

# THE IDEA OF A BI-NATIONAL STATE IN THE ISRAELI- PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

*The recent tragedy in Gaza overshadowed the peace process aiming at a sustainable political solution in Palestine. Lately, efforts have focused on the reconciliation of the ceasefire rather than a lasting peace agreement. Eventually, in her first visit to Israel in March 2009 as the United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton said the U.S. Government would pursue a comprehensive peace plan, and a two-state solution would be inescapable. This article discusses one of the options for a political solution; the idea of a bi-national state. Different groups throughout history have brought up the idea particularly in periods of change. By and large, the weaker party of the conflict has been an advocate of the idea expecting a change in power relations. Jews supported the bi-national idea during the Mandate era, while the Palestinian advocates emerged recently. The idea of bi-national state does not appear to be a realistic solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After all, the dispute is based on an identity conflict and both people are devoted to maintain their national identity through their own independent state.*

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**B**i-nationalism refers to a state “in which two and only two national cultures are afforded pride of place, with juridically entrenched rights for control of shares of the state’s resources, positions of authority, symbols etc.”<sup>1</sup> There exist a number of examples based on the bi- or multi-national principle such as Canada, Switzerland, South Africa, Belgium and Nigeria. These states have emerged through a natural and unplanned evolutionary process in which people with different ethno-national identities have thought that the commonalities and interests of living with the other outweighed the differences and risks. Switzerland is a remarkable example where four linguistic groups (French, German, Italian and Romansch) with two major religions (Catholic and Protestant) succeeded to form one state and coexist under it through an evolutionary process that took about a century. Like every country has its own unique conditions, the Swiss model has been *sui generis* in the sense that political/institutional factors such as neutrality, federalism and direct democracy provided the basis for a peaceful, economically successful and politically unified Swiss society.

Yet, in most cases, conflicts between two or more groups have been inevitable until a settlement has been reached. Even though the socio-economic level of the country is an important determinant for the success of the model, cultural and historical conflicts between ethnic/cultural groups may dominate the scene regardless of the level of development. The ongoing dispute between the Flemish and Walloon communities in Belgium is an example. Meanwhile, power relations between the groups determine the viability of coexistence under a bi-national state. Power relations may become more significant in cases where changes occur in the political, economic or demographic structure of the country.

In the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the idea of a bi-national state stands for one secular, constitutional and liberal state in the land of Mandate Palestine (excluding Jordan) where Arabs and Jews enjoy equal rights. Following the partition of the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate for Palestine was created as a League of Nations Mandate in the territory that now comprises modern-day Jordan, Israel, West Bank and Gaza Strip. The British Mandate controlled the territory from 1922 until the independence of Transjordan in 1946 and Israel in 1948. As all the Mandates under the League of Nations, British Mandate was established as a temporary one. According to historian Susan Lee Hattis, the future of Palestine after the Mandate would have been under one of the four scenarios: “i) Palestine could become a predominantly Arab state; ii) Palestine could become a predominantly Jewish state; iii) Palestine could be partitioned into an Arab and a Jewish state; or iv) Palestine could be a bi-national state.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Lustick, “The Cunning of History: A Response to the Case for Bi-nationalism”, *Boston Review*, (December 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Lee Hattis, *The Bi-National Idea in Palestine During Mandatory Times*, (Haifa: Shikmona Publishing Company, 1970), p.19.

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This fourth scenario has never been a structured proposal. Whether it is based on a classical liberal democracy with civic political rights or on a parity-based democracy, where the two collectivities are provided with collective rights besides civic rights is an open question and varies with each supporter's point of view. The bi-national idea in the Israel/Palestine case, unlike other cases had not been an outcome of an evolution; it has rather been a proposal of those who wished to change the status quo in their favor. In fact, the idea of bi-nationalism has emerged in times of change in power relations. The Jewish advocates supported the idea at the time of the Mandate, while the Arab advocates brought this issue recently with the expectation of change in power relations for their own advantage.

### ***Schools of Bi-Nationalism in the Israel/Palestine Conflict***

The bi-national idea in the Israeli/Palestinian context can be classified based on four different advocacies:<sup>3</sup> i) Old school of Jewish bi-nationalism ii) New-school of Jewish bi-nationalism iii) Contemporary Palestinian bi-nationalism iv) Outsiders' bi-nationalism.

#### ***i) Old School of Jewish bi-nationalism***

In the pre-state period, Jews who had believed in a settlement between Jews and Arabs formed the Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace) group in 1925. Brit Shalom's 1930 memorandum proposed "a free Palestinian commonwealth composed of two peoples, each free in the administration of their domestic affairs but united in their common political interests, on the basis of complete equality of the rights of each."<sup>4</sup> Brit Shalom did not perceive bi-nationalism as an ideal but rather a solution aiming to avoid the fall of Zionism. One other later group that supported the idea was Ihud (Union) established in 1942. Ihud was seeking a pragmatic solution for the question in a time where the Holocaust survivors needed a safe haven. With the fear that a war with Arabs "might destroy the Yishuv in Palestine"<sup>5</sup> they sought a parity-based model where "Jews and Arabs would have equal representation in a democratically elected legislative council and the head of state would be appointed by the United Nations Organization, with each community exercising autonomy in cultural matters."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tamar Hermann, "The Bi-national Idea in Israel/Palestine: Past and Present", *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 11 No.3, (2005), p. 381.

<sup>4</sup> Hattis (1970), pp.51-52.

<sup>5</sup> Judah Leon Magnes, one of the leaders of Ihud, had warned the future risks of the establishment of a Jewish state back in 1942: "Warfare might destroy a Jewish island in a hostile world (and) will breed hatred which will be difficult to assuage for generations". Quoted from *Hattis*, (1970), p.259.

<sup>6</sup> Hermann (2005), p.386.

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The old school's bi-nationalism was an outcome of a combination of political idealism and realism. They had believed that the domination of one group over the other would lead to a conflict and an endless war. Yet, they knew that both Jews (Promised Land) and Arabs (Native Inhabitants) had strong claims over the Land of Palestine and a compromise seemed to be the best proposal. The old school had raised these proposals in the midst of the challenges of the creation of a Jewish state. Yet, the Zionist establishment harshly attacked them for being naïve especially because of their views on limiting immigration and sharing the Promised Land with Arabs. They were even accused for treason.

The supporters of this idea had an expectation of change in power relations due to the incoming flow of immigrants from different parts of the world. There was no Palestinian counterpart for bi-nationalism in the pre-1948 period since the Arabs who had believed that Jews had no right whatsoever over Palestine were against any kind of compromise.

### *ii) New School of Jewish Bi-Nationalism*

The bi-national idea was raised in Israel first in the 1970s and then after the Oslo process. Supporters of this camp are a group of intellectuals from the non-Zionist left. Surprisingly, the idea has supporters in the right wing as well. The left wing critics of the expansionist Zionist ideology claim that the Israeli government had made the two-state solution impossible: "If a two-state solution had ever been possible, Israel had pushed it beyond reach with its aggressive policy of settlement in the occupied territories."<sup>7</sup> According to this camp, the two-state solution collapsed especially after the failure of the Oslo Process, which was proposing a Bantustan-type entity for Palestinians. One of the fierce critics of the establishment, Meron Benvenisti, who had been the Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, resembles Israel's discriminatory regime to the apartheid regime of South Africa and asserts that "separation is no longer an option and the entire Land of Israel should be regarded as a single geopolitical entity."<sup>8</sup> He proposes a federalist structure of ethnic cantons separated by soft boundaries similar to the borders between Maryland and Washington DC. Such an arrangement would generate a connection between land and ethnicity and would be accompanied by the principle of free movement.<sup>9</sup> The Israeli bi-nationalists hold this idea "as the last resort for saving Israeli Jews from themselves, from the repercussions of their expansionist and nationalistic drives that ... may lead to Israel's physical collapse."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "The One State Option", *The Economist*, 21 July 2007.

<sup>8</sup> *Haaretz*, 8 August 2003. Quoted from Hermann, (2005), p.388.

<sup>9</sup> Marjan Asi, "Meron Benvenisti Proposes One State Solution with Soft Boundaries", *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Vol. 26, No.5, (July 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Hermann (2005), p.386.

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The bi-national idea has supporters in the right wing since the proposal of a single Land of Israel is quite attractive. In November 2003, the Yesha (Judea, Samaria and Gaza) Council representing a group of right wing settlements who opposed the possible removal of some of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza came up with their own bi-national plan. They brought up the idea of granting “Israeli citizenship and equal rights to all Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza who are interested in accepting such status, as well as the partition of Israel into districts or cantons to skirt questions of Arab-Jewish demographics”.<sup>11</sup> These districts would get political representation based on factors that would assure Jewish rule. Obviously, “population” would not be the basis of representation in these highly Arab populated regions. This would be the means to create the Great Israel.

The proposals from the left have been based on criticism rather than indicating how exactly such a state would be constituted, while the right’s dream of Great Israel seems to be inconceivable. Both sides’ proposals have not gained any support from the Israeli people.

### *iii) Contemporary Palestinian Bi-Nationalism*

Palestinian bi-nationalism has its roots in Palestine Liberation Organization’s advocacy of a single, secular, democratic state for Jews, Christians and Muslims of the 1970s. The number of supporters of the idea grew especially after the failure of the political negotiations in the Oslo process and the consequences of the Second Intifada. The idea of an independent Palestine was becoming more than a dream: “Failure of the Oslo process to yield a viable Palestinian state could lead to a unitary state in Palestine. Indeed, the most likely response to the fading hopes of a Palestinian state will be the development of...equality of Palestinian and Jew in historic Palestine in the form of a bi-national state.”<sup>12</sup>

Similar to the early Jewish supporters of the idea, Palestinians, as the weaker party to the conflict were expecting a change in power relations through demographic changes. It could be perceived as a tactic to eventually acquire the bi-national state with a Palestinian majority. On the other hand, the emergence of a bi-nationalist state is inevitable if the Israeli occupation is not ended where the demographic trends are changing the population structure. It is estimated that a “*de facto* bi-nationalism, rooted in the Palestinians’ much higher birthrate, will prevail in the historical Land of Israel/Palestine in two to three decades.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, there is an increasing “structural dependency” between Israel and Palestine. The Palestinian economy and society is dependent on Israel through

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<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Stein, “Palestine: The Return of the One State Solution”, *Asian Affairs*, Vol.35, No.3, (November 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Nadima Rouhana, “The Test of Equal Citizenship”, *Harvard International Review*, Vol.20, No.2, (Spring 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Soffer, A. (2003), Quoted from Hermann (2005), p.398.

the imposition of identity papers for Arab residents, through labor mobility and through a national elite that benefit from the Israeli state apparatus.<sup>14</sup> According to Salim Tamari, a leading Palestinian sociologist, “the bi-national idea is embedded in the new and overlapping forms of identity that are emerging in Israel and Palestine a result of the interplay of population interaction, market forces and labor mobility.”<sup>15</sup>

Palestinians may also be attracted to the immediate material returns. In a bi-national state “Palestinians would be like immigrants to a wealthy metropole rather than nationals of a poor third country.”<sup>16</sup> Fighting for an independent state Palestinians have to deal with Israeli military generals, while in a bi-national state they will be citizens dealing with Israeli jurists instead. Judges are definitely better counterparts than generals for Palestinians.

Despite the fact that the cost-benefit analysis indicates gains for Palestinians, by and large, Palestinians themselves do not welcome the idea. It is criticized for damaging the national struggle for an independent Palestine state. After all, the emergence of a new Jewish-Palestinian identity would mean giving up the Arab-Palestinian identity.

#### *iv) Outsiders’ Bi-Nationalism*

The increasing criticism of Israel’s policies, which is backed by the United States, and the consequent rise of anti-Americanism, has brought the idea of bi-nationalism as an alternative before the international community. Israel is blamed for being an “intolerant, faith-driven ethno state”<sup>17</sup> which needs to be transformed into an open, pluralist democracy. Israel’s planting of hundreds of thousands of settlers in the occupied territories is particularly criticized for creating segregated areas for Palestinians. This raises the issue of transformation of the Israeli state: “If Israeli settlers want to stay in the West Bank- let them stay. But if they want to stay there... they (Israelis) cannot refuse to give equal rights within the whole of an expanded state of Israel/Palestine to all Palestinians who want to be a part of it... The end of the dream of a monocultural Jewish state? Yes.”<sup>18</sup>

International supporters of the idea generally emphasize the external dynamics of the process. For many, a bi-national state in the Middle East would require a devoted American leadership. Yet, the bi-national arguments of the outsiders

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<sup>14</sup> Salim Tamari, “The Dubious Lure of Bi-nationalism”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol.XXX, No.1, (Autumn 2000), pp.83-87.

<sup>15</sup> Tamari (2000), p.87.

<sup>16</sup> Lama Abu-Odeh, “The Case for Bi-nationalism”, *Boston Review*, (December 2001/January 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Tony Judt, “Israel: The Alternative”, *The New-York Review of Books*, Vol.50, No.16, (October 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Helena Cobban, “A Binational Israel Palestine”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, (October 2003).

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are essentially limited with the premises of one or more of the three schools analyzed above. Furthermore, these proposals do not reflect the core of insiders' arguments. The issue at stake is rooted in identity politics and generally speaking, outsiders cannot comprehend the struggle of the Israelis and Palestinians. That's why peculiar proposals emerge such as the one proposed by the Libyan President Muammar Al Gaddafi: "Fundamental Historical Solution: Isratine."<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Viability and Feasibility of Bi-Nationalism***

The idea of bi-national state does not appear to be a realistic solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The four versions of the idea indicate that neither of these proposals presents a consistent structure on how to settle the conflicts between two parties nor do they seem to be *de facto* feasible.

The idea has never been the most desirable option. It has emerged in periods of change in power relations. The Jewish advocates of the bi-national idea had confidence in the huge Jewish immigration during the Mandate era, while the contemporary Palestinian advocates have been raising the idea with the expectation that the higher birth rates of Palestinians will transform the demographics and eventually, the power relations, to their own advantage. Yet, in both cases, the group with an advantage- previously Palestinians, now Israelis- is aware of the real intention behind the proposal. As a result, "its (the dominant party's) interest in opting for a *de jure* bi-national arrangement becomes minimal or disappears."<sup>20</sup>

It is also not a desirable option for the peoples of both sides. Bi-nationalism may provide both sides with what is expected from a genuine solution with regard to peace, territory, resources, recognition and immigration, yet it brings the cost of encountering each other in micro and macro struggles. The bi-national idea leaves many questions unanswered: How will the people peacefully co-exist in day-to-day encounters when they have so many prejudices against each other based on different narratives? Why should Israelis redistribute their national wealth and make transfer of resources "from the rich Jewish units to the poor Palestinians?"<sup>21</sup> "How will the cultural resistance of Palestinian nationalism be incorporated within a Europeanized and industrially superior state?"<sup>22</sup> "How to change the minds of the 99 percent of Israeli Jews who believe they must live in a state with a Jewish majority to avoid another Holocaust?"<sup>23</sup> How to compromise with the Israelis who believe that the bi-national idea is a "Trojan Horse"<sup>24</sup> to

<sup>19</sup> Muammar Al Gaddafi, *White Book: Isratine*, (2004), [http://www.algathafi.org/html-english/cat\\_03\\_03.htm](http://www.algathafi.org/html-english/cat_03_03.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Hermann (2005), p.386.

<sup>21</sup> Lama Abu-Odeh, "The Case for Bi-nationalism", *Boston Review*, (December 2001/January 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Tamari (2000), p.85.

<sup>23</sup> "The One State Option", *The Economist*, 21 July 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Efrahim Karsh, "A Trojan Horse?: A Response to the Case for Bi-nationalism", *Boston Review*, (December 2001/January 2002).

destroy the Israeli state? What about the national struggle of the Palestinians; will they compromise a solution without a national identity on their own?

The actual shortcoming for the implementation of the bi-national idea is that the supporters of the idea have always been intellectuals. The applicability of such ideas is further questioned since these intellectuals are neither decision-makers nor practicing politicians. As Hermann puts it; “this gives their recommendations more than a touch of ‘ivory tower’ over-rationalization and detachment from reality.”<sup>25</sup>

In fact, the supporters themselves have doubts about the idea. The Israeli left-wing supporter Benvenisti admits a drawback of the argument: “I am not happy with what I have suggested. We are not going to have peace here. Even if there is some bi-national arrangement, it can only manage the conflict. At its outskirts, however, violence will always prevail.”<sup>26</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Bi-nationalism cannot replace the idea of two separate independent states, but even “thinking about how bi-nationalism might arise as an unintended consequence of failed negotiations might make that failure less likely”.<sup>27</sup> After all, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is based on an identity conflict, presenting itself through myriad of struggles in different platforms. Both Israelis and Palestinians are devoted to have their own independent state and keep their genuine national identity. Despite the fact that globalization is transforming nation states into post-national entities, nations remain as the principal organization level of modern societies and thus, national identities keep providing the dominant sense of belonging. In the words of philosopher Ernest Gellner “an individual has a national identity, just as he has one nose and two ears”.<sup>28</sup> It would not be the smartest move to ask Israelis and Palestinians to give up their national identities or share it with their “other” after decades of struggle.

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<sup>25</sup> Hermann (2005), p. 398.

<sup>26</sup> *Haaretz*, 8 August 2003. Quoted from Hermann, (2005), p.388.

<sup>27</sup> Lustick, Ian, “The Cunning of History: A Response to the Case for Bi-nationalism”, *Boston Review*, (December 2001/January 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.6.

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