

A New Approach for Zionists

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Changing Palestinian Minds

There are three ways of responding to conflict: conversation, negotiation, and force. Force tends, at the end of the day, to be the basis of war, while the other two – forms of dialogue – are constitutive of politics. But where the politics of negotiation strives to resolve conflict by making trade-offs and concessions, that of conversation aims instead for genuine understanding, for learning and progressively transforming the diverging positions so they can be, not accommodated, but truly reconciled.

Only when conversing, then, do we try to “convince” the other to change; when negotiating, by contrast, we put pressure on in order to “persuade” them instead. That’s why only conversation can be considered the basis of a politics concerned with the truth of the common good.

Given all this, we should recognize how, since the establishment of the modern state of Israel, Zionists in the country have either fought wars with their enemies, or attempted to negotiate with them, but they have never really tried to converse with them. That is, they have never really worked to convince them of Israel’s legitimacy. Such recognition requires conversation because, as both the Hebrew and Arabic words for it make clear, it’s a form of knowledge: the Hebrew *hakarah* is a synonym for “conscious of,” and the Arabic *i’тираф* has *ma’rifah* as its root, which means “(mystical) knowledge.” And we all know that knowledge is not something up for negotiation. One either knows the truth of something or one does not; it cannot be offered or taken away as part of some bargaining session.

Indeed, recognizing the legitimacy of the other is a *prerequisite* for negotiation, since people will only negotiate in good faith if they believe that their adversaries are legitimate. So, normally, conversation must come before negotiation, not least in the case we’re discussing here, since many Palestinians are devout Muslims and so cannot allow themselves to compromise on what they believe to be the word of God.

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Zionists, then, whether in the Middle East or around the world, need to take on the task of *changing Palestinian minds*. We need to convince them that the Jewish state is not something that they must, however reluctantly, accept, but that it is actually a good thing. To be sure, this is no small challenge, and it is made all the more difficult by the fact that conversation is an inherently fragile form of dialogue. Still, if we're willing to try, then we need to be clear about what, exactly, the Palestinians need to be convinced of. I would emphasize two truths in particular. The first is that Jews constitute not only a religion but also a national community. This means that, as with all nations, we feel a special attachment to a particular piece of territory (even if that territory happens to conflict with an equally valid attachment felt by another nation). And the second is that for a nation to consider itself free it must have both a significant degree of self-determination and recognition from the state under whose sovereignty it lives. In the case of the Jewish nation, this means that it needs a Jewish state.

How to communicate these truths? Let me offer a couple suggestions.

1) "I must confess," wrote Martin Buber many years ago, "that I am horrified at how little we know the Arabs." This remains all too true today. Zionists need to develop an intimate knowledge of Arab and Muslim cultures, one that would help us in convincing them of our two truths. Few, for example, are familiar with the Qur'an, which is a pity since the book contains passages such as the following:

O people! We have formed you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another
(49:13).

And thereafter we said to the Children of Israel: "Dwell securely in the Promised Land"
(17:104).

Something must also be done about the fact that, for some time now, the second language taught in the Jewish public school system in Israel is not Arabic but English; indeed, Arabic joins French as an equally recommended option when one wishes to study a third language. This, in a country with a large Arab minority and which is surrounded by millions of Arabic speakers.

2) While Zionists often decry anti-Zionist antisemitism, we often fail to counter it effectively. Enough with the shock and indignation whenever Israel is criticized by invoking double standards! Isn't it obvious that these reactions only make it more enjoyable for the antisemite? What we should

be doing instead is refusing to take them seriously, whether by mocking them for their absurdities or simply by making it clear how *boring* we find them.

Changing Zionist Minds

Conversation is a two-way street. So what might we Zionists learn from conversing with our opponents? At the very least, we might reach deeper understandings of what *we* are saying to *them*, since this is something that often happens during genuine conversations. For example, we might appreciate how it is that our two truths call for a bi-national Israel. By this I mean not an Israeli state “of all its citizens,” one that recognizes only individuals and so is more accurately described as “post-national”; rather, I’m referring to the sociological reality that the country contains an Arab as well as a Jewish nation.

To see why, we need to be clear about the differences between three kinds of community: the civic, the ethnic, and the national. The former is the community of citizens and their representatives, and politics is its *raison d’être*. That’s why it is centred around the state, its laws and institutions. By contrast, ethnic communities uphold practices that are carried out within civil society and the home. This is true of national communities as well, of course, but they also have a political dimension given that, as already mentioned, they require self-determination as well as recognition from their state. So the United Kingdom, say, should be considered a single civic community that includes numerous ethnicities as well as four nations: the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish. Israel likewise is a civic community that contains ethnicities (the community formed by Russian immigrants, for example) as well as two nations: the majority Jewish and the minority Palestinian Arab. And while it goes without saying that the former can be considered fully free, this is not the case with the latter. True, Palestinians in Israel have an important degree of self-determination given that they elect representatives to the Knesset and their towns and cities are run by municipal governments with significant powers. When it comes to recognition, however, while Arabic is (more-or-less) one of the country’s official languages, just as official bilingualism never served sufficiently to recognize the Québécois nation within Canada, more needs to be done. Because it is only when Palestinian Arab citizens can feel fully reconciled to the state that they will develop a strong sense of Israeli patriotism (though if the polls are to be believed, this has already been growing). After all, the formal legal equality shared by all Israeli citizens has not prevented the state’s inferior treatment of the Palestinian Arabs among them in everything from education to building permits to garbage removal (though

these and other services have also improved significantly over the years). Given this, you might think that a symbolic issue such as national recognition is rather superficial. But I would argue that the formal legality hasn't been sufficiently translated into substantive practice *precisely because* of a deficiency at the level of national recognition.

What form might state recognition of the Palestinian Arab nation within Israel take? The first thing to do would be to scrap the "Jewish nation-state" law (2018), which takes the nation-state model of what a country is or should be for granted (that model has been unfit for purpose since it originated with the signing of the treaties of Westphalia in 1648). Next, Israel's Basic Laws should be amended to declare that the state is not only "Jewish and democratic" but also "Palestinian Arabic." Finally, I suggest that a symbol representing the latter nation (e.g. a crescent moon with a Solomon's Seal pentagram) be added to the Israeli flag alongside the Star of David.

I can already hear the cries of horror from my fellow Zionists at this idea. But recognizing the Palestinian Arab nation in this way detracts *not at all* from recognizing the Jewish Israeli nation; on the contrary, it is fully compatible with the idea that, with Israel, we Jews have a state of our own. The only qualification would be that it is not *exclusively* our own. The recognition of nations, in other words, does not have to be a zero-sum affair. On the contrary, it is much like what the Jewish Midrash says of a candle, which loses none of its brilliance in kindling another.

Zionists who reject this genuinely bi-national Israel tend to do so for two related reasons. Either they fail to see that it is not only compatible with but also contributes to a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians, or they fail to appreciate that it in no way jeopardizes the reality that Jews will continue to form the majority nation in the country. Perhaps this will change some day; perhaps, once Israel and a future Palestine have lived side-by-side in peace for many years, both countries might choose to hold referendums over the possibility of forming a confederation. But not before then.

Affirming Israel's bi-nationality is not only necessary for reasons of domestic justice, since it can also help communicate our two truths to Arabs and Muslims outside of the country. For example, flying an Israeli flag such as the one I've suggested above Jerusalem would (partly) respond to the calls of many Muslims to "liberate" the city and so make it that much easier for them to accept Israel. Moreover, by encouraging patriotism among the country's Palestinian Arab citizens it would make way for enlisting their help in reaching out to their brethren outside the country and thereby facilitate the two-state solution. Finally, a bi-national Israel would lend support to the idea that any Jewish

national minority present within a future Palestinian state itself deserves to be recognized by that state. For that, too, is what justice demands.

Conclusion

Particularly since the demise of the Oslo peace process, the complaint has often been voiced that Palestinian leaders never prepared their people for the concessions essential to peace. My question is different, however: What's the sense in waiting for them to do so? We Zionists must make a serious effort to convince the Palestinians of our legitimacy. We haven't done so because most of us have arrived at our positions prematurely: whether because those on the left believe that good-faith negotiations are already viable, or because those on the right assume that there's no possibility of ever making them so. What's required instead is conversation. Only by convincing rather than persuading can we get our opponents to accept a Jewish Israel; only by "speaking to the rock" rather than "striking it" (Num. 19:1–22; Exod. 17:5–6) will we ever see an Israel in peace.

Of course, there's no guarantee that this approach will succeed. Still, it has yet to be seriously tried. Even accepting this, many will object that it would take a very long time to carry off. To which I can only respond with another question: How long do you wish Israel to remain in the Middle East?