Arab peoples', in order 'to turn our common dwelling-place into a community that will flourish economically

and culturally, and whose progress would bring each of these peoples unhampered independent development.' In that way, members of both nations will develop 'feelings of mutual respect and goodwill, which will operate in the life of both the community and its individual members'.[17]

The official Zionist position, as adopted by that Congress, noted 'the enmity of a part of the Arab inhabitants, incited by unscrupulous elements to commit deeds of violence', but also asserted 'our will to live at peace and in mutual respect with the Arab people, and together with them, to make our common home in a flourishing commonwealth whose reconstruction will assure undisturbed national development for each of its peoples'. It mandated its leadership body, the Zionist Executive, 'to secure an honourable entente with the Arab people on the basis of this declaration and in strict accordance with the Balfour Declaration . . . [without infringing] upon the rights and needs of the working Arab nation.'[18]

In retrospect, the differences between Buber's approach and the official resolution seem minor, but Buber did not condition agreement with Arabs on acceptance of the Balfour Declaration. The official Zionist position was a non-starter. No Arab leader in Palestine could possibly have accepted the Declaration as a basis for negotiating the future of the country, since it gave the Jewish minority (and non-resident Jews) a privileged position vis-à-vis the Arab majority. The British attempts to create representative institutions (a legislative or advisory council, an Arab Agency to parallel the work of the Jewish Agency) failed because they were premised on acceptance of the Mandate framework, which itself was premised on the Balfour Declaration. Willingness to compromise on – but not necessarily abandon – basic Zionist principle served to distinguish what became known as the bi-nationalist approach from other political perspectives.

BRIT SHALOM

While moderate voices had a long history, it was only with the formation of the Brit Shalom association in 1925 that they became consolidated into a more coherent perspective. In its statutes, the association defined its objective as follows: 'to arrive at an understanding between Jews and Arabs as to the form of their mutual social relations in Palestine on the basis of absolute political equality of two culturally autonomous peoples, and to determine the lines of their co-operation for the development