

'An Arab is an Arab'

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"An Arab is an Arab," said my close acquaintance, when we were discussing the renovation of my brother's house in the kibbutz, where the contractor was a Palestinian.

The sentence might seem neutral at first. And yet it holds a myriad of insinuations, prejudice and ideological supremacy which deserves to be analysed in historical perspective.

The term "Arab" was used already by the British in their Mandate period of 1923-48, where they had two "ethnic" definitions, one referring to the indigenous population of Palestine, termed "Arabs", and another for the overwhelmingly newcomer population, termed "Jews". Already here, if one cares to scrutinize, we approach some revealing truths:

Jews had existed in Palestine for many centuries, as a small minority. There had been peaceful coexistence in Palestine between Muslims, Christians, Jews and others during and before the four-century long Ottoman rule. "Jew" was not juxtaposed with "Arab". In fact, there have been, and still are, many Arab Jews. But few of them define themselves in that way nowadays (prominent examples are the late author Naeim Giladi and author Sami Michael), because the State of Israel, following the British model, had "monopolised" the term "Jew" as an ethnic term, under the false premise that it IS an ethnicity, and thus could not be merged with another assumed ethnicity - "Arab". Defining oneself as "Arab" whilst one was a Jew, would thus associate a person with the "others" - something which many Jews were wary of doing.

Here we already see the British acceptance of a Zionist idea - that Jews are an ethnic homogeneous "nation". The British accepted the idea that Jews were not merely a religiously defined people, but an ethnically defined people. As opposed to this, they regarded the local Palestinian population under one ethnic-linguistic term: Arabs - despite Palestinian religious diversity, dialect and traditions, which differ from other Arabs.

The British perception is based upon the notion that Jews, as they mostly perceived them (and as the Zionists mostly perceived themselves to begin with), were Europeans, more like themselves than the "Arabs."

Thus the separation into two classifications, "Jew" and "Arab," also reveals that the case of Palestine and Israel is really a case of European colonialism in its outset, rather than a dispute amongst two ethnic groups which appeared at roughly the same time. The Balfour Declaration, which Zionists love to refer to as part of an ostensible internationally approved legitimacy for a "national home" in Palestine, was written in 1917, when Britain had no power over Palestine. Not only did it thus not have a mandate or authority to promise such a thing - its doing so shows beyond doubt its bias towards the Jews in the future Mandate of Palestine, from the outset.

The term “Arab” was devoid of national cohesion in the locality of Palestine, thus basically suggesting that the whole region was one big mishmash of “Arabs”. Whilst one could supposedly suggest that “Jews” didn’t imply locality either, the fact of the matter is that in the paradigm of Palestine, “Jews” was a term used to designate the overwhelmingly European newcomers in that locality – the Zionist settlers.

Israel was happy to take up the terms from the British. After all, they were made with the exact same prejudicial view that the Zionists had held. When declaring the State of Israel, Israel did not define a new nationality, “Israeli”. In fact, no such nationality exists until this very day. Whilst the international community is fooled to believe there is such a nationality (in Israeli passports, the standard nationality is marked as “Israeli”), inside Israel it does not exist. In Israeli ID cards, “Nation” is taken as an ethnic heritage matter. Thus there are some 130 “nationalities” that one may be registered under, amongst them “Jewish” and “Arab”. Only *citizenship* is defined as ‘Israeli’, the nationality is regarded as a separate issue. Those few Israelis who have sought to have their nationality registered as “Israeli” in their ID cards have received the standard answer from the Ministry of the Interior: “it has been decided not to recognise an Israeli nationality”.

The purpose of such a system is obvious as an extension of the idea of “the Jewish State.” For Israel to be the state of all Jews worldwide, it must reserve their supposedly “ethnic” privilege under a “nationality” which is separate to the citizenship definition. Not doing so would imply that Israel is the state of its citizens. But it is not. It is self declared as the state of the Jews – the Jewish State.

So the term Arab was the parallel term in this binary perception– it supplied Jewish Israelis with the terminology by which to refer to the “others”. The “others”, the indigenous population, would not be called “Palestinians”, for that would suggest a national cohesion and relationship with the locality which Israel coveted. Calling them “Arabs” would conveniently rob them of this relationship and make it morally easier to dispossess them: Zionist apologia often repeat the claim that “they (the Palestinians) have 22 other ‘Arab’ countries to go to, whilst we (the Jews) have only one”...

At first, the Palestinians were not very robust in their accentuation of their Palestinian nationality. After all, the Spring of Nations in the mid 19th century was a mostly European appearance, and the accentuation of separate national definition was not as much of a passion in the Middle East as it was for Europeans. Despite existing Palestinian national awareness before Zionism and milestone events defining national coherence such as the Palestinian revolt of 1834, in 1948, the Palestinians had mostly found themselves in a state of shock, trying to recover from the violent dispossession that had befallen them, which was very much affecting them on the personal basis. It would take nearly two decades before Palestinian national awareness and leadership (albeit mostly as an exiled nation) would gain thrust, notably in the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in 1964.

In the meanwhile, Israel was happy for this dispersion. It was Israel’s goal to disperse the Palestinians in favor of Jewish-Zionist cohesion and consolidation in historical Palestine.

In 1969, Former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir famously said [in an interview published in the Sunday Times](#) and Washington Post:

“There were no such things as Palestinians. When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state?...It was not as though there was a

Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.”

If one wanted to be apologetic, one could attempt to see Meir’s comments as a mere reference to national definition, as I have heard even liberal Israelis seek to do. But as mentioned, the view of the nationality and local connection as “non-existent” played a part in the Israeli-Zionist ideology of dispossession.

Israeli Palestinians, that is those who were referred to as “Israeli Arabs” after the declaration of the state, were considered to be more the latter, “Arabs”, than the former, “Israelis”. Between 1948 and 1966 they were subject to a military regime. Those were Israeli citizens, yet for all practical purposes, they were considered a hostile, alien population.

These people were not regarded by Israel as “Palestinians”. To do so would be to recognize the paradigm of colonisation. And for the most part, Israeli Palestinians also regarded themselves as Arabs. The Israeli ‘divide and rule’ strategy worked at first. But with the process of strengthening national awareness, and a growing realisation of the historical paradigm of dispossession and oppression, Israeli Palestinians began increasingly to define themselves as Palestinians, in recognition of their relationship to the rest of the Palestinian people, in the realisation that they were merely the calculated minority that was allowed to remain.

The number of Palestinian Israelis defining themselves as Palestinians has thus grown in the years. According to recent polls by Prof. Sammy Smooha of Haifa University [cited in Haaretz](#) in 2014, 22% of “Israeli Arabs” call themselves Arab-Palestinians with no Israeli association at all. Another 45% call themselves Palestinian-Israelis. Only 32% define themselves as what the Jewish majority likes to call them – Israeli Arabs. In other words, two out of three Palestinians who are Israeli citizens consider themselves Palestinians.

This of course plays into the Israeli accusations, repeated often and mainly in times of clashes, that the “Arab population is a fifth column”.

Israel has been applying the term “Palestinians” considerably in media and discourse in the wake of the Oslo accords of 1993 and 1995. This was also a convenience for Israel in that the Palestinian “state”, which was regarded as “less than a state” by all Israeli leadership, including Rabin just before his assassination in 1995, provided the possibility of limiting the terminology of “Palestine” and “Palestinians” to a set of Bantustans scattered across some 40 percent of the West Bank [which remains under “Palestinian authority”](#). This definition would also provide Israel with terms by which to divide the Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories from the Israeli Palestinians – a separation which, as mentioned, many Palestinian Israelis refuse to accept.

Whilst Israel continues to expand its settlements and further dissect the West Bank, whilst strangling Gaza with a de facto siege and blockade for the last decade after Israel’s ostensible “disengagement” in 2005, the question becomes, when “There is no more Palestine. Finished...” (to cite Moshe Dayan’s quote to Time Magazine in 1973) will come to be realised, not only in ideology and definition, but in reality.

Palestinians obviously seek to prevent this catastrophe from happening. It would be a final manifestation of the Nakba, the “catastrophe” of 1948.

Meanwhile, for most Israeli Jews, the gradual dispossession of historical Palestine and Palestinians through various means of violence is an apparently “acceptable evil” – or even right. It is even possible to shut one’s eyes and pretend to be a liberal, whilst the Israeli military machine continues its work. For it does not need overt support, it works on its own.

Whilst Israel and Israelis thus regard some of the Palestinians as “Palestinians”, mostly for purposes of political correctness, the term “Palestinian” generally evokes an unease in colloquial talk. Here is another personal experience:

A few years ago, I was at a dinner with musicians after performing a concert which I had conducted. Three of us had Israeli attachment (citizens or expatriates). One of us, I knew, was teaching some Palestinian students. When I asked him about it at the table, he said “P-a-l-e-s-t-i-n-i-a-n-s” with a nasal voice and a twist of the face, which was full of ridicule and disdain. We were supposed to laugh. Another person did – I didn’t. I cut it short and left.

That approach, and the first mentioned “an Arab is an Arab” are the more honest expressions of attitude that Israelis will often express amongst themselves, doing the “dirty laundry” at home. Naturally, towards the “international community” they will often make effort to appear more neutral, more technical.

In the end, for most Israeli Jews, an Arab is not a Palestinian. An Arab is an Arab.

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