

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 is, ultimately, the basis of war, while the other two – forms of dialogue – constitute 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 diverging positions so they can be not merely accommodated, but truly reconciled.

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

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

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

Zionists, then, whether in the Middle East or around the world, have the task of *changing Palestinian minds*. We need to convince them that the Jewish state is not something that they must accept, however reluctantly, but that it is actually a good thing. This is no small challenge, obviously. 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, we’re trying to

convince the Palestinians of. I would emphasize two truths. First, 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 as that territory is the locus of an equally valid attachment felt by another nation). Second, that a nation will consider itself free only when it has a significant degree of self-determination and recognition from the state under whose sovereignty it lives. And in the case of the Jewish nation, this means a Jewish state.

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

1) “I must confess,” wrote Martin Buber many years ago, “that I am horrified at how little we know the Arabs.” This remains largely true today. Zionists need to develop an intimate knowledge of Arab and Muslim cultures, since this would surely help us convince them of our two truths. For example, few of us 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).

Along these lines, it’s more than a little detrimental to our cause 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 for those who wish to study a third language. In a country with a large Arab minority, surrounded by millions of Arabic speakers, this is simply absurd.

2) While Zionists often decry anti-Zionist antisemitism, too often we fail to counter it effectively. For it’s useless to express shock and indignation whenever Israel is criticized by invoking double standards. In fact, this type of reaction only makes it more enjoyable for the antisemite. Instead, we should be refusing to take them seriously, whether by mocking their ridiculousness, 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, as often happens in genuine conversation, we might reach a deeper

understanding of what *we* are saying to *them*. 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 understand the differences between three kinds of community: the civic, the ethnic, and the national. The civic is the community of citizens and their representatives, and politics is its *raison d’être*. That’s why it’s 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, but they also have a political dimension given that, as mentioned, they require self-determination as well as recognition from the state. So the United Kingdom, say, can 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 nations, albeit only two of them: the majority Jewish and the minority Palestinian Arab. But while the former can be considered fully free, this is not the case with the latter.

To be sure, Palestinians in Israel have a significant degree of self-determination, as they elect representatives to the Knesset and their towns and cities are run by municipal governments with real powers. Yet they lack recognition. One indication of this is that, despite the formal legal equality of all Israeli citizens, the state has only in the past few years begun seriously to address its inferior treatment of Palestinian Arabs in everything from education and building permits to garbage removal and policing. 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 practice *precisely because* of a deficiency at the level of national recognition. True, Arabic remains (more or less) one of the country’s official languages, but just as official bilingualism never served sufficiently to recognize the Québécois nation within Canada, this is not enough.

What form, then, might proper state recognition of the Palestinian Arab nation within Israel take? First, the “Jewish nation-state” law (2018) should be scrapped. This law takes the “nation-state” model of what a country is or should be for granted, even though the 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 Palestinian Arab nation (e.g. a crescent moon with a Solomon’s Seal pentagram) be added to the Israeli flag, alongside the Star of David.

Yes, I can 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’s like what the Jewish Midrash says, that a lit candle loses none of its brilliance in kindling another. And it is only when Palestinian Arab citizens 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 begun to grow).

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. 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 on the possibility of forming a confederation. But not before then.

Affirming Israel’s bi-nationality is not only necessary for reasons of domestic justice, it could also help communicate our two truths to Arabs and Muslims outside of the country. For example, flying a new Israeli flag that combines Jewish and Arabic iconography above Jerusalem would (partly) respond to the Muslim call to “liberate” the city and so make it that much easier for them to accept Israel. Moreover, encouraging patriotism among the country’s Palestinian Arab citizens would make way for enlisting their help in reaching out to their brethren outside the country, and that would 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 would itself deserve 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. Yet, I have a question: 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 truly begun to make that effort because most

of us have arrived at our positions prematurely: whether because, on the left, we believe that good-faith negotiations are already viable; or, on the right, because we assume that there's no possibility of ever making them so. But what's required instead is conversation. For 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 see an Israel in peace.

Of course, there's no guarantee that this approach will succeed. Yet it has not been seriously tried. And while many will object that it would take a very long time to achieve, to them I can only respond with another question: How long do you wish Israel to remain in the Middle East?