

Robert Lee

A Federation of Israel and Palestine?

Why, you may wonder, would I devote my “last lecture” to such a depressing topic as Israel and Palestine?

It is not the topic that drew me into the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It was the Algerian war for independence that first caught my attention. As an undergraduate at Carleton College I did a paper on Algeria in a history course taught by Richard Vann, and I became intrigued. A few years later I decided to my doctoral dissertation on the politics of colonial Algeria. I have always thought of the Maghreb as my academic focus. But conflict in the eastern Mediterranean grabbed my attention while I was still in graduate school.

In June, 1967, I was living at International House on Riverside Drive in New York City. I remember coming down to breakfast one morning and learning that Israel was in the process of crushing the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. I asked a Syrian student named Yasir how this could be happening. He said it was false news produced by the New York Times, a Jewish newspaper. (Now referred to by the White House as the “enemy of the people.” Yasir saw it as the enemy of the Arabs.) Israel celebrated, but the 1967 defeat was a bitter pill for all Arabs to swallow. A couple days later I learned that I would not go to Cairo to study Arabic that summer. Classmates and I went to Princeton, New Jersey, instead. Ever since I have blamed my struggles with the Arabic language on the Six-Day War and my failure to get to Cairo that summer! The Arab-Israeli conflict had grabbed my attention.

As I settled in to teach Middle East politics at Colorado College in the early 1970s, I could scarcely avoid dealing with the issue, which was already transformed by the war. After defeat in 1967, the Arab states no longer played much of a role. Palestinian guerrilla groups functioning under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization were becoming the Arab protagonists. The Arab-Israeli dispute was becoming the Israel-Palestine conflict.

My great aim in teaching about that conflict has been to expose students to the historical development of conflict from the emergence of Zionism to the present. I have tried to give careful attention to arguments advanced by all participants and analysts. My attitude has always been close to that espoused by the late Amos Oz, the Israeli novelist who taught for a year in our English Department. He once gave a lecture in Germany he called “Between Right and Right.”¹ This conflict is not a matter of good guys versus bad guys, he said, but rather a struggle between groups that both have legitimate claims. Neither side has a monopoly on virtue or a monopoly on vice, said Oz. By the way, I find his classic book, *In the Land of Israel*, one of the most compelling portraits of his country.² I commend it to you. His autobiography is fascinating, too.³

My intent in the classroom these last 47 years has been to let students reach their own conclusions by evaluating claims in the light of evidence. In my course on international politics of the area, I have always organized a simulation exercise involving teams of students playing diplomatic roles. In most years, the topic of that simulation has been the Israel-Palestine conflict. During the simulation, as in the classroom, students have almost invariably been able to discuss this sensitive issue without outbursts of hostility and emotion. I have always tried to get students with strong convictions on one side to join a delegation of the other side in the simulation. Once I violated my own rule and let an Israeli student be a part of the Israeli delegation in the simulation. That was not wise. When his fellow Israelis softened their position in a negotiation, he lost his cool. I have tried not to let that happen again.

Sometimes the simulated negotiations reached the very brink of a settlement; on other occasions we ended when further war seemed imminent, but never did we blow up the world. My only rule for the simulation was that there be no physical violence. Once there was a loud explosion on the second floor of the old Rastall. I was told

that Yasir Arafat had been assassinated with a cherry bomb in a closet. The reigning authorities in Rastall were not pleased, but there were no actual injuries.

In my teaching, I have not sought to advance one set of arguments over another, taking the position I have just identified with Amos Oz. The whole truth does not lie with one side or the other. And, when pressed by students, I have since the early 1970s explained my support of a two-state solution. That is, I have argued that Israel should liberate the territories it occupied in 1967 and permit the creation of a Palestinian state. In return, the Palestinians and the Arab states should recognize the state of Israel. Note that this possibility emerged from the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, which had been under Jordanian control, and the Gaza Strip, which had been Egyptian territory. Israel's war for independence in 1948-49, which the Palestinians refer to as the nakba, their great disaster, established the so-called Green Line as a border of the state. (Note that the Green Line is red on this map I have hung on the wall.)

I first encountered the two-state idea in a little book published by the Middle East Institute in 1970, a book entitled, "A Palestinian Entity."⁴ Amos Oz and most of the Israeli left came to embrace that position; the Rabin Government endorsed the idea in agreeing to the Oslo accords, and the United States government supported, at first tentatively then more explicitly, the two-state solution from the 1980s through the Obama administration.

But I have come to have doubts about that solution. One reason to be skeptical about the possibility of two states is the attitude of the current Israeli government. While the Prime Minister has not to my knowledge renounced his intent to negotiate a two-state solution, I see no evidence that he is moving in that direction. The wall is up, settlements continue to expand, check points dot the West Bank, and Gaza remains locked off from the world. I cannot believe the Israelis see this situation as sustainable, and clearly the Palestinians do not, but neither side seems interested in resolving it. The unsustainable is effectively sustained.

My reasons for coming to doubt the viability of a two-state solution run deeper. They lie in the effort to establish a culturally defined state in Israel. From the outset Israel has aspired to be a liberal, democratic state, and at the same time it seems ever more insistent on defining itself as a Jewish state. The Palestinians explicitly recognized the state of Israel years ago, when Yasir Arafat was still alive, but the Israelis now want recognition as a Jewish state. But the state of Israel is not and cannot be totally Jewish.

Zionism arose out of a European conception of the relationship between nation and state which is quite different from ours. In the creation of the United States, nothing separated the new nation from the mother country in terms of either language or religion. Benedict Anderson has labeled our pattern "creole nationalism."⁵ The people who revolted and established a state lived in a given territory quite separate from the mother country. That's what made them Americans. But in Europe there emerged another conception of the nation, one deeply influenced by German thought. German philosophers such as Herder rejected the claims of universalism represented by the French Revolution. They hypothesized the existence of an authentic German culture defined by language and culture. Culture defined a people, and people constituted a nation. In this conception, echoed later in Woodrow Wilson's argument about self-determination, the world is made up of a set of peoples naturally differentiated by their histories and cultures.

Many modern Europeans continue to think in this fashion, and it is a significant problem. That is, many Frenchmen and women think there is more to being French than having citizenship or even speaking the language. What does it mean to be "truly" French? Can one be a Muslim and a "true" German? Can one be a Dane and not eat pork? Every European country is struggling with this problem of reconciling its notion of identity with a reality that is more obvious than ever before: They are all multicultural states. Some, like the United Kingdom, have more willingly accepted that label while others continue to resist. The problem is not limited to Europe. I don't think there is a single state in the world that can legitimately claim to be homogeneous.

Israel is in that situation. It is a multicultural state and cannot, in any way I can imagine, escape that condition. The state currently includes about 6 million Jews and about 2 million non-Jews, most of whom are Arabs and most of them Muslims. There are also half a million immigrant workers of various non-Arab and non-Jewish

provenance. Even the creation of a Palestinian state would not render Israel homogenous. And that creates serious problems for liberal democracy in Israel.

The notion of a culturally homogenous nation-state never quite worked in Europe, certainly not in Eastern Europe, and the concept never had a chance in the Middle East, as the historian Elie Kedourie pointed out emphatically and repeatedly.⁶ Multiculturalism has something to do with the problems of creating stable nation-states in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, to name just a few other instances. The two states in the area that have been most insistent on cultural definitions of nationalism are Turkey and Israel.

Notice that one of the major obstacles to liberal democracy in Turkey is the failure to accommodate Kurds, who do not see themselves as Turks. As for Israel, Zionism promoted a single language and a single religious tradition but has become more diverse in every respect with the passage of time. It is neither monolingual nor monocultural. This is one reason why a two-state solution does not resolve a fundamental problem for the state, which is the status of non-Jews. But there are more reasons.

A two state solution does not make sense economically, environmentally, sociologically, or politically. Israel has a powerhouse of an economy that already dominates the West Bank and Gaza. Any chance for prosperity in an independent Palestine would depend upon close ties to Israel for industry and for jobs. Then there is Gaza. How would Gaza be linked to the West Bank? I have seen projections of a high-speed rail line that would knife through Israel with fences on both sides. Jerusalem is a key city for both Palestinians and Israelis. How is it to be governed? Any Palestinian state would have to be demilitarized to be acceptable to Israel, and that means that Israel would be the de facto guarantor of any Palestinian state, as it is now the guarantor of security in the West Bank and Gaza, even though the Palestinian Authority and Hamas play subordinate roles. A decade ago, Bernard Wasserstein's book *Israelis and Palestinians: Why do they fight?*⁷ laid out overwhelming reasons why Palestine needs to be united economically, environmentally, sociologically and politically. He then endorsed a two-states as the best available solution!

It seems to me that Wasserstein's book points in another direction. His arguments about the complications of separation have become more powerful as a result of the wall, settlements, roads and checkpoints that now mark the West Bank. And then there is Gaza. Ariel Sharon pulled Israel out of Gaza but the area is hamstrung, isolated, and frustrated. Israeli evacuation has solved nothing. Is this indicative of the problems a Palestinian state might encounter?

I want to be clear. I am not opposed to a two-state solution. If there were agreement on such a solution, I would cheer. But it would only work if there were close cooperation between the two states, a scheme for compensating refugees, an understanding about the status of settlers, a means of tying Gaza to the West Bank, and borders adjusted to include some settlements within Israel and adjusted to compensate Palestine in other ways. And Jerusalem? I have always said the solution is to proclaim God sovereign over Jerusalem. One would hope a two-state solution would be only a step to something better.

Much better would be a modern version of the binational state proposed and rejected in the 1940s. Martin Buber, a distinguished theologian, and J. L. Magnes, president of Hebrew University, advanced such an idea in these terms:

Dividing up the world into tiny nationalist sovereign units has not been the success the advocates of self-determination had hoped for at the end of the First World War. The peoples who have been placed by fate or by history in the same country have warred with one another for domination throughout the centuries. The majority have tried to make the State homogeneous through keeping down the minority nationalities. The federal multi-national State, based on the parity of the nationalities, is a most hopeful way of enabling them to retain their national identity, and yet of coalescing in a larger political framework. It results in separate nationalities yet a single citizenship. This is a noble goal to which the youth of multi-national countries can be taught to give their enthusiasm and energies. It is a modern challenge to the intelligence and the moral qualities of the peoples constituting multi-national lands.⁸

I think it is time to revisit binationalism. I would call for a federation of two states that we might call Israel and Palestine. Israel would continue to be a Jewish state, and Palestine could define itself as it wished, but the two states would share the same boundaries: the Jordan River to the Mediterranean, Lebanon in the north to Sinai in the South. Citizens could choose to identify with either of the two states, and all citizens of both states would elect a federal council to deal with issues such as defense and foreign affairs. Political wizards would need to develop a consociational system---consensual democracy--- whereby all legislation would require support in both communities. A simple majority would not be sufficient. The constitutional arrangements would have to be adequate to guarantee both states protections and rights.

The idea that a majority should carry the day is fundamental to democracy, but most political systems, including our own, demand more than a majority to act on many matters. Our current deadlock makes that clear. All federal systems have a consensual element; bicameral legislatures, presidential as opposed to parliamentary systems, independent judiciaries, proportional representation---all are characteristics that can make a system less majoritarian and more consensual. Belgium and Lebanon have often been placed in the consociational category, because they prevent any one linguistic or religious group from imposing its rule over others. Israel and Palestine would have to negotiate a fresh model.

A binational solution would be advantageous to both communities. Palestinians have long advocated a single state in which a majority would rule. Israelis have opposed that idea, because Jews might soon be outnumbered by Arabs and the Zionist objective of a Jewish state would disappear. But with this scheme the Jewish state could be preserved and reconciled with democracy. Arabs now living within the Green Line would presumably associate themselves with Palestine without moving from their homes.

Israel has been stunningly successful in the economic realm and in building an unrivaled military force in the region. It has not been successful in resolving the Palestinian problem or establishing normal relations with some of its neighbors. With this arrangement Israel would escape its pariah status in the United Nations and be able to regularize its relations with Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and probably Iran. Settlements in the midst of the West Bank might not be jeopardized. Refugees who wished to return and could find work and housing within the current Green Line might be accommodated without jeopardizing Jewish domination of the Israeli state.

I doubt that Palestinians would be entirely happy sharing borders with the enemy Israelis, but this idea holds many advantages for them. Access to the Israeli economy, protection from and of the Israeli military, and an equal say with the Israeli state in fashioning all the policies of the federation including matters of water and the environment. Currently they have only limited responsibility for urban areas in the West Bank and Gaza.

For Israel to accept such a solution would require some rethinking of Zionism but scarcely a rejection of it. Zionists have long differed with each other over fundamental issues. Revisionism opposed Labor Zionism; General Zionists wanted to move slowly, when David Ben Gurion seized control and moved faster. Secular Zionists pushed settlement before World War I and beyond but tend to oppose it now; religious Zionism discovered settlement after 1967. To accept this sort of proposal, Zionism would have to come to terms with a fact: that Israel is a multi-cultural state, whatever it may proclaim. Theodore Herzl envisioned a state as a safe-haven for Jews, a state like other states. Israel is such a state. And like other states it has become multicultural.

For Israel to move toward binationalism would require new and imaginative leadership. For Palestine to think in these terms would also require creative thinking and leadership capable of generating broad support. Both propositions may strain your credulity, as they do mine. But politics can and does produce surprises. So far, over the span of my career, there have been many surprises coming from this part of the world. I must admit that most of them have been unpleasant or even appalling.

Is this proposed federation of Israel and Palestine the sort of solution that Jared Kushner is trying to put together? I doubt it. And I rather doubt that the United States has much influence with either of the two parties right now, anyway. Our diplomacy has been pushing a two-state solution for more than thirty years without much success. Maybe it is time to advance an idea such as this and let it reverberate without bringing pressure to bear.

American pressure has sometimes been effective, as when Henry Kissinger twisted arms to get a peace deal between Israel and Egypt. But our leverage right now seems limited, to say the least.

To sum up, I think of the situation this way. The partition plan adopted by the United Nations in 1947 has not worked in resolving an important conflict that produces ongoing injustice and destabilizes a whole region. It is time to revive binationalism, albeit in a set of circumstances very different from those in which it was first proposed. The British ended their mandate in Palestine. Israel is independent. It is not going away. Multiple wars have been fought. The Arab states have opted out. Palestinian nationalism has matured. The conflict has become a clash of two nationalist movements claiming the same territory. I think it is time that these two nations combine to build a federation and welcome a multicultural reality.

How soon will there be resolution of this problem? Clearly not before I bow out as a regular faculty member at Colorado College. Amos Oz said in that same speech I referred to at the outset: “I can stick my neck out and predict that we are not going to spend hundreds of years butchering one another in the time-honored European tradition. We will be quicker than that. How much quicker? I wish I could answer you. I never underestimate the shortsightedness and stupidity of political leadership on both sides. But it will happen.” It didn’t happen in his lifetime. He died in December. And the conflict has already reached the 100-year mark!

I hope someone in this room lives to see this problem resolved. When agreement is finally reached, implementation will surely be costly and difficult for both sides. But the current conflict has already cost far too many lives, too much treasure, too much grief and despair. It is time to move in a new direction.

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¹ Amos Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

² Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel*, translated by Maurie Goldberg-Bartura, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanavich, 1983).

³ Amos Oz, *A tale of love and darkness*, translated from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange (Orlando: Harcourt, c2004).

⁴ Middle East Institute, 1970.

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, new edition (London: Verso, 2006).

⁶ Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

⁷ Bernard Wasserstein, *Israelis and Palestinians: Why do they fight? Can they stop?* 2nd ed., (New Haven: Yale, 2004).

⁸ J. L. Magness, “Written Statement to the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry,” in *Palestine A Bi-National State*, Martin Buber, Judah L. Magness, and Moses Smilansky, eds., (New York: Ihud (Union) Association of Palestine, 1946), p. 21.