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ISRAEL AND ARAB NATIONAL INTEGRATION: PLURALISM VERSUS ARABISM

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SINCE THE RISE of nationalism in the Arab world, a transformation process has been going on in which traditional religious, tribal and regional loyalties are being replaced, completely or partially, by national and socio-economic loyalties. These can contribute to the integration of the Arab world or of different Arab political entities. Religious loyalties, on the other hand, especially in those states which contain many members of different religious communities (such as Syria and Lebanon), can stimulate or maintain national and social dissension and retard social progress.

One might ask what role the Jewish State of Israel has played, and is still playing, in this transformation process. Political events and developments of the past three decades lead us to conclude that Israel, in order to maintain or strengthen its position of power, has taken advantage of differences within the Arab world. In its mass media and political policy Israel has concentrated on latent or manifest sectarian, tribal, regional, and national or ethnic differences between or within specific Arab states – and within Israel itself – a major aim thereby being apparently to hinder the above-mentioned transformation process.

The stimulation of sectarian loyalties was not disadvantageous to Israel itself since as a Jewish state, it would fit more easily into a Middle East divided into political or administrative units based on religious and ethnic bonds than into a Middle East where boundaries between religious communities count politically for less and less, and moreover cut through existing international boundaries.

In the case of the Jewish State of Israel the categories of nation and religious community are closely intertwined and almost inseparable. A similar relationship does not apply to the Arabs, however, who might be subdivided into several distinct religious groups such as the Sunnis, Shi'is, Greek Orthodox Christians, Maronites, etc. The majority of these groups are not restricted to the Arab people, but include parts of other national groups, such as the Turks, Persians, and Kurds. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that Sunnis constitute an overwhelming majority among the Arab people, and that the Arab nationalist movement originally had strong Sunni overtones and used to be Sunni-dominated, the role of religious

communities in relation to Arab nationalism is completely different from that in relation to Jewish nationalism. This is clearly manifested in the case of the Jewish State of Israel.

Secular Arabism versus Zionism

It will be clear from the above that secular Arabism and Zionism flatly oppose one another as regards their visions of the ideal future for Middle Eastern society.

The ideology of the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, different factions of which now rule in Syria and Iraq, is the most important representative of secular Arabism. The party's vision of an ideal Arab society can be found in its Constitution which dates from 1947. Pluralism and Arabism are dealt with in the Constitution as follows:

1. The Arab homeland is an indivisible political and economic unity; it is impossible for any one Arab country fully to realize the requirements of life in isolation from any other.
2. The Arab nation constitutes a cultural unity. All differences existing among its sons are accidental and spurious and will disappear with the awakening of Arab consciousness.
3. The Arab homeland is for the Arabs who alone have the right to manage its affairs, to dispose of its wealth, and to direct its destinies.
4. The national bond is the only bond existing in the Arab state. It ensures harmony among citizens by melting them in the crucible of a single nation and combats all other forms of religious, sectarian, tribal, racial and regional factionalism.¹

Israel's Zionist political leaders hold quite contrary ideas. Many of them consider that peaceful co-existence between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East would be possible only if the pluralist character of the local population were recognized and the vision endorsed that Middle Eastern society consists of distinct religious and ethnic entities whose right to self-determination should be recognized. Such a view, for instance, can be clearly traced in the words of Professor Shlomo Avinery. In August 1976, as Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he commented during a lecture on the civil war then raging in Lebanon:

It should be assumed that the firmer consolidation of the Maronite people in Lebanon, brought about in the course of the fighting, will lead to the future legislative structure in Lebanon having to take into consideration the Maronites' right of self-determination . . . Recognition of the pluralistic character of the Middle East is a condition for establishing peace in the region . . . And the example set by Israel serves as an encouraging factor to other groups in the region that are not prepared to put up with an unfettered Arab – Islam hegemony.²

In the same period Avinery argued that in the Middle East there should be "room for a variety of national movements", and further:

The Arab attempt to create an entirely Arab – Muslim Middle East should be foiled. This is what we did when we established the Jewish

state, and now something is going on with the Maronite community in Lebanon. Self-consciousness is developing with them. The tragedy is that nations are moulded in wars, blood and fire, and this is what is happening to the Maronite minority in Lebanon. But they are waking up and moulding themselves . . . I cannot envisage a Lebanese solution into which a self-determining Maronite people will not be integrated as a people.³

Similar ideas were expressed by former Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Abba Eban who, in an interview on 8 August 1976, said:

Arab nationalism claims the Middle East as Arab, monolithic, homogeneous. We contend that the Middle East has a multicoloured texture with an Israeli [i.e. Jewish], a Christian, a Kurdish content and so forth . . . The lesson to be drawn by us, a crucial lesson for me, in any case: a country whose composition is lacking in human unity, such a country is doomed to tragedy . . . Lebanon was for many years synonymous with a compact Christian-Maronite population on Mount Lebanon, along came France and expanded the borders, thus adding to Lebanon Muslim territory and population.⁴

Out of all this, according to Eban, Israel should draw the lesson that if it wished to survive as a Jewish state, it should guard against incorporating large groups of non-Jews (i.e. Palestinian Arabs). This would be the case, for instance, if Israel were to annex the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including their Arab populations. Thus, Eban argued:

We must weigh a thousand times the pros and cons before we become tempted by plans incorporating profound changes in the demographic and national composition of the State of Israel. I think that had Lebanon remained more compact, but more consolidated in its composition, it would have managed to hold out much better. I don't know whether at this late stage one can revert to the subject of partition. That would be for the Lebanese like making a post-factum crucial decision about something that had to be done in the first place.

Israel, however, is facing an option and it mustn't ignore this lesson. Those who actually violate the internal national unity, the loyalty of every citizen to the flag, to the goal, to the nation's aims, are in fact endangering the existence and security of the state.⁵

According to the Zionist conception of stable Middle Eastern society, there should on the one hand be room for separate sectarian and/or ethnically more or less homogeneous distinct political entities, for instance, for Maronites or Kurds, which might even attain the form of independent states as in case of the Jews. On the other hand, there should be no room, for instance, for a Palestinian Arab state, let alone for a secular democratic state in the whole of Palestine, as originally envisaged by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), in which Arabs and Jews irrespective of their religions would be able to co-exist peacefully next to each other. For both the latter "Palestinian" alternatives would, according to the Zionist ethnic/religious view of society, constitute heterogeneous entities which

would only harbour political instability for the future. Additionally it should be noted that, still according to the same vision, in the case of an Arab-Jewish state in the whole area of Palestine, instability would be even greater than in the case of a Palestinian state confined to an area where Palestinian Arabs would constitute a numerical majority, such as the West Bank or the Gaza Strip.

Israel as "the shield of minorities in the Middle East"

It should be evident from the above that Israel's support of various Maronite Christian factions in Lebanon during the past few years is not only to be explained within the framework of strategic military interests, but also within that of Israeli policy towards religious minorities in the Arab world in general. That policy is apparently aimed at maintaining the religious and ethnic pluralist character of Middle Eastern society, as it existed at the time of the Ottoman Empire's disintegration early in the twentieth century.

That Israel, if necessary, intends to play an active and central role in maintaining this pluralist character, may be concluded from the words of Israeli Premier Menahem Begin who, during an interview in September 1977, commented on Israel's assistance to Maronite Christian Arabs in Lebanon as follows:

We are helping them in good faith, with the assumption that no minority should be destroyed by a majority, on the basis of "and you remembered that you lived in the land of Egypt". I see Israel as the shield of minorities in the whole of the Middle East.⁶

It seems safe to assume that Premier Begin, when claiming for Israel the role of protector of "minorities" in the whole of the Middle East, was referring only to specific religious and ethnic minorities – such as Maronites, Druzes, Kurds, or Jews living in Arab states (at least in as far as these could be considered by Israel as tactical allies opposing unionist Arabism) – and certainly not to minorities of other categories such as the Palestinian Arabs.

Israel and Palestinian Arab national identity

Unlike their counterparts within Israel, those Palestinian Arabs who fled their original homeland and found refuge in neighbouring Arab states, are generally not subdivided by the Israeli administration as to religion. In as far as the Israeli authorities confer any identity upon these Palestinians at all, current practice is merely to call them "Arabs". "One of the implications of that terminology is that the Palestinians are 'actually' Arabs and therefore might just as well go to other Arab countries."⁷ In the Israeli view mentioned earlier there is no room in the Middle East for "nations" such as the Palestinian Arabs whose group feelings are based mainly on their common regional origin but who further, at least according to that view, have few specific characteristics in common by which they can be distinguished from other Arabs. Any terminology that might imply recognition of a peculiar national identity of the Palestinian Arabs is therefore usually systematically avoided by the Israeli administration. This contrasts

to their attitude as regards the Lebanese Maronite Christian Arabs, whose (pseudo-)national identity is usually stressed by Israeli mass media.

However, if we leave out of consideration the criterion of sectarian or ethnic homogeneity as often applied by Israel, and take as our point of departure that "the tragedy is that nations are moulded in wars, blood and fire",⁸ then the Palestinian Arabs, with all they have gone through during the past three decades and more, have a kind of "national" identity just as have the Maronite Christian Arabs of Lebanon.

Israel's internal minority policy

In Israel itself, pluralist minority policy is shown clearly in the way in which religious or ethnic origin is registered on official identity cards. The population is officially subdivided into Jews, Christians, Druzes, Circasians and Arabs, the latter term apparently denoting the Palestinian Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims. Thus, according to this terminology, Palestinian Arabs in Israel are subdivided into two groups: on the one hand the Sunnis are classified as a national minority (i.e. as Arabs); on the other hand the Christians and Druzes are classified as religious (and therefore by implication non-Arab) minorities.

An important effect of this subdivision may have been that Arab nationalist ideas have generally developed among Christian and Druze Palestinian Arabs at a slower rate than among Sunni Palestinian Arabs. If so, this has changed considerably during the last decade, particularly within the Druze community.

The ambivalent position of Druzes in Israel

Of the Arabic-speaking religious minorities in Israel, the Druzes in particular find themselves in an ambivalent position. Cut off from their co-religionists in the neighbouring Arab states, where the Druzes, especially those in Syria, have generally opted for an Arab national identity next to or above their communal identity, the leaders of the original Palestinian Druzes have for some time since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, clearly opted for the survival of their religious community as a more or less autonomous body. Their attitude might be interpreted as an instance of "a nearly thousand-year-old tradition of artificial assimilation in the defence of a zealously guarded life style and system of religious belief".⁹ Such an assimilation implied that Palestinian Druzes living under Israeli rule had to suppress any Arab nationalist feeling that might arise, at least if they wished to be treated on a more or less equal footing with the Israeli Jews.

Modernization of the Druze community in Israel, as well as its exposure to the influence of Arab mass media, have caused many of its members to become increasingly aware of their relative backwardness and inferior position with regard to the majority of Israeli Jews. They are placed in the dilemma that Israeli Jews in practice do not really accept them as equals, while other Arabs often suspect them because of their stand vis-à-vis the State of Israel and because they are the only Arab group in Israel which is subject to compulsory military service.

Increasingly, Israeli Druzes are finding a way out of this dilemma by

choosing to join the emergent Arab nationalist current which, combined with socialist ideas, is becoming apparent in their community.¹⁰ From time to time voices are heard within the Israeli Druze community, calling for the rejection and refusal of compulsory military service for the Druzes in the Israeli army. Also, Israeli Druzes have reportedly started to join Palestinian commando movements, as became apparent from Palestinian commando raids carried out in 1974 on the Israeli towns of Kiryat Shemona and Ma'lot, when Druzes were among the attackers.¹¹ In the meantime the Israeli administration, and also some Israeli Druzes, stress that the Druzes form an entity which should be distinguished from "Arabs and Muslims" in general.¹² Some have even suggested the establishment of a Druze state on the Golan Heights,¹³ or a "Druze Neutral Zone" including the Syrian province of al-Suwayda', where the majority of the Syrian Druzes live.¹⁴

A report published in the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv* on 21 September 1977 may serve as an example of Israeli classification of Druzes as non-Arabs:

A policy of cracking down heavily on nationalist and hostile organizations, even if their activities are for the moment restricted to propaganda and incitement verbally and in writing, is to be expected following the changes in government on the issue of the Arab sector in Israel.

One extremist organization recently brought up in this context is called the "Druze Initiative Committee". The founders of this organization, whose members are still few at present, favour the blurring of the Druze identity. They claim that they are all Arabs and that the only difference lies in their religion. They also demand that their identification cards be changed and their nationality amended from Druze to Arab.

In recent years this group has concentrated its activities on propaganda against Druze compulsory military service in the Israel Defence Forces and its members have been suspected of encouraging Druzes to desert from the army.

Conclusion

The transformation process in Arab society in which traditional sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties are being replaced by Arab national and socio-economic loyalties, mentioned at the beginning of this article, is not a continuous process: in the first place the theoretical end of the scale may never be reached; and in some particular crisis situations – such as the recent civil war in Lebanon – one may even speak of regression. The transformation process seems to be only partially reversible due to the fact that Arab nationalism has grown into a political force which can no longer be neglected, and can be repulsed only with difficulty, be it only because the notion that Arab national integration and inter-Arab cooperation in various fields is advantageous to the Arabs in general, has pervaded the minds of many Arab political leaders. Socio-economic group feelings in the wake of socialist-oriented Arab nationalism, have to some extent caused the replacement of the sectarian division of Middle Eastern society along vertical lines that existed during the Ottoman Empire, by a more horizontal and class-oriented national structure of

society which hinders an easy switch back to a political division of Arab society on a sectarian basis. Thus far, efforts to bring about such a sectarian division once again have only given rise to serious political instability in the Arab world.

The Israeli Zionist thesis that recognition of the pluralist character of Middle Eastern society is a condition for the establishment of peace in the region thus only applies when one thinks in national categories, such as Arabs, Kurds, etc., rather than in sectarian ones, such as Maronites and Druzes. Political stability seems to be a prior condition for permanent peace in the Middle East. One might conclude, therefore, that a peace agreement concluded between Israel and an Arab world which, in sectarian respect, would be largely integrated, would constitute a greater guarantee for long term peace than an agreement concluded between Israel and an Arab world that is divided along sectarian lines.

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