

Zionism and Arab Nationalism

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History is governed by cause and effect. When one explores the cause, it is to understand the effects of an action, and in essence, the effects of Zionism and Arab nationalism have dominated relations and the balance of power of the Middle East. This question is not only central due to academic necessity, but it is of fundamental importance for the attainment of peace in a region dominated by war, neo-imperialism and gross violations of human rights.

Understanding the evolution of Jewish and Arab, more specifically Palestinian consciousness, in its emergence through a socio-political nationalism, allows for a more profound understanding of the status quo. This essay shall argue that Zionism was, to a limited extent, a response to the failure of assimilation but especially due to the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), whose contrast to assimilation, highlighted a moral and physical “national death.”[1] Albeit, Zionism was in essence a response to the precarious situation in Europe, which in turn was caused by a rise of anti-Semitism and hence the need for security and dignity through Jewish unity. Although Ahad Ha’am stresses that the ‘instinct for national survival’[2] and not anti-Semitism caused Jewish nationalism, Anita Shapira argues that it was a mixture of all these factors that caused Zionism to be born out of deep disappointment, shame and outrage.[3] Arab nationalism in turn, was a response to Western colonial encroachment and anti-Ottoman feeling, inspired by a return to the purity of Islam; Arab nationalism was an “immortal message and the way to salvation.”[4] Edward Said highlights that Zionism was Palestinian nationalism’s alter ego,[5] it helped shape the identity it took, but identities are fluid and dynamic and to suggest that Palestinian nationalism emerged as a response to Zionism, would be greatly myopic and underestimate its roots in pan-Arabism.

The failure of Jewish assimilation into their respective nation-states galvanized anti-Semitism and Ha’am argues it degenerated into ‘self-effacement’[6]. This corruption of the Jewish spiritual centre threatened the nation, as it repressed national inclinations, and the development of the Jewish nation was dependent on self-love – Zionism was the remedy to achieve self-confidence and national vitality that assimilation had failed to provide. The *Haskalah*, an 18th/19th century movement advocating enlightenment values and pressing for integration into European society, garnered assimilation; it advocated ‘coming out of the ghetto’[7] in a spiritual and physical sense, in order to assimilate.

The failure of assimilation was highlighted by Jewish emancipation of the late 19th century. The Germany Jewry for example, had been freed and underwent a process of massive economic, social and cultural transformation, allowing for *bildung*[8] (a German process of self-cultivation). This was a great step forward, noting that Jews had been physically and psychologically persecuted for centuries. This emancipation represented hope and a taste of freedom: the Western European Jewry believed it had a chance of changing things. However, the anti-Semitism that followed aggressively shattered this dream, that mankind was progressing towards assimilation, cosmopolitanism and a one-world culture.

Both Herzl and Lilienblum stress the dangers of the failure of assimilation, as they still rendered the Jew, ‘a stranger’[9] or ‘a guest’[10]– a stranger could only be received into a family as a guest, however a guest that competes or bothers is angrily reminded of his status.[11] Lilienblum’s attitude to the stranger is in essence why Zionism emerged out of necessity, it sought to protect the Jews from the danger of a ‘national death’[12] both physically and spiritually. Moreover, assimilation broke down the Jewish spirit; the Russian and Polish Jewry were confined to *shtetlachs* (Jewish areas of inexorable decline) and Ha’am highlights that the failure of assimilation had a

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profound moral and material impact[13], and the only cure was *Hovevei Zion*. Zionism was a response to this oppression of assimilation. It sought to cultivate harmony and unity in the Jewish nation, as opposed to self-effacement. Zionism was a self-conscious psycho-political effect of the failure of assimilation, which looked to the Jewish state to provide a remedy for “poverty, complete tranquillity and national glory.”[14]

The genesis of Zionism was in large part caused by the rise of anti-Semitism, especially the events of 1881-84 in Russia, following the death of Tsar Alexander II. This composed and fuelled the movement in its formative years. Russia was riveted by 215 pogroms that destroyed \$80million worth of Jewish property,[15] especially that of Kishiner and Bessarabia, that consolidated the anti-Semitic character, inducing great migration to Central and Western Europe. Newspapers and literature cultivated the stereotype of the sly Jew and Herzl highlights the quotidian encounters of anti-Semitism, such as abusive language, that were more dangerous than political anti-Semitism.[16] Zionism can be seen as a direct effect of the need to save and redeem the Jews from the bewildering intensity of anti-Semitism and rumours of blood libel. Pinkser writes in 1882 that anti-Semitism was a ‘psychosis and incurable’[17], the only remedy was to become an independent nation through self-liberation. Herzl appreciated this analysis especially after the 1903 pogrom that left 49 dead – Brenner argues that it was not the butchery that stirred the Jews, but rather that the Jews had put up no defence.[18] Hence, anti-Semitism abased the Jewish nation, and abreast with the failure of assimilation, provoked a response that sought to cure this abnormal condition of Jewish life.

It is important to note that Jews felt marginalised and betrayed, especially the Germany Jewry who had endeavoured to assimilate. The impact of anti-Semitism is evident through Jewish literature, such as Schnitzler’s *Weg in Feie*, where Ehrenberg states, “Who created the liberal movement in Austria? The Jews...who betrayed the Jews? The liberals. Who created the German national movement in Austria? The Jews... who betrayed the Jews? The nationalists.”[19] Such a mentality highlights the feeling of betrayal, thus the emergence of Zionism was to demand action from the Jews. Furthermore, Zionism was a response to anti-Semitism in the sense that it sought to put the Jews on good terms with their Gentile neighbours, Herzl articulates that the Jews shall depart as honoured friends, if some returned they would be greeted as favourable and civilised.[20] Thus Zionism was a solution for the failure of assimilation and a way to abate the aggressive growth of anti-Semitism that threatened the existence of the Jewish nation, by uniting the nation Herzl believed not only could anti-Semitism be allayed but, the Jewish spirit would be revived.

The crux of Zionism is a movement as an effect of the precarious situation in Europe, thus a response to the need of security and national dignity, through unity. Although this essay has focused on political Zionism, it is important to realise the role of cultural Zionism, where Ha’am emphasised the need for a spiritual centre – this would be grasped by raising national dignity to a moral obligation, “to take pride in its people, glory in the honour of the nation!”[21] Through this Zionism would also encourage the emancipation of the Jewry from a feeling of inferiority; it saw itself as an enlightened for of nationalism to liberate the oppressed. Nordau stresses Zionism as a cure for the rootless, Western Jew[22] – where Palestine would anchor the nation and provide security. The failure of assimilation and growth of anti-Semitism highlighted Jewish physical insecurity, Zionism provided a simple solution for this with Palestine. Zionism was also a response to the need for unity; Hovevei Zion was understood as the only way to ensure Jewish collective existence, ‘as religion could no longer serve to unify our hearts’[23]. At its core, Zionism sought to rebuild something that anti-Semitism and failure of assimilation had destroyed – the Jewish spirit. Palestine would revive the spirit, the land would rebuild the person, “If I wish to substitute a new building for an old one, I must first demolish before I construct”[24]. This construction would be the remedy for centuries of oppression. Zionism was able to grasp the dynamic of deep disappointment and shame, and redirect it to Jewish salvation.

The phenomenon of Arab nationalism anchored itself in, and galvanized Arab society, because it awoke the individual and collective Arab psyche. Western colonial encroachment played a role in the shift from *Dar al-Islam* (Household of Islam) to the contemporary territorial states, a shift that was mediated by pan-Arabism. Al-Bazzaz argues Arab nationalism was a tool to create a healthy political existence, a weapon against intellectual imperialism and a way towards salvation, dignity and justice, through the formation of national spirit.[25] Although a feeling of ‘Arabism’ and Arab consciousness had always existed[26], Western colonial encroachment fuelled and necessitated Arab nationalism as a form of physical, intellectual and psychological defence. *Al-Nahda* (cultural

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awakening) was the basis of Arab nationalism's intellectual modernisation, Sayyid Jamalaldin fused an adherence to Islam with an anti-colonial doctrine and in 1859, al – Bustani was calling for an Arab nation to counter Western domination. Behrendt argues Arab nationalism was merely an imitative adaptation, a way of compensating for and overcoming inferiority complexes caused by colonial rule[27], however this is a view that fails to understand that the Muslim world was originally perceived a single political unit, until Napoleon's conquest of Egypt.

In addition to a loyalty to the *Ummah* (Muslim nation), they also acquired a sense of *watan* (territorial) and *qaum* (ethnic) loyalty, thus a sense of nationalism, if not in the European sense did exist. Albeit, Western colonial encroachment broke down these three concepts within Islamic philosophy, as it highlighted the inherent contradictions. Western encroachment fuelled Arab nationalism, as its colonial occupation was abrasive and ridden with broken promises. The Balfour Declaration for example, that asserts for a "Jewish national home"[28] at the expense of the "existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine"[29], was a stamp of colonial presence, an affront to the Arab consciousness, that reinforced the humiliation of the Sykes-Picot agreement, whereby the French and British sliced through ethnic and tribal regions with arbitrary borders. Thus Arab nationalism became a "revolt against the West"[30] where it would embrace Western ideas to free itself from Western dominance.

An anti-Ottoman feeling invigorated the emergence of Arab nationalism as a movement with political aims. The Tanzimat Reforms garnered policies of Turkification, whereby Arabs began demanding equality. However, it also allowed for the intellectual and physical development of Arabs, who began to become more politically active and were allowed to serve in the army. The strength of the Ottoman Empire forced ideas of *watan* and *qaum* to the forefront, however it also encouraged the growth of Arab nationalism, by highlighting the corruption of Turkish rulers. Arabs began to seek a return back to the purity of Islam, thus moving the center of gravity from the Turks, to the Arabs, so the caliph ought to be Arab. This feeling was emphasized by the obscure future of the empire, which many be absorbed by Russia or Austria, hence the decline of Islam – so the reform of Islam depended on the Arabs, as they were "free from moral decay"[31]; enforcing the idea that Islam had been an Arab preserve. This only became more necessary with the victory of the Committee of Union and Progress in 1913, where the Arabists were cut loose, driving many to overt Arab nationalism. Hence, Arab nationalism sought to reform Islam and by doing so would move away from the Turks, and enforce the need for an Arab nation.

Although Golda Meir claimed Palestinians have never existed, one cannot deny the existence of a Palestinian consciousness. Palestinian nationalism was embedded in pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism as a whole, until it was rendered bankrupt following the 1967 war. The Arab-Israeli conflict and the Zionist presence have helped shape Palestinian nationalism, however did not solely mold it.

The growing protests starting in 1929, in British Mandate Palestine, up until the Arab Revolt of 1936, highlight a growing, ardent sense of Palestinian consciousness, alongside the existence of an Other – Zionism. The 1948 war in turn, where many Palestinians were dispossessed of their land and had to organize themselves for defense, highlighted this *Palestinian community*, and a stronger affinity with the land, especially when many died trying to defend it, and others were exiled. Palestinian nationalism thus emerged as a way to confront Zionism with a more potent form of nationalism. This is not to negate that Arab nationalism was a nationalism in itself, and not one that was *constructed* to counter Zionism. Palestinian nationalism did however take on a more militaristic stance with the emergence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, that sought to replace victimhood with pride, and the denial of a Palestinian nationalism by Israeli political figures only fuelled it. Palestinian nationalism requires a more nuanced understanding, as its evolution is one that is closely intertwined with Zionism, albeit not dependent on it, and it has only gathered a strong dynamic since the 1930s, however a Palestinian consciousness has long existed, and is evident through 19th century literature.

To conclude, a major point of contention is also whether nationalism is to be understood through a primordial, ethno-symbolist or modern conception, however this is not for the scope of this essay. Understanding the dynamic and evolution of Zionism and Arab nationalism, independent and interdependently, is a crucial step in comprehending the ramifications of all their wars since 1948 and the asymmetrical balance of power between them now. Zionism should be understood as a political and international force, one where Herzl was able to cut through the inconsistencies and dilemmas that overshadowed and paralyzed the social action of the Jews. Zionism was not only an effect of the

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failure to assimilate, but also an effect of the drastic growth of anti-Semitism, that pressurized for a need of a state, in order to provide for security, dignity and unity.

Arab nationalism was to a limited extent an effect of Western colonialism, something that was imposed on the Arabs, but only awoke what was there before – an Arab consciousness anchored in Islam and Arabism. Arab nationalism was also the cause of a growing anti-Ottoman feeling, whereby modernization changed the fortunes of many Arabs, but also induced a growth of Turkish nationalism, that was countered by Arab nationalism. Palestinian nationalism was in a sense an outgrowth of Arab Nationalism, but was furthered by the latter's failure to provide a solution to the conflict; it too has its roots in pan-Arabism but was also fueled by the Zionist colonial presence. The ramifications of Zionism and Palestinian nationalism bear significant importance, as peace now depends on deciphering and understanding not only their needs, fears and narratives, but recognising that when the hearts and minds are galvanised with such a passionate, irrational and emotional resolve, this translates to an uncertainty that can elicit catastrophe or peace.

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