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ISRAEL,
JORDAN,
AND
PALESTINE

The Two-State Imperative

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INTRODUCTION

The failure to achieve a peaceful solution between Israel and the Palestinians based on two independent states, Israel and Palestine, has given rise to the recently more salient support for the one-state idea. This notion suggests that instead of two states there should be one single state spanning the entire territory of Western Palestine from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. For Hamas, in principle, it would have to be an Islamic state, in which the Jews, if they remained, would become a tolerated minority in a Sharia-dominated polity. For Palestinian secularists and their like-minded Western supporters, at least in theory, it ought to be a unitary, secular, democratic state, where Muslims, Jews, and Christians would be fully equal in one undivided, non-ethnic, civic nation-state.

A civic national identity is defined by “a common loyalty to a territorially defined state and rooted in a set of political rights, duties, and values shared by the citizens of that state, regardless of their ancestry and of the non-political (e.g. linguistic, religious, etc.) aspects of their cultural heritage.” The United States is often referred to as the quintessential civic nation, based on such a civic national identity. For a long time in the social science typology, this *civic nation* was contrasted with the *ethnic nation*, whose identity was based on the principle of kinship. Members of the ethnic nation shared “a myth of common descent” and were “bound to one another by putative ties of blood, not just by juridical categories and/or ideological affinities. Their sense of kinship is both manifested in and reinforced by distinctive cultural attributes (such as language and/or religion) that they have in common with one another and that mark them apart from those who do not share their national identity.”¹

The association of peoples' identities with fixed cultural markers rather than with their residence and membership in an existing territorial unit, so the critics of ethnic nationalism argued, led to the discriminatory tendencies often associated with ethnic nationalism. If national identity was construed as an

inherited quality, it would appear by definition to be less liberal, tolerant, and inclusive than civic nationalism, whose criteria for membership could theoretically be met by any resident of the nation-state's territory. Any individual could choose to subscribe to a common set of principles. Conversely, ethnic nationalism (such as ethno-cultural German, Greek, or Jewish nationalism) was considered intolerant of both individual rights and cultural diversity because of its preoccupation with ascriptive qualities that could not be freely acquired nor voluntarily relinquished.²

The discussion about Israel and Palestine is therefore also part of this wider debate in the social sciences on the virtues and vices of civic and ethnic nationalism, where a Jewish Israel alongside an Arab Palestine is often deemed to be a negative example of ethnic nationalism, as opposed to the one-state solution founded on the ostensibly more liberal and inclusive civic nationalism.

However, the dichotomous presentation of civic nationalism as inherently liberal, democratic, and tolerant—that is, “good nationalism”—as opposed to the intrinsically exclusionary and potentially repressive ethnic nationalism—that is, “bad nationalism”—is somewhat out of date. It has been superseded in recent years by a considerably more nuanced approach, in which “civic” is never entirely so, and elements of “ethnic” are associated with it, just as “ethnic” is hardly ever quite as “un-civic” as suggested in the extreme typology.

As Craig Calhoun has pointed out, the contrast of “ethnic to civic nationalism, organic to liberal, Eastern to Western is so habitual today that it is hard to recall that it was invented. Like nationalism itself, it seems almost natural, a reflection of reality rather than a construction of it. But while the distinction does grasp important aspects of modern history and contemporary politics, it does so in a specific way, shaping evaluations and perceptions, reinforcing some political projects, and prejudicing thinkers against others.”³

Moreover, the theoretical distinctions are actually quite blurred. There are civic elements in ethnic-leaning nations, just as there is “kinship imagery” in civic frameworks of nationhood. As Aviel Roshwald has noted, “It is difficult to imagine how a purely civic nation-state could retain its social and political cohesion in practice, particularly if its political culture was informed exclusively by principles of liberal individualism. . . . For any democratic polity to function . . . its members must have some sense that they are bound together as a community of fate, not just a club of like minded individuals.” People have died for God and country, but it was hardly likely they would hurl themselves into a hail of bullets “on behalf of the American Dental Association.” The citi-

zens of a polity “based on the popular sovereignty principle must feel that the state is the public expression of who they are.” And in satisfying that sense of communal identity the polity “ceases to be a purely civic nation-state.” Or alternatively, an avowedly ethnic nation-state that was aware of the potential alienation of minority groups and was therefore willing to find various ways of accommodating or compensating them, while simultaneously upholding civil rights of all individual citizens regardless of ethnicity, would actually be preferable to a state that actively suppressed minorities in the name of a supra-ethnic ideal. France, for example, a civic-leaning nation state *par excellence*, applies pressure on cultural minorities to assimilate “into a supposedly universalistic French civilization” at a time when these government-defined norms “cannot be viewed as neutrally universalistic, for they are themselves the outgrowths of a specifically European and French cultural heritage.”⁴

Even in the United States, the most civic-leaning and inclusive of nations, where ethnic heritage is preserved and even favored over complete assimilation, there are certain limitations on the state’s tolerance of diversity. A certain degree of “*pro forma* doctrinal and symbolic conformity with perceived national norms is seen as a precondition for reaping the full political benefits of American ethno-racial tolerance.” Ethnic lobbies therefore feel obliged to trumpet their unswerving loyalty to America and their belief in what are regarded as American social and political values.⁵

Another version of the one-state concept, aside from the unitary civic or ethno-national model, is the binational state. Binationalism, as the term itself suggests, is not based on the concept of either the civic nation-state or the ethnic nation-state. Rather it is founded on the mutual and symmetric recognition of the national rights of the ethno-cultural peoples that combine to make up the society of a heterogeneous state, which may or may not have a dominant majority group or may even have no majority group at all. Such a state is made up of groups who have agreed on a power-sharing formula for their divided society, famously defined by Arend Lijphart as consociationalism. The system is characterized by four main principles: the formation of a grand coalition government representing all major linguistic, ethnic or religious groups; a measure of cultural autonomy for each of the component groups; proportionality in political representation and civil service appointments; and minority veto power over vital minority rights and autonomy.⁶

This form of power-sharing is “a set of principles that, when carried out through practices and institutions, provide every significant identity group or

segment in a society represent a nation and decision-making abilities on common issues and a degree of autonomy over issues of importance to the group.” The overarching idea is that by sharing power, political, economic, territorial, and military, between the different segments of society, a system of accommodation is created to reduce insecurities and thus minimize the likelihood of conflict.⁷

Discussing the one-state idea, whether of the unitary or the binational models, naturally gives rise to the question of their applicability to the Israel-Palestine arena. To what extent do the Jewish Israelis and the Arab Palestinians possess a mutually accepted historical narrative, ideological affinity, common loyalty, and shared values that would allow them to participate in the construction of a shared polity of any type, unitary (civic or ethno-national) or consociational? Do these two peoples constitute a community of fate, that is, do they possess a sense of shared interest and destiny? Do they share a will to accommodate to an extent that would override their ethnic separateness, their history of hostility and mistrust, and their religious, linguistic, and cultural differentiation? Or, alternatively, could these differences be mitigated within a consociational model of binationalism?

Stating the Case

The areas of today’s Middle East that form Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza, and Israel have been tied together by geography, demography, history, and politics since time immemorial. The political destinies of Jordan, Israel, and Palestine as modern political entities have been inextricably linked since the very day of their creation, and in constantly alternating ways they remain so until the present.

Various ideas on the future relationship between Israel, Jordan, and Palestine have evolved over the years. In 1947 the United Nations proposed the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. After the 1948 War, Israel acquiesced in Jordan’s incorporation of the major remnant of Arab Palestine, the West Bank, into the Hashemite Kingdom. Jordan’s control of the West Bank ended in 1967, and in recent years the dominant paradigm for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement has been based on the partition of British Mandatory Palestine into two independent states.

Proposals envisaging a federation or confederation between Jordan and Palestine or between Israel, Jordan, and Palestine have also been raised at different

times since 1967. Others have, on occasion, gone so far as to propose arrangements predicated on the removal, destruction, or disappearance of the polity of one or two of the other of these three parties concerned. Presently the international consensus, as it was in the 1940s, is still for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement based on partition and the establishment of two independent states, Israel and Palestine. This is also the formula consistently supported by most Israelis and, in most polls, by a majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

The central thesis of this study is that during various phases of the twentieth century, Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians have developed cohesive collective identities, which have all too frequently violently collided with each other. The situations of conflict have only tended to further entrench these three particular identities, each defined against their respective competitive "Others."

Each one of these three peoples aspires to self-determination in an independent state of its own, aspirations that remain to a large degree contradictory and are, more often than not, at the expense of one another. Their mutual acceptance is grudging at best, and achieving stable agreement between them has proved to be a very tall order.

However, the notion that these peoples, since agreement between them is so hard to obtain, should somehow be thrust together and/or assimilated in one shared political entity, whereby any one of these distinct collective identities might stand to lose or would even be expected to relinquish its inherent right to self-determination and collective self-expression, is not likely to provide a stable solution. On the contrary one binational or unitary state for Israelis and Palestinians, or a Jordanian state that should be made to give way to Palestine, would most probably set the stage for interminable intercommunal conflict and bloodshed.

The Historical Setting

Jordan and Israel have been intimately tied together through the Palestinian problem for decades. It is virtually impossible to discuss Jordanian-Israeli relations in isolation from the Palestinian context, one cannot fully comprehend the Israeli-Palestinian interaction if one ignores the Jordanian component, and likewise Jordanian-Palestinian relations are inexplicable if detached from the Israeli input. Both recent and more distant history and present-day demo-

graphic realities link these three protagonists together, perhaps considerably more than they would really want to be. Jordan is home to a Palestinian population that quite possibly constitutes more than half of the kingdom's total of some six million and probably outnumbers the Palestinians in the West Bank and Arab Jerusalem combined. Moreover, the special ties linking the Arab populations on both banks of the Jordan River are anything but new, nor are they solely a consequence of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem.

The lay of the land has contributed to the merger of the peoples on both banks of the river since the earliest of times. Three rivers flow from east to west on the East Bank of the Jordan into the Jordan Valley, carving the East Bank into three distinct geographical segments: the Yarmuk in the north, on what today forms the border between the states of Syria and Jordan; the Zarqa in the center, flowing from its source near Amman into the Jordan Valley; and the Mujib in the south, which flows into the Dead Sea. In their flow westward, these rivers cut through the hilly terrain of the East Bank creating deep ravines and gorges, more difficult to cross than the Jordan River itself, which is easily traversed during most times of the year. Historically it was far less challenging for people and goods to travel along the east-west axis across the Jordan rather than along the more daunting routes on the north-south axis.

It followed naturally that political, administrative, economic, social, and family ties developed more intensively between the East and West Banks of the Jordan than between the northern and southern parts of the East Bank. Towns like Salt and Karak on the East Bank, which are part of the present-day Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, were more intimately connected through a web of historical, family, and commercial ties with their sister towns on the Palestinian West Bank, Nablus and Hebron respectively, than they were to each other. In the administrative divisions of both banks of the Jordan River in biblical times, then again in the Roman era, at the time of the Arab conquest, thereafter under the Ottomans, and finally with the initial formation of the British Mandate for Palestine, large areas on both banks of the river were united in the same provinces. Over extended periods of time, from antiquity to the modern era, the Jordan River was not the administrative boundary between them.

Eugene Rogan quotes a Damascene visitor to the East Bank town of Salt who had written in 1906 that economic migrants from Nablus had flocked to the town in such great numbers, for trade, construction, and government employment, that "it could almost be called 'Nablus the Second.'" ⁸ Some Salti

families were originally from other parts of Palestine, like Nazareth for example. Karak and Hebron had similarly close ties. The Majalis, one of the most powerful tribes in Jordan and time-honored stalwarts of the Hashemite monarchy, hail from the southern town of Karak. But the origins of the family are actually from the environs of the Palestinian West Bank town of Hebron, from whence they immigrated to Karak, as merchants, in the mid-seventeenth century. With the passage of time “a succession of brilliant political leaders [was] able to raise the tribe from a virtually powerless position to that of the leading power of the region and a mover in the whole of Transjordan.” Karak traded much with Hebron and Jerusalem, and it was also a tradition in Karak to reserve a seat for a Hebronite on the municipal council.⁹ Other Transjordanian towns had Palestinian connections of their own. The northern town of Irbid, usually noted for its links to Damascus, also had its share of families whose origins were in northern Palestinian towns, such as Safed.¹⁰

Upon their occupation of Palestine at the end of the First World War, it was hardly surprising for the British to observe that “Palestine is politically and economically closely interested in all that passes beyond the Jordan.” The two areas were “economically interdependent” and “Palestine has ever looked to Transjordan for surplus supplies of cereals and cattle.” The development of the two areas, therefore, ought to be “considered as a single problem.”¹¹ With all the above in mind, it made perfect sense for the British to include both banks of the Jordan within the boundaries of their mandate for Palestine.

Borders and States in British Mandatory Palestine

In 1921 the British decided that the territory of the East Bank of the Jordan River, though part of the Palestine Mandate, would become the Emirate of Transjordan and would develop into an independent Arab state. The Zionist project would, therefore, be restricted solely to Palestine west of the river. Thus carved out of the Mandate for Palestine, Transjordan was to be intimately associated with the Palestinian question from its very inception, and it remained part of the Palestine Mandate until granted independence in 1946. The emirate was placed by the British in the hands of the Hashemite prince, or emir, Abdallah. He was the son of the illustrious Husayn ibn Ali, the sharif of Mecca, who had launched the Arab Revolt, in cooperation with the British, against the Turks during the First World War.

At the end of the war, the Hashemites, led by Abdallah's younger brother

Faysal, were ensconced in Damascus, from where they ruled over the short-lived Arab Kingdom of Syria, which lasted until July 1920. Faysal was then unceremoniously ejected by the French, who had come to claim their zones of influence, as agreed with their British counterparts in the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916. After Faysal's ouster, the French took Syria, but Transjordan, which was part of the British zone of influence, was no longer governed as a province of Faysal's kingdom, as it had been hitherto, and the British were in a quandary about its dispensation. When Abdallah came up north from the Hijaz to Transjordan in late 1920, ostensibly on his way to Damascus to coerce the French to reinstate the Hashemites, a solution to the British uncertainty about Transjordan had just presented itself.

After talks in Jerusalem between Abdallah and the British colonial secretary, Winston Churchill, Abdallah agreed in early April 1921 to remain in Amman as the prospective ruler of Transjordan and abstain from pursuing his initial objective of confronting the French in Syria. But during the talks with Churchill, even before the boundaries of Transjordan had finally been drawn, Abdallah repeatedly requested of Churchill to have Palestine included in his realm. Churchill turned him down,¹² but Abdallah never gave up.

It was agreed that Abdallah would take control of Transjordan for an initial trial period of six months. He undertook to prevent both anti-French and anti-Zionist agitation to the best of his ability, and he was promised a British stipend in return.¹³ Abdallah could hardly remain on his seat of power in Amman without British support. It goes without saying, therefore, that he also accepted the British Mandate for Palestine, of which his emirate was a part.

Acceptance of the British Mandate was not to be taken lightly. It also meant acquiescing in the Zionist enterprise, which the British were committed to foster in terms of the mandate they had obtained for Palestine from the League of Nations. The Arabs of Palestine never accepted the mandate precisely because of its Zionist agenda. Thus, from the outset, the emir of Transjordan was at loggerheads with the embryonic Arab nationalist movement in Palestine and its first leader, the mufti of Jerusalem and chairman of Palestine's Supreme Muslim Council, Hajj Amin al-Husayni. Concurrently, potential common cause between the emir, the British, and the Zionists was already in the making. This was not a question of ideology, just plain and simple pragmatism.

Abdallah was not enamored with his swath of desert in Transjordan. Likened to a canary in a cage, for Abdallah Transjordan was but a stepping-stone to greater prizes in Syria, Iraq, or Palestine.¹⁴ He envied his younger brother

Faysal, who received the throne of Iraq, seated in Baghdad, a glorious city of antiquity and capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, in the land of the great rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Abdallah, on the other hand, was quartered in Amman, the dusty and almost desolate remains of Roman Philadelphia, at the time a nondescript Circassian village of some two thousand souls, not even quite reaching the banks of the Zarqa, a stream of which hardly anyone had ever heard. The country was sparsely populated. It had a literacy rate of about one percent, and “high civilization” needless to say “was undeveloped.”¹⁵ Just a few months after his arrival, Abdallah declared in the summer of 1921, in his obviously frustrated anguish, that he had “had enough of this wilderness of Trans-Jordania. . . .”¹⁶ Abdallah sought expansion, and Palestine was definitely an option.

Zionists, Hashemites, and the Arabs of Palestine

The Arab Rebellion that erupted in Palestine in April 1936 was to become a critical turning point in the history of the triangular relationship between the Hashemites, the Zionists, and the Arabs of Palestine. Clashes between Arabs and Jews spread rapidly throughout the country in the hitherto most-sustained Arab opposition to the British Mandate and the Zionist enterprise. Palestinian educator and diarist Khalil al-Sakakini called it a “life-and-death struggle” of the Arabs of Palestine for their country David Ben-Gurion, the chairman of the Jewish Agency and independent Israel’s first prime minister, observed that the Arabs of Palestine were fighting a war against dispossession that could not be ignored.¹⁷

Indeed it was not ignored. The Jews of Palestine now realized more fully than ever before that if it was a Jewish state in Palestine that they really desired, they would have no choice but to fight a strident Arab nationalist movement to obtain it. The British appointed a royal commission to ascertain the causes of the rebellion and to make recommendations for a way out of the Palestinian conundrum. The commission, headed by Lord William Robert Peel, former secretary of state for India, arrived in Palestine in November 1936. After some seven months of deliberation and enquiry the commission produced its report in July 1937.¹⁸ To this day, seventy years hence, the Peel Commission’s report remains one of the most thorough and brilliantly insightful documents ever written on the Palestine problem.

The report noted that “an irrepressible conflict has arisen between two na-

tional communities [emphasis added] within the narrow bounds of one small country.” The British had come a long way from the formulations of the Balfour Declaration. The Balfour Declaration had recognized only the Jews as a people with national rights, regarding the Arab population as no more than the “existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine,” who had civil and religious, but not national, rights.¹⁹ It was the Arab Rebellion that had imposed new modes of thinking about Palestine, coercing both the British and the Zionists to recognize the Arabs in Palestine as a national entity.

It was now more readily apparent that there were two national communities in Palestine, one Arab and one Jewish, and both equally deserved to exercise their right to self-determination. But, the report observed, the lesson of the rebellion was “plain, and nobody . . . will now venture to assert that the existing system offers any real prospect of reconciliation between the Arabs and the Jews.” The obligations that Britain undertook toward the Arabs and the Jews had proved to be irreconcilable. “To put it one sentence,” the Peel Commission concluded, “we cannot — in Palestine as it now is — both concede the Arab claim to self-government and secure the establishment of the Jewish National Home.”²⁰ The commission, therefore, recommended that the country be partitioned into two states, with the Arab part adjoined to the Hashemite Emirate on the East Bank.

Syria was Abdallah’s obsession until his dying day. But it was a political mirage, “a sad catalogue of wishful thinking” never to materialize. Despite all of his intrigue in Syria, and his pleading and maneuvering with the British, they never had the slightest intention of installing Abdallah in Damascus. At best, they treated him with patronizing disinterest. At times they were irritated or embarrassed by his machinations, which only complicated their relations with some of their other Arab allies.²¹

Palestine, on the other hand, was no obsession. It was primarily about realpolitik and rational state interest. Considering the historical ties between both banks of the Jordan River, whatever occurred west of the river had immediate ramifications for the East Bank. He who ruled Transjordan could only ignore events in Palestine at his peril. Transjordan’s links to Palestine were, therefore, naturally strong. Many of Abdallah’s cabinet ministers and civil servants hailed from Palestine. More significantly, the three most prominent prime ministers of his entire reign were of Palestinian origin: Ibrahim Hashim from Nablus, Tawfiq Abu al-Huda from Acre, and Samir al-Rifa’i from Safed.²²

Abdallah always meddled in Palestinian politics, constantly courting the

enemies of Hajj Amin al-Husayni. Palestinian Arab society was deeply divided between two rival camps: Hajj Amin and his allies, the Husaynis, and their opponents, the Nashashibis, otherwise known as the “opposition” (*al-mu‘arada*). Abdallah and the Husaynis were to become mortal enemies. This was not a personal feud nor a tribal vendetta. These were conflicting political interests at play, and they carried over to future generations. Abdallah’s grandson, King Husayn, would thus be similarly entrapped in conflict in later years with the founder of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Ahmad al-Shuqayri, and with his successor at the helm of the Palestinian movement, Yasir Arafat.

As Hajj Amin was the *bête noire* of both the Hashemites and the Zionists, it made sense for Abdallah to forge close ties with the Jews. Abdallah’s links to the Jewish Agency were both political and financial. Though the emir accepted money from the Zionists, it would be wrong to infer that his relative moderation was simply bought. The Zionists and Abdallah had many genuine common interests. Moreover, Jewish financial assistance granted Abdallah a much-needed measure of leeway in his overly dependent relationship with his British patrons and with some extra means to manipulate East Bank local politics too. Thus in 1936, during the Arab Rebellion in Palestine, money was liberally disbursed to tribal leaders in Transjordan and also spent on relief work, as a way of keeping people in distressed areas quiet. It was not unknown that “some of Abdallah’s largesse came from the Jewish Agency.”²³

The emir Abdallah, just as he had accepted the British Mandate, supported partition too. It would seem to have been the eminently sensible thing for him to do. Considering his most impressive territorial gain, coupled with the political exclusion of his nemesis, Amin al-Husayni, who had fallen out of British favor with the outbreak of the rebellion, the annexation of Arab Palestine to his realm was hardly an offer he could refuse. But in so doing he was not only accepting Arab Palestine as part of Transjordan, he was also acquiescing to Jewish statehood in the other parts of the country. That was an unforgivable concession, completely at variance with the Arab consensus, and, in the eyes of other Arabs, a betrayal of their cause in Palestine. Abdallah was vilified by all and sundry. The partition proposal was soon dropped by the British, because of the unrelenting Arab opposition. But the initial foundations had been laid for eventual partition, for Jordanian preeminence in Arab Palestine, and for the postponement of Palestinian independence that would last for decades.

1 BETWEEN BINATIONALISM AND PARTITION

The debate on partition and, in its present reincarnation, the discourse on the pros and cons of the one-state or two-state solution go back to the earliest days of the conflict in British Mandatory Palestine. Some of the original assumptions of the Zionist founding fathers were flawed. The first was that with the issue of the Balfour Declaration by Great Britain in support of a Jewish national home in Palestine, in November 1917, and the conquest of Ottoman Palestine by the British in the closing phases of the First World War, the Jews of Eastern Europe would choose in great numbers to immigrate to Palestine. On the eve of the Paris Peace Conference at the end of the war, Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann envisaged a land that would be made available for the settlement of “four or five million Jews.” In their “immediate post-1918 euphoria” Zionist leaders anticipated “70,000 to 80,000 immigrants annually.”¹

Such a pace of immigration would have made the Jews the majority within a decade in the sparsely populated land of Palestine, whose indigenous Arab population at the time hardly reached seven hundred thousand. The territorial desiderata that the Zionists initially put forward to the British were determined far more by geography, resources, and perceived natural boundaries than by demography, which they apparently assumed was not going to pose a real problem.

Not only did they demand all of what became Palestine of the British Mandate, but they also set their sights on southern Lebanon up to the Litani River, and eastward across the Jordan up to the line of the Hijaz Railway, and even beyond. Indeed, in the early years of the Zionist enterprise after the First World War, the Zionists claimed both banks of the river for themselves. Even after the creation of the Emirate of Transjordan on the East Bank, the Zionist right continued to demand the creation of a Jewish state with a Jewish majority on both banks of the Jordan River,² a demand that they only “quietly buried” in the mid-1960s.³

However, the Zionists were soon to find out to their profound dismay that

the great majority of Jews leaving Eastern Europe preferred immigration to the affluent, liberal democratic West, in Europe and especially in North America. This was far more attractive than the trials and tribulations of settling in the rugged terrain of the uncertain and potentially dangerous frontier of Palestine.

Another flawed assumption was that the Arabs of Palestine would eventually acquiesce to the Zionist project. After all, so the Zionists really believed, it would bring the Arabs the material benefit of Western-style modernity and the capital and progressive enterprising spirit of the Zionists, which would raise the standard of living of the indigenous Arab population. Ben-Gurion was stunned when, in his first meeting with the Palestinian leader Musa al-Alami, in March 1934, Alami gave short shrift to Ben-Gurion's exposé on the benefits of Zionism to the Arabs. Alami retorted to the effect that he would rather have the country remain poor and desolate for another hundred years, until such time as the Arabs would be capable of cultivating and developing it themselves, than to have the Zionists take it over.⁴

The First Binationalists

The failure to rapidly establish a Jewish majority and the force of Arab opposition drove some on the Zionist left (Brit Shalom and subsequently the Ihud and Hashomer Hatzair movements) to support a binationalist solution, that is, a state that would be equally Jewish and Arab. First voiced in the mid-1920s, the idea, though never supported by more than a small minority, remained a disproportionately influential part of the internal Zionist debate⁵ until the UN partition resolution of 1947. Palestine, the binationalists argued, was a country of two nations, and therefore, it should become "a bi-national state, in which the two peoples will enjoy totally equal rights as befits the two elements shaping the country's destiny, irrespective of which of the two is numerically superior at any given time." Majority status was not essential for Brit Shalom. On the contrary, they argued, striving for a Jewish majority only instilled fear in the Arabs and exacerbated the conflict.⁶

In 1930 Brit Shalom published a memorandum calling for "the constitution of the Palestine state . . . composed of two peoples, each free in the administration of their respective domestic affairs, but united in their common political interests, on the basis of complete equality." Some in Brit Shalom even urged the Zionists to restrict Jewish immigration and assuage the Arabs by declaring their "desire to remain a minority."⁷

In the immediate aftermath of the 1929 disturbances, which culminated in the destruction of the Jewish community in Hebron, when the Jews of Palestine were still reeling from shock, even Ben-Gurion gave some consideration to a version of the binational idea. These were most trying times for the Jews, when the entire future of the Zionist enterprise seemed to be hanging by a thread. In the face of mounting Arab opposition, Britain was on the verge of adopting a far more hostile and restrictive policy toward the Jewish national home. To preempt the imposition of an undesirable British plan, Ben-Gurion proposed that in the longer run a federal state should be established in Palestine, based on a formula of parity in government, national cantons, and the end of the British Mandate. His ideas were unpopular even in his own party, Mapai, and they were rejected. Even so, general ideas on eventual parity in government with the Arabs still remained in the party's platform until 1937.⁸

The fortunes of the Zionist enterprise improved dramatically with the large-scale immigration from Europe in the 1930s. The resultant regeneration of the power and self-confidence of the Jewish community washed away any remnants of binationalist thinking among mainstream Zionists. Mainstream thinking was by then predominantly in favor of independent statehood and partition.

By the mid-1930s Brit Shalom had essentially ceased to exist, but a few years later, in 1942, the Ihud Association was founded as its ideological successor.⁹ Like Brit Shalom, Ihud was willing to accept perpetual minority status with special constitutional protection for the Jews of Palestine. The catastrophic predicament of the Jews in Europe forced the binationalists onto the defensive in the face of mounting criticism by mainstream Zionists, who condemned their conciliatory position on immigration. In response, the binationalists adapted their program to correspond with both the Jewish tragedy in Europe and newly prevalent ideas in Britain and the Arab world on Arab unity. They proposed a binational state in Palestine as part of a regional federation that would enjoy the protection of the Western powers. The binational state would be based on demographic equality at first. It could eventually become a Jewish majority state, with the agreement of the Arabs of Palestine. The Palestinian Arabs, the binationalists believed, would be less concerned about being engulfed by the Jews if and when they were part of a greater Arab federation. Binationalism, they argued, was preferable to partition. A small Jewish state established in part of Palestine against the wishes of the Arabs "would be forced to live by the sword," and its long-term survival would always be in doubt.¹⁰

The problem with binationalism was obviously not its well-intentioned drive for fairness and peace, but its feasibility. There was something fundamentally naïve about the idea. It did not enjoy much support among either the Jews or the Arabs. “This was an instance of the idealist’s hope for the abstract . . . without much regard for the concrete tendencies.”¹¹ As Jewish immigration increased and tension and violence mounted in the 1930s, it became abundantly clear that the Jews and Arabs of Palestine simply did not have the elementary common political interests to make binationalism a reality. As Alexander Cadogan, a British Foreign Office official concluded at the time, the dream of binationalism was “pure eyewash.”¹² Those who were willing to commit to a permanent Jewish minority were unable to find a mechanism that would ensure the security and well-being of the Jewish community in the Arab-majority state. Nor did they know how to finesse the problem of Arab-Jewish power sharing as equals, when the Jews were only a minority.

Some suggested that the mandatory power serve as an indefinite protectorate to ensure that the majority would not subjugate the minority. Thus in the name of protecting the rights of both Jews and Arabs, they produced the unintended consequence of denying national independence to both peoples.¹³ Others believed in the gradual creation of a Jewish majority but could not find Arab partners who would agree to any Jewish immigration at all. With the passage of time, matters only got worse as immigration continued and Arab political consciousness developed and deepened and with it emerged an ever more determined and well-articulated rejection of the Zionist enterprise.

Even so, the Marxist Hashomer Hatzair movement did not lose faith in their version of binationalism, seeking throughout the 1930s and 1940s to establish a “bi-national socialist society in Palestine.” But they believed simultaneously in the unhindered advancement of the Zionist enterprise, the eventual achievement of a Jewish majority, and governmental parity irrespective of the numerical ratio between the two peoples. Indeed, for Hashomer Hatzair, a Jewish majority was a precondition for the creation of the binational socialist society that they envisaged. In due course, they believed, the class solidarity of the workers would overcome the national alienation between Jews and Arabs.¹⁴ These ideas, needless to say, had virtually no Arab takers either. Two Arabs, Fawzi Darwish al-Husayni and Sami Taha, neither of whom had any substantial political or intellectual standing, were assassinated (Husayni in November 1946 and Taha in September 1947) for apparently exhibiting a readiness to cooperate with Jewish binationalists.¹⁵

After all, from the Arab point of view why should they share a land they believed was entirely theirs as equals with a minority of foreigners, particularly if these new immigrants strove to become the majority under the protection of the binational idea? After the Second World War, Hashomer Hatzair accepted the inevitability of partition, and though they never formally relinquished binationalism as an ideal, in practice they joined the Zionist consensus on Jewish statehood.¹⁶

A variation of the binationalist theme was cantonization. According to this idea, the country would be divided into autonomous Arab and Jewish cantons united in one federal state under the British Mandate. Cantonization was thoroughly discussed by the Peel Commission, which rejected the idea as impractical, as it went nowhere to satisfy the intense desire of both Jews and Arabs for national self-government. Moreover, the commission noted, the old uncertainty as to the future destiny of Palestine would remain to intensify the antagonism between the parties. The commission concluded that cantonization presented most, if not all, of the difficulties presented by partition, “without Partition’s one supreme advantage—the possibility it offers of eventual peace,” based on two states.¹⁷

After Britain’s decision in early 1947 to hand the Palestine question over to the UN, the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) set out to study the problem and to recommend a solution. The binationalists presented a written statement to UNSCOP calling for a UN trusteeship for an agreed transitional period, under which an undivided binational Palestine would be established. During the period of trusteeship, Jewish immigration would continue until numerical parity was reached with the Arabs. Thereafter immigration would be agreed upon by Arabs and Jews, in terms of their binational constitution.¹⁸ The only thing that united the Zionist mainstream and the Arabs on these ideas was their total and unremitting rejection of the binationalist proposals.

UNSCOP also considered this and other varieties of the binational solution (including cantonization, federation, or confederation) and rejected them all as unfeasible. The Zionist position presented to UNSCOP dismissed the alternatives to partition, arguing that none of them had the advantages of partition, “which is final, clear-cut, and well-formed.”¹⁹ Essentially this was the view adopted by the UNSCOP majority. The new reality that emerged in the wake of the 1947 UN partition resolution and the establishment of Israel in May 1948 brought an end to the discussion of binationalism, which had been trumped by the two-state solution, at least for the meantime.

The Triumph of Partition

For the mainstream Zionists, the quintessential issue was not binationalism but to create a majority community in all, or at least part, of Palestine. It made no sense for the Zionists to have a so-called “national home” in a territory where they would be just another Jewish minority the likes of which already existed all over the diaspora. After all, from the Herzlian political Zionist point of view, the solution to the Jewish problem could only come about if the Jews would finally escape their deplorable minority predicament through Jewish sovereignty in a state they could call their own. But the Arabs had no intention of passively agreeing to become a minority in a country where they had been the majority for centuries. They did not feel any compulsion to have that change because Jews were being oppressed in Europe. As they made clear very early on, they would resist the Zionist enterprise to the bitter end. The Arabs were prepared only to grant the Jews minority rights, but no more. As Arthur Ruppin, one of the Zionist enterprise’s key figures, explained, what the Jews really needed from the Arabs, they could not get, and for what they could get, they had no use. “For minority rights the Jewish people would not invest its blood and capital in the building of Palestine.”²⁰

Unable to muster a majority in all of Palestine, faced with relentless Arab resistance, and opposed to binationalism as both undesirable and unrealistic, the Zionists were forced to finally acquiesce in the partition of the country into two separate political entities. In fact, even before the country was partitioned territorially, it was governed by the British on the basis of a de facto ethnic partition due to the incapacity and unwillingness of the Arabs and the Jews to cooperate. From the outset, disagreement between Jews and Arabs prevented the British from creating a unified political community in Palestine embracing both peoples.

The administration of Palestine foreshadowed ethnic partition. Each community had its own governing institutions as the communities also developed their own separate economies and political, cultural, and social institutions. From quite early on in the mandate, the British were inclined to assign Jewish and Arab officials to posts where they would be required to deal mainly with members of their own ethnic groups. There was also a tendency for the delineation of administrative districts to similarly reflect relative ethnic preponderance.²¹

The critical turning point toward territorial partition came in the 1930s. The

clouds of impending disaster about to befall the Jews of Europe began to accumulate in the early 1930s with the rise of the Nazis to power in Hitler's Germany and vicious anti-Semitism in Poland. Though nothing as horrific as the Holocaust could have been foreseen, Jews in ever-increasing numbers sought to escape from Europe. Accordingly, the number of immigrants to Palestine was suddenly and dramatically on the rise.²² The Arab population was genuinely disturbed by the possibility of being overwhelmed by a Jewish majority, and they rose in rebellion.

Even though the Peel Commission's partition plan offered the Jews less than 20 percent of Palestine, the majority opinion in the Zionist movement was to accept partition. Partition recognized the principle of Jewish statehood, and considering the extreme sense of urgency in respect to the plight of the Jews in Europe, any sovereign sanctuary was better than none. According to the partition plan, one area would become a new British Mandate for the Holy Places and would include an enclave of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, with a corridor to the sea via the towns of Lydda and Ramle and terminating at Jaffa. A second area, encompassing much of the Coastal Plain as far south as Majdal, the Valley of Jezreel, and the Galilee, would become an independent Jewish state. The rest of Palestine, the Negev, the West Bank and the Gaza area, and the southern Coastal Plain, would be united with Transjordan to form an independent Arab state under the Hashemite crown.²³

Though partition was accepted by the Zionists, the decision was finally made only after fractious internal debate. By the time of the Peel Commission, in early 1937, both Ben-Gurion and Weizmann were ardent supporters of partition, which for Ben-Gurion had become a "cornerstone for a new Zionist policy." However, even convincing his own party, Mapai, not to mention the Zionist movement as a whole, was no foregone conclusion. Initially all the Zionist parties in Palestine, including Mapai, rejected the Peel scheme.²⁴

At the Twentieth Zionist Congress held in Zurich in August 1937, Ben-Gurion convinced the majority by making the following main arguments: the principle of partition ought to be accepted; the Peel proposal need not be endorsed as it stood, but rather should serve as a basis for negotiation with the British to improve their plan; a small Jewish state was better than none and would provide an essential sanctuary for the Jews who were in awfully dire straits in Germany and Poland; and the small state could be the basis for expansion at some later stage.²⁵ The fact that the British proposal included an exchange of population, which meant transferring a significant part of the

Arab population out of the Galilee to the proposed Arab state (some voluntarily and others compulsorily), made the proposal more acceptable to many of the Zionist delegates. Eventually Ben-Gurion won the day at the Zionist Congress by the handsome margin of 299 to 160.²⁶

The Arabs of Palestine, however, adamantly rejected the idea of partition. In the late summer of 1937, the Arab Rebellion was renewed with a vengeance. On September 26, Lewis Andrews, the acting district commissioner of the Galilee, was killed by Arab assailants. The Palestinian leadership, the Arab Higher Committee (AHC), headed by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, was outlawed, and warrants were issued for the arrest of its members. Hajj Amin first went into hiding and subsequently, in mid-October, managed to slip out of the country by boat to Lebanon.

From then onward, the recognized Palestinian Arab leadership functioned in exile. The absence of their leadership, and its inherent illegitimacy in the eyes of the powers that be, would haunt the Palestinians for decades, giving their Zionist and Hashemite rivals a built-in advantage. This Palestinian handicap was only finally overcome with the signing of the Oslo Accords and the return of the Palestinian leadership to the homeland in the early summer of 1994, for the first time in nearly sixty years.

In the face of Arab rejection, at the end of 1938, after yet another commission of inquiry, the British retreated from the idea of partition, arguing that it was unworkable. They summoned a conference of Arab and Zionist representatives in London in February 1939, which ended, as expected, in failure. In "proximity talks" of an earlier era, in which Arabs and Jews talked not to each other but to the British alone, a few weeks of fruitless negotiations ensued. At the conclusion of this dialogue of the deaf, an exasperated British government issued a new White Paper in May 1939.

The rebellion had run out of steam by then, and as the clouds of war collected over Europe it made sense for the British to try and satisfy the Arabs, who were of immeasurably greater strategic and economic importance than the Jews of Palestine and their supporters in the diaspora. The White Paper severely limited Jewish immigration to Palestine, restricted land sales to Jews, and promised independence to Palestine within ten years. In such circumstances, independence could only have meant an independent Arab state, in which the Jews would have been relegated to the unenviable and untenable position of a permanent minority. Needless to say, had this White Paper ever been fully implemented, Jewish statehood would never have come to pass.

But the outbreak of war in Europe with its catastrophic consequences for European Jewry reconfigured the political context of the Palestine problem. Arab opposition and the other political realities in Palestine were obscured and forced into the background by the plight of the Jews in Europe, and the inner logic of partition resurfaced again. But Jewish and Arab positions remained irreconcilable. The Jewish Agency insisted on partition, while the Arabs would have nothing less than Arab majority rule and independence in all of Palestine.

By now British energy and interest for the intractable conflict in Palestine had been exhausted. Once Britain had decided to finally part with India, the jewel in the crown of the empire, the passage to India, of which Palestine was an essential link, had lost its inherent strategic value. In February 1947, unable to impose a solution of their own, His Majesty's government decided to hand the issue of Palestine over to the UN. The General Assembly established yet another committee to study the conundrum—UNSCOP.

In September, after having traveled to Palestine, the majority on the committee recommended partition. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181 endorsing the plan to partition Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab, with Jerusalem and Bethlehem and their holy places as an international enclave, to remain under UN supervision.

For the Jews, the UN resolution was a historic achievement. The international community had endorsed the principle of Jewish statehood and thus fulfilled the fundamental ambition of the Zionist enterprise. For the Arabs, however, partition was unacceptable. The Arabs in Palestine had boycotted UNSCOP, which they felt was biased in favor of the Zionists. Informally, however, various Arab spokesmen did put forward the Arab position rejecting partition and binationalism, calling for an independent unitary Arab state in all of Palestine. The Arab position had already been submitted in a detailed paper to the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry, which had preceded UNSCOP, in early 1946.²⁷

The paper, "The Arab Case for Palestine," one of the most comprehensive exposés of the Arab position, showed no concern for the recent suffering of the Jews of Europe and their urgent need for relief, nor did it concede that the Jews had any valid historical claim to, or association with, Palestine. The Arabs of Palestine argued in no uncertain terms that "the whole Arab people is unalterably opposed to the attempt to impose Jewish immigration and settlement upon it, and ultimately to establish a Jewish state in Palestine." They could not



Map 1. The UN partition of Palestine, 1947

acquiesce in the subjection of “an indigenous population against its will to alien immigrants, whose claim is based upon a historical connection which ceased effectively many centuries ago. Moreover they form the majority of the population; as such they cannot submit to a policy of immigration which if pursued for long will turn them from a majority into a minority in an alien state; and they claim the democratic right of a majority to make its own decisions in matters of urgent national concern.”²⁸

Furthermore, in the Arab view, the Arabs of Palestine, which was geographically “part of Syria,” belonged “to the Syrian branch of the Arab family of nations; all their culture and tradition link them to the other Arab peoples.” But the Zionist presence and ambitions had cut them off from the other Arab states, retarded their advance to independence, and prevented their full participation in the affairs of the Arab world to which they naturally belonged, thus undermining the “traditional Arab character” of Palestine. Any settlement to be attained in Palestine would have to “recognize the fact that by geography and history Palestine” was “an inseparable part of the Arab world.” Palestine should be a unitary Arab state, as the majority of its citizens were Arabs. Decisions on such matters as immigration and land sales should be taken democratically in accordance with the wishes of the majority.²⁹

As irrevocably opposed as the Arabs were to Zionism, they were “in no way hostile to the Jews as such.” The Jews in Arab Palestine would not suffer as the minority and would enjoy full civil and political rights in the country (a contention that Jews, needless to say, would find unconvincing after years of fierce conflict). They would be able to maintain their own cultural institutions and could also enjoy municipal autonomy in the districts “in which they are most closely settled.” However, the idea of partition was inadmissible for the same reasons of principle as the idea of establishing a Jewish state in the whole country. As unjust as it was, in their view, to impose a Jewish state on the whole country, it was equally unjust to impose it on any part of the country. A binational state based on parity was hardly any better and was rejected for “denying the majority its normal position and rights.” There were also “serious practical objections to the idea of a bi-national state, which cannot exist unless there is a strong sense of unity and common interest overriding the differences between the two parties.”³⁰ There was obviously no such common interest or sense of unity between Jews and Arabs in Palestine.

The Zionist enterprise, from the Arab point of view, was in total contradiction to the right of the Palestinian Arabs to self-determination and unfairly

denied them the capacity to exercise that right just like other Arab nations. The Zionist enterprise had been imposed on the Palestinian people against their will and as such was unquestionably illegitimate in the eyes of the Arabs. This position was to remain the backbone of the Palestinian case for decades to come.

After the publication of the UNSCOP recommendation, the Arab Higher Committee, the formal representative Palestinian Arab leadership, rejected the idea of partition, since a “consideration of fundamental importance to the Arab world was that of racial homogeneity It was illogical [to introduce] an alien body into the established homogeneity [of the Arab world], a course which could only produce new Balkans. . . . The Arabs . . . would lawfully defend with their life blood every inch of the soil of their beloved country.”³¹