



Before Statehood: The Case for a Palestinian Civil Rights Movement

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

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Before Statehood: The Case for a Palestinian Civil Rights Movement

In March 2017, Miki Zohar, a member of Likud party, made a troubling remark about his vision for a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; he said Israel should annex the West Bank, but without giving Palestinians “full citizenship” because that, he reasoned, would enable them to vote.¹

As a student of American Studies familiar with the struggle of minority groups in the United States, his statement rang familiar. Minority groups in the US have also been denied the full rights of citizenship. The most egregious type of discrimination was directed at Native Americans, whom the ‘white man’ considered savages unworthy of citizenship.

The historical experiences of Native Americans and Palestinians have several characteristics in common. For example, both suffered a loss of land at the hands of a more powerful party, and the two indigenous populations were viewed similarly by American and Zionist leaders.

It’s important to emphasize, however, that this essay is not an attempt to equate settler colonialism with Zionism. There are no two experiences in history that are exactly similar. And to equate Western colonialism in the US with the Zionist movement is to neglect many aspects that contributed to the formation of both the Palestinian and Israeli identities.

This essay examines similarities of how leaders of the Zionist movement and presidents of the United States regarded and addressed the two native populations. It also proposes a way forward for the Palestinian struggle, taking these findings into account.

The “Naked Truth” of Miki Zohar

While some might argue that Miki Zohar’s statement is not representative of how the majority of Israelis view the conflict, it can also be argued that he is speaking the “naked truth”.² Reading between the lines of Zohar’s statement suggests that a) the two-state solution is dead, and b) that Israel and the Palestinian territories are already one state. Regarding the first part, he’s definitely not the only one; people have been announcing the death of the two-state solution for the past decade now. And the hundredth nail in the proverbial coffin of the two-state solution came this year when Trump’s US announced withdrawing support for it.³

1 Barnea, Nahum. (2017, March 3). Miki Zohar has a dream for annexation. Ynetnews. Retrieved from <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4934816,00.html>

2 Misgav, Uri. (2017, March 9). Israeli lawmaker wants to annex the West Bank. Haaretz. Retrieved from <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.776053>

3 Madeline, Conway. (2017, February 15). Trump says he can live with either two-state or one-state solution. Politico. Retrieved from <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trump-two-state-one-state-solution-israel-235054>

Regarding the second part, one can easily make the case that Israel is already a one state. When Dani Dayan, consul general of Israel in New York since 2016, was asked during an interview with Mehdi Hassan why doesn't he live inside Israel instead of living in Ma'alei Shomron, a settlement to the north of the West Bank, or what he calls by its Biblical name "Judea and Samaria", he chuckled, "Oh I live inside Israel, I live in the heart of Israel".⁴ For Dayan, and other centrist and right-wing leaders, the borders of Israel stretch to cover the whole land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

The audience based in Oxford University rolled their eyes at his statement, but what Dayan expressed is the reality today; Israel has full sovereignty over area C, which constitutes 60% of the West Bank. What is left for the Palestinian Authority to "govern" in security cooperation with Israel is less than 40% of the West Bank, referred to as areas A and B. The Israeli Parliament today is the only supreme government over all of historic Palestine, where 1.7 Million Palestinians in the West Bank and 1.8 Million Palestinians in Gaza live with no representation. Every day the Knesset passes laws that influence the daily lives of Palestinians, but Palestinians have no say in the matter.⁵ Under the pretext of security, Israel has managed to subject an entire population of Palestinians to conditions that raise humanitarian concerns.

More importantly, there's no imminent plan to ending occupation, certainly not under the current government. Just in February 2017, the Israeli Knesset passed the regulation law, a controversial bill that allows Israeli government to annex privately owned Palestinian land.⁶ It's true that this bill might be struck down by the Supreme Court, but the mere passage of it is telling. It first speaks of Israel's long term expansionist aspirations, which the Palestinians have long suspected, and which are the long term goals of the Zionist project. Second, it points out the elephant in the room of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Palestinians are not treated as equal human beings in the first place, and as equal citizens and natives of the land in the second and third places.

Had it been a private Israeli land, would the outcome have been different? Even the question sounds ridiculous. Today, there are about 700,000 settlers living illegally in the West Bank while protected by the IDF and sponsored by the Israeli government. They have their different roads, schools, communities while enjoying full Israeli citizenship with representation in the Knesset and protection of Israeli soldiers who hold them to completely different standards than Palestinians living in the West Bank.

The way Palestinians are treated today did not come out of the blue. In fact, it is a continuation of how they were treated by early Zionist leaders, just as early American presidents paved the way to how Native Americans got treated afterwards.

4 Head to head: Israeli settlers: patriots or invaders. Al-Jazeera English. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6lwgCs2PNM&t=301s>

5 Bahour, Sam. (2015, February 6). The inevitability of civil rights for all. 972mag. Retrieved from <https://972mag.com/no-voice-hopes-for-israeli-elections-from-those-who-cannot-vote/102332/>

6 Al-Jazeera English. (2017, February 6). Israel approves controversial settlement expansion bill. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/israel-approves-controversial-settlement-expansion-bill-170206184729444.html>

In the beginning was “the promised justice”

Thomas Jefferson started out as someone who pledged to protect the Native American lands, for example stating in 1768 before becoming president, “not a foot of land will be taken from the Indians without their consent”.⁷ After becoming president, especially during the early days, he continued speaking for the rights of the Natives and to promote policies of peace.

Likewise, Herzl envisioned a utopian homeland for Jews and did not expect any conflict with the Arabs.⁸ This stems from his conviction that the Arabs would welcome the Jews to their land once they see the money and prosperity the Jews would bring to the region. He did not give Arabs much thought nor did he view them as a problem. If anything, he envisioned a secular country that gives equal rights to everybody and where everybody lives in peace and harmony.

Both the Native Americans and the Palestinians were referred to in early American and Zionist discourse as backward populations that would nonetheless be granted justice and equality in the new state, and maybe be introduced to the new ways of civilization with time.

It's important to remark that just because they were perceived as backward does not make it true. For example, when the Jews first arrived in Palestine, they came with no experience in agriculture and looked to the Palestinians to teach them their methods.

The fall of the promise

Things started to change once the natives refused to buy the newcomers brand of justice. This is expected; No native will quietly accept the type of newcomers who plan to establish a state and expand on more land. And so, neither the native Palestinians nor the Native Americans took it quietly.

For the Native American, US history tells a story of two presidents who adopted policies that did Native Americans the most harm: Jefferson and Jackson. Jefferson started out as someone who pledged to protect the Native American lands, but adopted assimilation policies at a later stage. He then ordered the annexation of all Native American land east of the Mississippi, and adopted removal policies.

Jefferson shared Jackson's dream for expanding settlements of white men “beyond the Indian tribes”. But Andrew Jackson was more of a hardliner. In 1839, Jackson announced the “Happy consummation” of legislation to remove two main Native American tribes. Jackson thought he was solving a problem, for the Indian Removal Act would prevent their assimilation with the civilized white or worse their annihilation.⁹

⁷ Jefferson, Thomas. (1786). Answers to de Meusnier Questions.

⁸ Herzl, Theodore. (1902). Altneuland.

⁹ Andrew Jackson speech to the congress. Retrieved from https://www.nps.gov/museum/tmc/MANZ/handouts/Andrew_Jackson_Annual_Message.pdf

Born a demographic threat!

The question of what to do with us the Palestinians who incidentally and inconveniently happened to live on the land of Zion is one that the leaders of Zionism had to grapple with early on, and one that is as relevant today as it used to be during the inception of the modern Zionist movement; from Herzl to Jabotinsky to Ben Gurion.

Jabotinsky acknowledged that Palestinians were a nation and that they were problematic. What he proposed to keep this problem in check was: *Create a Jewish state behind iron walls that the Arab population couldn't break. And once Israel was in a position of power, and the Palestinians were scattered and weakened, they would come to the negotiating table from a position of weakness. It's only then that a peace deal could be made with them.*¹⁰ The current Israeli Likud party along with the far right parties still hold this view today, except that they have pushed it further. Netanyahu seems to want to keep the Palestinians in a permanent state of subservience.

Ben-Gurion was quick to notice that the Arab population posed a problem. This is why he led intensive debates on what to do with the Arabs during 1930s. The Arab transfer was debated as one of the solutions. When the idea of transfer to neighbouring countries was agreed on, the mechanism remained controversial. Should it happen voluntary or compulsory and how?¹¹

Positions of Zionist leaders have varied between denial of Palestinian existence (despite evidence showing otherwise), dismissal of the population as insignificant, and a focus on the establishment of the Jewish state. These questions and debates took a modern form. They not only arise in the rhetoric of Netanyahu talking about Arab Israelis, but they are also present in the arguments of left-wingers. For example, with regard to the Arab demographic threat, left-wingers think the best solution is to give Palestinians a state and to respect their own national identity (i.e. 'we don't want you among us, but at least we want you to live with dignity and equality in your own state'). The right-wingers, by contrast, want to continue to deny Palestinians a state, while at the same time subjecting them to occupation, discrimination, and land theft.

The quest for justice

No matter how hard both the Native Americans and Palestinians tried, they remained secondary actors, reacting to the policies of a 'more powerful' party. This asymmetry of power left both peoples helpless. Their opponents spoke of the two peoples using a type of language that is dismissive and that relegated them to an inferior status, and facilitated the unfair treatment they later received. It makes sense because in order to do whatever you like with a people you must first dehumanize them.

Today, and despite the fact that the two-state solution speaks to Israel's long term goals of remaining a Jewish-majority state, Israel is not committed to it. If a country is willing to subject an entire population to military rule to feel safe, that in and of itself should be revealing of what Palestinians have to deal with Under the pretext of security, Israeli

¹⁰ Jabotinsky, (1923). The iron wall. Retrieved from <http://en.jabotinsky.org/media/9747/the-iron-wall.pdf>

¹¹ Masalha, Nur. (2004). 60 years after Nakba.

soldiers have conducted extrajudicial killings and house raids and interfered with a populations' basic right to move freely inside their home country by imposing checkpoints.

Whether the Palestinians had a national identity at the time of Israel's foundation is not important. What is important is that a people, however they chose to identify themselves, had lived there and they have suffered, and they're still paying the price, as refugees outside of historic Palestine and as second class citizens in their own land. Two generations of Palestinians today know no other reality than the one where they're second class citizens subjected and treated as either a demographic or a security threat, or both.

We have long been thinking of solutions to the conflict in the framework of states; one state, two states, and more recently, a full state for Israel and a 'state minus' for the Palestinians. But this discussion is futile under current circumstances. Indeed, Palestinians have reached an impasse that only can be reversed through a civil rights movement. Just like Native Americans, Palestinians should mobilize for civil rights before sovereignty. They should push to be viewed as equals, worthy of justice and dignity. Statehood and sovereignty would come later.

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