

# MERIA

## Essay: Role Reversal Over Partition: 1948 And 1998

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Over fifty years have elapsed since the UN General Assembly passed the Partition Resolution of November 29, 1947. The resolution called for the division of Palestine, governed by the British mandate since 1920, into a Jewish and an Arab state. Yet despite many subsequent wars, the basic issue that faced the UN in 1947 is still unresolved.

The momentous decision still confronting Jews and Arabs in 1997 is whether to modify their nationalist aspirations and agree to territorial compromise. This issue is even more weighty than the choices faced by Arab and Israeli leaders in the wars of 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, and the Gulf War, all of which were essentially fought over territory and borders. By contrast, the partition of Palestine and the fate of its successor territorial components of Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, and Jordan, raises fundamental issues of ideology, security and national identity. As a result, the debates within Israeli and Palestinian society are in fact weightier and more likely to stand in the way of compromise than the issues on the negotiating table before Palestinian and Israeli negotiators.

Zionist endorsement of partition in 1947 did not reflect a Jewish consensus over the worthiness of the objective. Rather, the vitality of democratic procedure in the embryonic political institutions of the Yishuv [the Jewish community in Palestine] permitted a controversial decision to accept half a loaf as the only viable road to a

Jewish national home, especially in the wake of the Holocaust.

From the outset, there was great diversity among the varied schools of Zionism. At the turn of the last century, Zionism suggested a remedy for the pervasive Jewish identity crisis--as a means of restoring some essential dimension of Jewish identity which was lacking in the Diaspora. For Theodore Herzl, a political Zionist, normalcy was the goal, so that the Jews could be a nation among the nations; for Ahad Ha'am, a cultural Zionist, Israel would serve as a "light unto the nations"; for A.D. Gordon, a labor Zionist, the model was the Jewish farmer; for Zev Jabotinsky, a Revisionist Zionist, the model was the Jewish soldier.

The move toward the political center, and toward embracing pragmatic solutions, reflected a primary instinct for national survival. How else would one explain the vote by the religious Mizrachi party in the Zionist Congress of 1903 to endorse a Jewish national home in Uganda if that would provide a safe haven? Or the subsequent Mizrachi position that despite having voted against partition, the majority decision would have to be followed? The one major faction to hold out against partition was the Revisionist Party, whose discontent flared up in the unfortunate Altalena incident of June 1948. At this time, the fledgling Israeli army fired on a ship carrying arms for Revisionist forces. Menahem Begin, in his book, *The Revolt*, recalls how his eyes filled with tears giving

a radio speech after the boat was sunk. Nonetheless, he stressed the overriding importance of avoiding civil war among Jews:

And so it came to pass that there was no fratricidal war in Israel to destroy the Jewish State before it was properly born.... [S]ometimes, as the "Altalena" taught us, it is essential that tears should take the place of blood. 1

By contrast, Arab rejection of partition in 1947 reflected a crisis of leadership in a community whose identity as Palestinians was not yet fully crystallized. Indeed, at the start of the British mandate, the Arabs of Palestine were profoundly ambivalent about the appropriate focus of their political loyalties--should they identify with the overall Arab nation, consider themselves Southern Syrians, or call themselves Palestinians in conformity to boundaries artificially drawn by imperial powers?

The responsibility for resisting British rule and confronting an influx of Jewish immigrants fell upon a Palestinian political elite drawn from traditional urban notable families. The tensions between the two foremost families--the Husaynis and Nashishibis--came to a head during the Arab Revolt of 1936-39. This uprising did yield British restrictions on Jewish immigration and land purchase, but not a secure route to Palestinian self-determination. As noted by Palestinian scholar Rashid Khalidi:

The Palestine Arab Revolt...was in many ways the decisive episode in the efforts of the Palestinian Arabs to resist the British mandate's support for a Jewish national home in Palestine....[It] has been glorified in much Palestinian historiography but...ultimately the revolt must be judged a failure....[D]uring this episode [the Palestinians'] already

divided leadership was fragmented further....These divisions contributed to the failure of the Palestinians to capitalize on [their] potential advantages. 2

The categorical rejection of partition by the Arab Higher Committee led by Hajj Amin al-Husayni as well as the newly created Arab League represented an all-or-nothing attitude that was ultimately counterproductive. It resulted in the utter defeat of Palestinian dreams for independence, for at least half a century.

After the 1948 war, Palestinians in the diaspora lived at the mercy of Arab regimes who championed their cause verbally but offered little meaningful assistance. As Fawaz Turki charges in his book, *The Disinherited*:

Here we witness the most ruthless and mercenary display of the manipulation of one man's misfortune for the benefit of another. Politically, "usurped Palestine" became a catch phrase to use in speeches by government leaders with a thirst for prestige and popularity....But it was known to all that the Arab governments had put the solution of the Palestine issue at the bottom of their list of priorities.3

Palestinian disillusionment with Arab leaders crystallized after Arab defeat in the 1967 war, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) adopted a strategy of self-reliance. But "armed struggle" against targets in Israel failed to achieve the proclaimed goal of liberating Palestine, and instead led to banishment of the PLO from Jordan and Lebanon. The real turning point was the eruption of the Palestinian uprising or intifada, highlighting the priority of attending to the grievances of Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation. In order to end occupation, they were willing to

validate the principle of partition and accept a two-state solution.

After the conclusion of the Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO in 1993, the election of the Palestinian Authority (PA) yielded a measure of legitimation and participation. But the PA has been unable or unwilling to put the lid on terrorism--and the price has been paid not only by Israel but also by the Palestinians themselves. Terrorism jeopardizes whatever gains the Palestinians have achieved thus far. As noted by Palestinian scholar Yezid Sayigh, "potential threats to Palestinian security include possible resort to covert operations by Palestinian individuals or groups opposed to the peace with Israel." Sayigh suggests that in the long term, instead of thinking of security in the narrow sense of "military defense against direct, physical threats," it would be wiser for Israelis and Palestinians to realize that security really means "the ability to protect 'national values'...ensuring the physical well-being and survival of the population...and preserving social harmony."<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, an ongoing crisis of leadership hampers Palestinian decisionmaking. Problems of authoritarianism and human rights abuse persist. In a September 1997 poll conducted in the West Bank and Gaza, 58% said that they could not criticize the Palestinian authority without fear. In that survey, 36% of those polled supported suicide bombings against Israelis. On a more optimistic note, 59% of the public indicated that they support the Oslo peace process.<sup>5</sup>

For Israel as well as the Palestinians, the intifada represented a critical psychological turning point. Until then, most Israelis viewed the territorial gains of the "Six Day" War of 1967 as an unmixed blessing. But as opposed to the sparsely inhabited buffer zones of the Sinai and the Golan, the West Bank and Gaza were heavily populated by inhabitants whose

anger was waiting to erupt. The intifada was a wake-up call for Israelis, revealing that occupation was costly, and bringing Israel's choices into sharp relief. Since the intifada, an increasing number of Israelis became convinced that Gaza and perhaps even the West Bank constitute a security liability.

In recognizing the PLO and initiating territorial withdrawal in 1993, Israel accepted the principle of compromise, but not necessarily the principle of partition. The ultimate status of the West Bank and Gaza was not resolved in the Oslo accords, and Israeli security analyst Mark Heller argues that the accords represented "at most, an agreement to enter into an open-ended, multi-staged process leading to a peace agreement."<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, once Israel withdrew from Gaza and major West Bank towns, a fundamental change in the status quo had occurred. Heller goes so far as to say that: the argument about whether a Palestinian state should or should not exist is anachronistic--the semi-independent Palestinian state already exists....The real agenda now focuses on ...first, the borders of that state [and]...second, on its authority.<sup>7</sup>

The jury is still out on whether Israel's current leadership will eventually endorse partition. The election of Prime Minister Netanyahu in 1996 reflected the apprehensions of many Israelis that the preceding Labor government had already given away too much to the PLO and was about to give away the whole store. However, the ball remains in Israel's court, as the party favored by the territorial status quo, for concessions in permanent status negotiations. More than any other issue, the fate of Jewish settlements will be critical. In an intriguing analysis, two scholars from Bar Ilan University recently argued that it is desirable to promote "clearer separation between Israelis and Palestinians" by "removing several Jewish settlements situated inside Palestinian population centers."<sup>8</sup> In any event, no meaningful

agreement on partition is possible if a future Palestinian state is confined to a set of disconnected enclaves that can be isolated from each other at the discretion of Israeli leaders.

In fact, public opinion polls show that Israeli leaders may have more room to maneuver than they acknowledge. A poll conducted in February-March 1997 indicated 70% support for the Oslo process, 51% of the public favoring the establishment of a Palestinian state, and 77% believing that a Palestinian state would be created within the next ten years. 9

In conclusion, an apparent role reversal has occurred: whereas in 1947, partition was accepted by Jews and rejected by Arabs; in 1997, partition is accepted by Arafat and apparently rejected by Netanyahu. But the question still remains how each community will overcome dissent on the road to compromising with the other. What is required is the historical vision to make partition, at last, a working formula. We face a compelling need to close the file on the core issues in the dispute, as a precondition to bringing peace to the peoples of the region, and to normalizing Israel's status as a viable member of the Middle East community.

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## Notes

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2. Reeva S. Simon, Philip Mattar, and Richard W. Bulliet (eds), *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East*, New York: Macmillan, 1996. 4 Vols. pp. 1409-1410.
3. Fawaz Turki, *The Disinherited* (New York: Modern Reader, 1972), p. 40.
4. Sayigh, Yezid. "Redefining the Basics: Sovereignty and Security in the Palestinian State," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 24:4 (Summer 1995): 10-15.
5. Center for Palestine Research and Studies (Nablus) poll, September 1997. See also Khalil Shikaki in *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (January 1998).
6. Mark Heller, *The Israel-PLO Agreement: What If It Fails? How Will We Know? Final Status Issues Series: Israel-Palestinians*, no. 1. Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1994.
7. Mark Heller, "Towards a Palestinian State." *Survival* (Summer 1997): p. 9.
8. Efraim Inbar and Shmuel Sandler, *The Risks of Palestinian Statehood*. *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, no. 33. BESA Center for Strategic Studies. Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University, 1997, p. 35.
9. Asher Arian, *Israeli Public Opinion on National Security*, 1997. Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Memorandum no. 47 (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center, 1997).