

Israeli – Palestinian Agreement – Before it is too late

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a national conflict between the Zionist movement and the Palestinian national movement. To understand the roots of the conflict, an historical perspective is necessary.

During the 19th century, the idea of nationalism spread across Europe and as a result, the continent's citizens demanded the establishment of different nation states. The most significant expression of nationalism was the Spring of Nations in 1848. The 1848 revolutions along with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I are in many ways responsible to the evolvement of the European statehood.

The idea of nationalism left its mark on the secular Jewish community in Europe, and as a result (although the rising violence and antisemitism across Europe also played a role), the Bilu Movement (a movement whose goal was the agricultural settlement of the Land of Israel) was created, and led the first secular Aliyah (an Hebrew word for immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the Land of Israel) (the "First Aliyah"). The First Aliyah was the first time non-religious Jews were seeking to build a national home for the Jewish people in Israel (1882).

So these are the roots of the conflict. Once the Jewish people developed the aspirations to build a Jewish country between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, and when some make historical claims (based on the Bible) even in regards to the other side of the Jordan River or believe the Jewish country's borders should be drawn between the Nile and Euphrates and Tigris, it is a zero-sum game—as each side claims the entire country.

Up until the events described above, in the area between the Jordan River and the Sea lived approximately 20,000 Jews (most of them were religious Jews located in the holy cities of Jerusalem, Safed, and Hebron) and a few hundred thousand Arabs. It should be emphasized that the entire area was under the control of the Ottoman Empire and thus, similar to Europe, was not split to different states.

In 1917, Great Britain conquered the region and issued the famous Balfour Declaration, according to which, the Kingdom will support the establishment of a national home for the Jewish People in Palestine. Simultaneously, national states such as Jordan, Egypt and Syria followed by Lebanon, were established in the region. On the west side of the Jordan River, Britain continued to rule under its UN mandate.

The Arabs living west of the Jordan River, who had been living in Israel for many years, were not citizens of the new states established all around (they were certainly not Jordanians nor Syrians nor Egyptians nor Iraqis). They were aware of the Zionist movement and its intentions, and of course knew about the Balfour Declaration and thus, a Palestinian national identity was shaped.

In many aspects, this was the beginning of the conflict between the two groups which became more violent as years passed by, where each side claims for 100% of the land. From the very beginning of the conflict, it was obvious that whether by war or by compromise, the solution will be in the shape of either a two-state solution or a one-state solution, when the one-state solution (assuming it would be a democratic one) contradicts the basic idea behind Zionism, which is to build a national home to the Jewish people, since in such solution, the Jewish population is doomed to be a demographic minority.

The British, which controlled the territory first as an occupier and later through the power given to them by the UN mandate, pushed strongly towards a two-state solution, and therefore (following the Balfour Declaration and the Peel Commission recommendations), the UN adopted Resolution 181 (November 29th, 1947), recommending the partition of the land – 45% to the Palestinian population and 55% to the Jewish population (Jerusalem was planned to be under international administration). The UN Partition Plan was a result of the international community's pangs of conscience after the Holocaust and was adopted in contradiction to the demographic reality on the ground (550,000 Jews vs. 1,300,000 Palestinians).

The Jewish population in regards to the Partition Plan was divided. The right wing movements, especially the Betar Movement (revisionist Zionist youth movement), insisted on the entire area west of the Jordan River as well as area east of the Jordan River (an approach known as "Two Banks has the Jordan – this is ours and that one as well"). The center political wing, associated with Mapai (center-left political party in Israel), insisted on 100% of the land west of the Jordan (an approach known as "the Greater Israel"). Pragmatists, led by P.M. Ben Gurion were in favor of the plan. Fortunately, the pragmatists' opinion won.

Unlike the Jewish population, Palestinians' leadership was controlled by radicals headed by Haj Amin al-Hussieni who, similarly to Mapai, insisted that they are entitled to 100% of the land. Moderate Palestinians had almost no influence. Palestinians' rejection of the Partition Plan led to 1948 war which was initially a civil war but quickly evolved to a war between Israel and the neighboring Arab States, after the Israeli independence declaration and the end of the British Mandate.

Nowadays, it seems clear that the Arab armies' intention during the 1948 war, and especially the more dominant ones (Jordan and Egypt), was to take over the 45% of the land given to the Palestinians under the Partition Plan, and not to gain control over the entire land. Thus, the legacy according to which the Arab States were seeking to exterminate the Jewish population is nothing but folklore.

Regrettably for the Palestinians and to Israelis' benefit, with the end of the war, 22% the land west of the Jordan River was in Palestinian control and 78% in Israeli control, with a divided Jerusalem.

The 1948 War created another fundamental problem concerning the Palestinian refugees. Out of 1,300,000 Palestinians residing between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea before the war, about 640,000 became refugees (As for the rest: 160,000 remained in Israeli territory including those who had time to return before the borders closed down and 500,000 already lived in the areas that remained under Palestinians' control (the 22%)). Some refugees willfully escaped, some escaped after they were threatened, and some were

forcefully displaced (“transfer”). The refugees’ problem itself was clearly not caused by the fleeing or displacement but was rather a result of Ben Gurion’s historical decision to not allow refugees to return to Israeli territories as agreed upon in the 1949 Armistice Agreements. The decision rationale was clear – The population in Israel consisted of 600,000 Jews vs. 160,000 Arabs (who didn’t escape). Allowing the refugees to return would lead to a Jewish minority. To date, these refugees have not been provided with any compensation for their land nor with any reimbursement for their funds which have remained in the Israeli banks.

Ever since the 1948 war, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) official policy was “throw Jews to the sea”. November 1988 marked a dramatic shift in that approach. The Palestinian National Council (PNC) also acknowledged that their reaction to the Partition Plan was wrong and therefore they would agree to the two-state solution going forward, based on the 1967 borders (22% - 78%), according to the peace formula implemented under the 1978 Camp David accords – full retreat (it was Abu-Mazen’s initiative which received Arafat’s blessing). That approach was expressed by the PNC in the Oslo accords. However, since at the same time they also demanded the return of 4 million Palestinian refugees, execution was impossible.

In 2002, the League of Arab States offered an initiative according to which the Arab States will all sign a peace agreement with Israel, if Israel agrees to the two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. As for issues concerning the Palestinians’ right of return, it was suggested for the first time that a solution will be found based on a mutual agreement.

It is my belief that if Israel adopts the League of Arab States’ proposal (with regard to the West Bank block settlements’ – it will be resolved through territories’ exchange – an acre for acre. Note that neither P.M. Ehud Barak nor P.M. Ehud Olmert offered the Palestinians the full 22%) and agrees to dividing Jerusalem (each party would receive the territories sacred to its religion), then a solution for the refugees will be found (for instance, some could immigrate to other countries, some could receive citizenship in their current location and some could return to the Palestinian state), as there is no Muslim who would insist on returning (i.e. property rights) if Palestinians received the right to control Temple Mount (Haram al-Sharif).

An Anecdote – Not only that in 1947 P.M. Ben Gurion was willing to give up Jerusalem and the Western Wall along with 45% of Israel by agreeing to the Partition Plan, but it is now known that in 1949, after the war ended, Ben Gurion rejected IDF commanders’ proposal to conquer the West Bank and Eastern Jerusalem (they claimed it would take 72 hours). His rejection was driven by fear of the international community’s reaction on the one hand, and by fear of Apartheid, on the other hand; a fear which also drove P.M. Barak and P.M. Olmert when negotiating peace agreements.

The danger – since 1974, when Gush Emunim (a right-wing activist movement committed to the Jewish settlements) was established and the settlements’ enterprise started, the conflict has evolved into a religious conflict rather than a national one. Once the religion will take over the conflict, reaching a solution will become impossible, since who shall defy the Lord’s instruction when there is only one God...