



The Dubious Lure of Binationalism

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ESSAY

THE DUBIOUS LURE OF BINATIONALISM

SALIM TAMARI

AS PALESTINIANS EDGE TOWARD a territorial settlement that is less than satisfactory in terms of their minimal requirements for statehood, the idea of a binational state for Israelis and Palestinians begins to acquire a certain attractiveness. A public opinion poll published at the end of 1999 suggested that close to 20 percent of the respondents from the West Bank and Gaza and about 15 percent of the Jewish respondents from Israel (17 percent of the Israeli Arab respondents) favored a binational solution if the attempts at establishing two states fail (Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, December 1999).

But the debate on binationalism begs for elucidation. While at the conceptual level the issue raises interesting possibilities for examining new dimensions in the nature of extraterritorial nationalism and ethnicity, at the level of practical politics the concept could be counterproductive and escapist.

THE DRAWBACKS OF THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

The two-state solution has gradually eroded before its realization on the ground. This erosion rests on a number of political developments:

- The nature of the Palestinian political regime, in terms of democratic conduct and representativity, has considerably less appeal than the expectations raised by the Madrid Conference and the Oslo agreements.
- The territorial delineation of the Palestinian state-to-be appears to involve considerably less land than the 23 percent of Mandated Palestine that constitute the 1967 occupied territories, and it is likely to leave contested and unresolved the status of Arab Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley, and a substantial area under extraterritorial control by Jewish settlements.
- There is little chance that current negotiations will allow any meaningful return of Palestinian refugees to their homeland, except perhaps in symbolic or token numbers.

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Moreover, as proponents of binationalism have suggested, the "facts on the ground" created during the thirty years of Israeli political incorporation of the West Bank and Gaza have rendered the Palestinian economy and society so dependent on Israeli institutions that any separation would be illusory (though separation would also tend to camouflage the structural dependency and control over markets, services, and the labor force). Whatever possibilities for separation and disengagement from Israel were sparked by the intifada were more than offset by forms of structural dependency that ultimately proved to be stronger than political factors.

These forms of structural dependency include substantial labor mobility between Israel and Palestine on a daily basis (a mobility that involves almost a third of the total Palestinian labor force, even after the continued closure of the territories). This means that overlapping domains of national consciousness have evolved, buttressed as they are by material interests of daily life. In Jerusalem, this notion of overlapping domains is even more pronounced by virtue of the imposition of Israeli identity papers for Arab residents (and the acquisition of Israeli nationality by about 10 percent of the city's Arab population). The extension to Jerusalem's Arab residents of privileged services in health, education, and welfare further integrates them into a new (Israeli) juridical corpus, separating them from a potential Palestinian one.

Another aspect of this structural dependency is the manner in which the Palestinian Authority (and eventual Palestinian state) is emerging under the tutelage of the Israeli state, creating a new national elite that shares considerable interests and interacting concerns with the Israeli state apparatus, hegemonic class, and economy. Taken together, these are bound to give way to forms of exchange, dependency, and penetration that in turn will generate modalities of common markets and formal federal frameworks.

In short, the final status talks are likely to end the Arab-Israeli conflict as we know it, but without resolving in a meaningful way the key issues of territorial sovereignty, Jerusalem, refugees, and the duality of exile/return in Palestinian consciousness. This fact, in conjunction with the difficulties of separating the two entities, is bound to keep the lure of binationalism alive.

AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM?

Nonetheless, the positing of binationalism as an alternative paradigm to a truncated statehood, currently fashionable in some Palestinian and Israeli intellectual circles, is itself problematic and hardly a political option. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, espousing the binational state is not a programmatic position but simply the expression of a desired outcome to replace a whole set of social, political, and institutional modalities that have been created on the ground since the return of PLO cadres to Palestine in 1994 and afterward. In fact, the attractiveness of the binational idea lies precisely in its simplicity. No discussion of the repercussions of creating a juridical, social, and political regime

from two antagonistic national groups in one single constitutional corpus has been put forward.

Second, the binational state idea has no real constituency on either side. Although this objection should not, in principle, be valid for an idea “whose time is ripe,” nevertheless the “ripeness” is a function of potential advocates. At the moment, the advocates are too few and (politically) too marginal. This makes it difficult to mobilize large numbers around the idea. As for the polling data I cited above, I do not believe that they accurately reflect public opinion regarding binationalism, since the question was formulated in the context of the failure of a two-state framework. On the Israeli side, furthermore, one should read the poll’s results at least partly in the context of religious and right-wing opposition to any form of statehood for the Palestinians.

Third, the binational debate does not address the formidable task of fighting the institutions of the Israeli state, its military apparatus, its Zionist consciousness, its religious establishment, and the material benefits that accrue to its citizens by excluding the masses of pauperized Palestinian refugees from its franchise. Nor does it address the cultural resistance of Palestinian nationalism to being incorporated—at least for the foreseeable future—within a Europeanized and industrially superior state.

Finally, and most importantly from the perspective of this argument, binationalism means that Palestinians would have to give up their struggle for independence, for the further evacuation of Israeli military rule, and for the dismantlement of colonial settlements. They would give up this struggle in order to struggle instead for a constitutional arrangement that is bound to be met with hostility by their Israeli neighbors and by the vast majority of their political leadership and currents of ideological thought.

(One could add here that the idea raised by the PLO in the late 1960s and early 1970s of a secular democratic state of Jews, Christians, and Muslims was never put forward seriously except as a slogan. It was never properly articulated within the PLO, the Palestine National Council, or in any intellectual forum in that period. Emile Tuma raised a justified objection to the idea in the late 1970s when he suggested that for decades the Palestinian national movement had fought to establish the unity of the Palestinian people in their struggle for independence under the banner of secular nationalism. With the PLO slogan calling for a state of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, he noted, the Palestinians had reverted to the Ottoman formula of confessional communities.)

One can further argue that even a truncated state enshrined in a peace treaty would leave considerable latitude for continued struggle aimed at consolidating its territorial domain and achieving substantial sovereignty. We have witnessed this in a number of historical cases (cf. the Irish Free State after the autonomy agreement signed by Michael Collins). We also witnessed, albeit under very different conditions, the State of Israel expanding in 1948–49 and 1956 well beyond the boundaries sanctioned by the 1947 partition plan. A precarious geography that is crisscrossed with ethnic

boundaries tends to be inherently unstable if "peace" is imposed by a stronger party on a weaker one. Such impositions are bound to be renegotiated, as relations between the stronger party and the weaker one are renegotiated.

For these reasons, I believe that conditions today are neither favorable nor desirable for abandoning the struggle for realizing the objectives of Palestinian independence. Nor do I believe that the state that results from conditions imposed by the Israelis on the Palestinians in a situation of weakness will necessarily be permanently deformed or that these conditions are immutable.

RELEVANCE OF BINATIONALISM

Whatever the lacunae in the binationalism argument, the Palestinian state that is emerging, with its fragmented boundaries and limited ability to satisfy the aspirations of the Palestinian communities of the diaspora (to say nothing of its own citizenry), is bound to generate conditions in which the binationalism debate will continue. These conditions tend to weaken the bonds of an exclusive Palestinian identity and undermine the symbolic trappings of Palestinian nationalism and their potency (the flag, the insignias, the anthem, and so on).

They also compel Palestinians to rethink their relationship with neighboring Arab states, particularly Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, in the direction of confederal association. Since most West Bankers and even many Gazans were until recently Jordanian citizens, and since about half the current Jordanian population is of Palestinian origin, this relationship is particularly meaningful as far as the future constitutional ties with Jordan are concerned. In operational terms, this means that the "binational idea" is increasingly of greater relevance to Palestine's relationship with Jordan than its relationship with Israel, particularly when one takes into account cultural factors.

In a more profound way, the conditions that will arise from a truncated state will also compel Palestinians to rethink the pan-Arab component of their own culture. This is particularly significant in the arenas of cultural affinities and political identity.

But the manner in which binationalism is being raised today refers almost exclusively to recasting the strategic objectives of the Palestinian national movement and to the dubiousness of creating a Palestinian state next to the Israeli state.

There are currently three categories of advocates of binationalism who are likely to constitute a potential constituency for the idea:

- Israeli-Palestinian citizens who may see in it a historic breakthrough for their struggle against discrimination and for equality with Jewish citizens within the corpus of the Israeli state

- Members of the Israeli anti-Zionist Left, who see in this framework a gradual rupture with the idea of a Jewish state through a joint state for Palestinians and Israelis
- Intellectuals in the Palestinian diaspora who see in this slogan (and I emphasize that it is a slogan, not a program) an answer to the betrayals of Oslo and its aftermath

It is noteworthy that not one Palestinian political group, not even minority ones, have adopted binationalism as an objective (except for the brief flirtation with the idea by the Democratic Front, the Popular Front, and Fatah in the early 1970s). All the major Islamic groups find it anathema, since they reject the idea that the Israelis (or the Jews for that matter) constitute a nationality. One can even suggest that the idea is being implicitly rejected by many of these groups.

What is the balance sheet of these countervailing forces? At the level of resolving the immediate tasks of dismantling Israeli colonial rule in the occupied territories, binationalism creates expectations and prospects of political action that are either unrealizable or counterproductive. In the main, it would act to defuse and mystify the struggle for independence.

The binational idea, however, is also embedded in the new and overlapping forms of identity that are emerging in Israel and Palestine as a result of the interplay of population interaction, market forces, and labor mobility. We witness this interplay in the juridical ambiguity in the status of Jerusalem residents under forced Israeli rule and in the evolving legal ethnicity in the status of Palestinian Israeli citizens. The struggle against Israeli colonial rule is related to, but is not equivalent to, the struggle for “a state of its citizens.” To merge the two problems into a single struggle for binationalism is likely to undermine both possibilities and prolong the resistance against them.