

## **Orientalism, Palestinian Nationalism, and Israeli Repression**

Written by Ibrahim Gabr

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IBRAHIM GABR, JUN 20 2014

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This essay examines the prospects of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process on the basis of the ideological structures of Palestinian Nationalism, Orientalism, and Zionism. Hypothesizing that different variants of nationalism bear witness to differing degrees of Orientalism, the essay thus proposes that the successes of Palestinian nationalism, in the context of the peace process, are dramatically complicated by the variations in Orientalism which occur between different forms of Zionism. On this basis, the essay argues in favor of the thesis that, because it tends to contain lower levels of Orientalism, a Labor Zionism is far more amenable to peace than either Religious or Nationalist versions of this Israeli politico-religious ideology. Beginning with an overview of the concept of Orientalism itself, the essay links anti-Orientalism to Palestinian Nationalism so as to demonstrate the manner in which rejecting Orientalism is crucial to the Palestinian nationalist project of countering Zionism.

The essay then moves forward to examine several variants of Zionism, notably its Labor, Nationalist and Religious

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manifestations, in both theory and practice, so as to examine the manner in which each frame Israeli portrayals of the Palestinians, and the peace process more broadly. Noting that the Labor variant is the one most germane to including Palestinians within a broader conception of the country and region, the essay proposes that it involves far fewer manifestations of Orientalism than the Nationalist and Religious variants of Zionism. Concluding with an overview of Putnam's concept of the two-level game, the essay proposes that negotiating a stable peace requires that both Zionism's variants and their associations to different forms of Orientalism be taken into account. Ultimately then, it notes that a resolution of this long-running and potentially-intractable conflict requires understanding the manner in which Zionism can produce politically-salient and heterogeneous variants of Orientalism.

## **The Framework of Orientalism**

To begin with the theory of Orientalism itself, Said (1979: 24-32) proposes that throughout the history of colonialism, those coming from the colonial metropolises created discourse frameworks that set up those living in the colonies as systematically inferior individuals who were, in all cases, fictitiously painted as the binary opposites of Western colonialist. Thus, while the colonialists perceived themselves as rational, they painted the dwellers of the colonies as impulsive and irrational. While the colonialists perceived themselves as reasoned and enlightened saviors, the dwellers of the colonies were constructed as heathens. With this, the colonial metropolises waged virtual psychological warfare on those inhabiting the colonies by continuously downgrading the nature of their existence, and legitimizing their domination of them by making them come to believe, through power structures and repetition, that they were indeed inferior to their colonial masters (Said, 1979: 12-13).

On this basis, Orientalism, derived by Said from his own experiences vis-à-vis Palestinian oppression, represents a purported framework by which Israel and the West more broadly have sought to marginalize Oriental peoples like the Palestinians. In this regard, Said (1985: 3-6) argues that the corollaries of Orientalism are all-encompassing. Over time, he argues that they come to permeate all of the structures of a given society, and to reify the marginalized identity which the groups subject to the discourse live with. On this basis, and with regards to the specific Palestinian case, Said (1985: 7-8) thus speaks of a context in which brutalized and sub-human portraits of the Palestinians have been diffused both throughout Israeli society and through the Western international governance structures mandated with adjudicating the Palestinian peoples' claims. On this basis, Said (1985) thus argues that, absent the type of nationalist movement discussed below, there is a very real chance that oppressive discourses like Orientalism can detract from a people's ability to engage in collective action against the oppression which they face.

## **Orientalism and Nationalist Resistance**

With the purportedly Orientalist nature of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians in mind, Berman (1999: 53-54) argues that nationalism is a necessary ideological framework for reconstructing the history and common culture of colonial spaces, that had been taken away from people like the Palestinians through years of colonial oppression, both physical and psychological. Simply put, given the significant redefinition of colonial cultures that the various colonial metropolises had caused, nationalism was a necessary ideology in recreating a legitimate and native colonial past, whether real or imagined, that could serve as the locus of colonial resistance and political organization so as to achieve sovereign political independence (Said, 1979: 4-5). With this, nationalism emerged in these colonized states, and resistance movements were created so as to throw off the shackles of colonial oppression. The necessary condition for the creation of these movements, however, was an indigenous nationalist discourse that could successfully reject the history and culture that the colonial metropolis had imposed upon the colonized, and allow these individuals to form their own solidarity on the basis of a shared culture and history that not only belonged to them, but that also served to empower them politically (Hobsbawm, 1990: 31-32).

With regards to the nature of these nationalist movements, Anderson (2006: 5-8) defines them as "imagined communities," whereby even though most of the members of a national group will never meet each other, they nevertheless share a common history, culture, religion, and other characteristics. On the basis of this, the group is capable of developing a common identity, acting in concert so as to achieve political objectives, and of mapping its national identity onto the geographic space of a sovereign state, thus creating a nation-state. Tangibly then, the imagined community, within the context of a theoretical framework based on Orientalism, represents the attempts at

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resistance, against colonial oppression, made by those subject to Orientalist discourses under colonial or neo-colonial rule. The imagined community, and thus the nation, becomes the core of the resistance movement, via its presentation of a discourse that runs counter to the oppressive hegemonic one previously provided by the colonial metropolis, through its control of the colony's educational system, financial system, and daily life writ large.

With this, the imagined community underlying a nationalist movement like that of the Palestinians emerges as a necessary condition for the sovereign emancipation of a colonized polity. In layperson's terms, the Orientalist discourses that exist prior to such a movement's emergence brainwashes the population, and ingrains it with a metropolis-oriented identity that precludes organization, solidarity, and resistance. In contrast, when a counter-colonial movement emerges, often spurred on by a country's public intellectuals, like Said, the nation is imbued with a new common meaning, common culture, and a more representative and realistic accounting of its collective history (Corbridge & Harriss, 2000: 38-40). This not only gives the nation's members a sense of purpose with regards to emancipating themselves from their colonial oppressors, but also a means to an end, through the movement that is formed to achieve this independence.

Applied directly to the Palestinian case, the nexus formed by nationalism and Orientalism is one which ultimately serves to demonstrate that Palestinian resistance to what has been referred to by many as Israeli oppression is premised upon a rejection of the structures of history and discourse put forth by the dominant Israelis. In this regard, Gerber (2003: 23-24) notes that all of the histories and political analyses of Israel which predominate in the West are predicated upon Orientalist-imbued historiographies. On this basis, it thus becomes clear that, because counter-Orientalist Palestinian nationalism is predicated upon a rejection of these Orientalist structures, it is imperative that the components of different forms of Zionism – Palestinian nationalism's counter-ideology – be understood as discursive rivals to the Palestinian emancipatory project.

## **Theoretical Variants of Zionism**

With the visions of Orientalism and the counter-nationalism of the Palestinian people in mind, this essay moves forward to examine the ideological composition of the different variants of Zionism which exist in Israeli domestic politics. Given that Zionism represents a powerful and mainstream counter-ideology to Palestinian nationalism, one which also is supported to varying degrees by Orientalist conceptions of the Palestinians, the essay thus examines these variants so as to determine the degree to which the Orientalist discourses which flow from them are congruent or incongruent vis-à-vis Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation and the peace process.

### *Labor Zionism*

Beginning with the Zionism of the political Left, Kuzar (2001: vii) notes that the Labor Zionism created by Yithzak Tabenkin was predicated on the ideal of "the entire Jewish people, in its whole homeland, all in communes, in a union of Communist nations." Over time, however, the Communist stance of the movement, like most other proto-Communist movements, has taken on a social democratic bent. Contemporarily represented in Israeli politics by the Social Democratic Labor Party, Labor Zionism's vision of Israel does value the idea of a Jewish state as a progressive safe haven for Jews worldwide, but countenances its nationalism with a recognition of Arab interests in the region and of the historical and religiously-derived rights of Arabs (Kuzar, 2001: 280-285). In contemporary Israeli politics, most Labor Zionists, because of this conception of both Israel and its neighbors, are advocates of the "two-state-solution" and, for the most part, of the abandonment of Israeli settlements in the "occupied territories" (Kuzar, 2001: 280-285). Because of this, Labor Zionism is thus the most accommodating of these forms of Israeli religious nationalism, and the one least likely to involve irreconcilable, irremediable Orientalist discourses and constructs.

### *Nationalist/Revisionist Zionism*

Moving forward, Nationalist/Revisionist Zionism, a right-wing perspective on the Jewish State developed by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, was formed under the aegis of European fascist regimes during the 1930s, and then advocated the creation of a Jewish army to push Arabs out of Palestine, thus allowing for mass Jewish migration to the area and the creation of a Jewish state (Avineri, 1981: 33-34). Over time, Nationalist Zionism became the centerpiece of the Likud

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Party's platform, and given the latter's prominent role in Israeli governments since the late 1970s, has led to significantly "hard-line" policies against Arabs within both the "occupied territories," and the region writ large (Shlaim, 1996: 285-287). As such, given the exclusionary nature of Nationalist Zionism, and its focus on the preservation of Jewish interests to the detriment of all others, recent Likud party policies have opposed ceding the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and East Jerusalem to the Palestinians, and have led to the party splitting, with some left-leaning members forming the Kadima Party over the issue (Shelef, 2010, 121-126). Based on this, it is thus very likely that, because of the exclusionary nature of the Likud's Nationalist Zionism, it is likely to bear witness to some of the most fundamental manifestations of Israeli Orientalism.

## *Religious Zionism*

Finally, Religious Zionism, predicated on the Torah scholarship of rabbis such as Abraham Isaac Kook and Moshe Shmuel Glasner, proposes that the Jewish people have an inalienable and sole right to the lands of Israel, on the basis that Zionism itself is a tool that has been created by God so as to hasten the second coming of the Messiah, and with it the attendant salvation of all Jews (Don-Yehiha, 1987: 221-223). Because of this, the policy corollaries of Religious Zionism are exclusionary in nature, in that Arabs are not seen as having any right to the Holy Land because of scripture's granting of it to the Jewish people. As such, proponents of Religious Zionism have a tendency to support the continued creation of settlements in the "occupied territories" and are highly reticent to compromise with Israel's Arab minority and neighbors in settling the Arab-Israeli conflict. Their contemporary electoral manifestation is found in the Hazit Party (Gutwein, 2001: 12-15). With this in mind, the manifestations of Orientalism found in Religious Zionism are highly likely to mirror those of Likud-style Nationalist Zionism. Indeed, because this form of Zionism is founded on the non-confirmable basis of religion, the bases of exclusion present within it are likely to be highly salient in nature, and thus problematize the peace process.

## **Variants of Zionism in Practice**

Moving forward from these elaborations of the different forms of Zionism that are important in contemporary Israeli politics, specifically with reference to the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is possible to see them in action if we are to consider the Israeli offers to the Palestinians that have been made in the context of the peace process, largely shepherded by the United States, in the goal of solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Specifically, we notice that when the Labor party is in power, and when Likud and the Religious Zionists have little influence in the polity's management, peace proposals towards the Palestinians are broader and more compromising. Thus, elements of Orientalist subjugation are less likely to manifest themselves in the Israeli peace process discourse when these parties are in power.

For example, when negotiating the 2000 Camp David Accords, Labor Party-affiliated President Ehud Barak offered Yasser Arafat, then the Palestinian representative, all of the Gaza Strip and over nine tenths of the West Bank as the land for a Palestinian State, if Arafat was willing to transfer – on the basis of the influence of the Religious Zionists – about seventy Orthodox Jewish settlements in the West Bank to permanent Israeli sovereignty (Pressman, 2003: 16-21). This expansive offer was clearly a corollary of the Labor Zionist conception of the Israeli state, and of its attendant willingness to accept living alongside the Palestinians. While the Religious Zionists had an effect on this offer, due to the politics of the Knesset, it was minimal in nature, and most specialists agree that the offer was only rejected because of Arafat's posturing for both domestic and international audiences (Pressman: 2003: 37-38).

In contrast to Barak's conciliatory and compromising offer, that which Israel is willing to offer when Likud is in power is much more limited. For example, during the current US-engendered negotiations, Likud-affiliated President Benjamin Netanyahu, buoyed in his majority by the support of Religious Zionists, has been reluctant to put any piece of land on the negotiating table. Rather, reflecting the hard-line approach of his own Nationalist Zionism alongside the uncompromising nature of Religious Zionism, Netanyahu has largely stalled peace talks on the basis of his insistence that the Palestinians begin by recognizing Israeli legitimacy on the basis of both scriptural and historical facts. Furthermore, the effects of these forms of Zionism are also manifested by Netanyahu's unwillingness to put an end – likely because of his need for Religious Zionists' electoral support – to the continued construction of settlements in the "occupied territories" (El-Khawas, 2012: 25-27). Thus, we see that when the political leadership of Israel

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changes, so do the variants of Zionism that determine its policies in the Arab-Israeli conflict. As will be discussed below, the effects of these changing variants of Zionism, and their differing electoral manifestations, is concomitantly a result of the ideational constitution of material reality, and of the volatility of Israeli electoral politics under the aegis of a proportional representation system.

## **Different Zionisms, Different Orientalisms**

With the influence of these variants of Zionism in mind, as it pertains to the peace-process, it becomes clear that different forms of Orientalism are salient components of each variant of this Israeli politico-religious ideology. With this in mind, the case studies engaged in above demonstrate that the degree of exclusionism inherent to a form of Zionism is a direct and linear predictor of the salience of the Orientalism to be found within it. Indeed, when religious and nationalist Zionisms lie at the core of Israeli policy-making in the context of the peace process, we bear witness to offers which do not recognize the legitimacy of the Palestinian people's nationalism. In contrast, when a Labor-oriented Zionism is in the midst of the negotiating process, recognition of Palestine's right to exist is more likely to emerge, and Orientalist attitudes are less likely to be salient in nature.

On this basis, a clear and symbiotic relationship exists between Zionism, Orientalism, and the specific nature of how the peace process proceeds under any such instantiation. With this, what is most interesting about this comparative analysis of Zionism, within the context of Orientalism, is the manner in which Israeli and Palestinian nationalisms are direct predictors of each other's contents. With this in mind, this analysis contributes to our enhanced understanding of the prospects of the peace process inasmuch as an understanding of the depth of Orientalism present within any negotiating framework is a direct explanatory factor vis-à-vis the degree of compromise possible in any given Israeli position.

## **Making Peace with Zionism: A Two-Level Game**

With the above in mind – and considering that Israeli politics as they pertain to the Arab-Israeli conflict must satisfy both an ideationally-motivated electorate, which is itself split across adherence to different versions of Zionism, and both state and non-state rivals with their own divergent ideational baselines – finding a solution to a problem as intractable as the Arab-Israeli conflict is a challenging proposition. In this vein, Robert Putnam's concept of the two-level game is germane to understanding the effects of ideation on the peace process. At base, Putnam proposes that, when negotiating diplomatic agreements, states' representatives have to simultaneously please their domestic constituencies and their negotiating partners (Putnam, 1988: 430-435). With this in mind, the multiple stakeholders involved in the resolution of the conflict, and the different degrees of Orientalism which flow from their Zionisms, dramatically complicate the achievement of a stable peace.

On this basis, and given the heterogeneity of the forms of Zionism present in Israel, as well as the differing degrees of enmity versus acceptance put forth by Israel's Arab neighbors, negotiating an agreement between these ideationally-divergent entities is a daunting task. Thus, in having to negotiate between the ideational baselines of both domestic and international audiences, Israel's plight, in negotiating a peace process, is rendered very difficult. In the end, this two-level game is even further exacerbated by Israel's use of a system of proportional representation in its domestic electoral politics, whereby governments must often be formed by coalition, and where the country's leadership changes far more frequently than is common in most Western democracies (Bejar & Mukherjee, 2011: 460-465). With this exacerbating the problems of divergent ideations both within and without the state, the challenge of solving the Arab-Israeli conflict is a massive one. Ultimately then, bringing about a stable peace to this seemingly irresolvable and long-running conflict requires that those negotiating on both sides of the equation recognize which variants of Orientalism permeate different variants of Zionism and thus complicate the peace process to varying degree of significance and dubiousness.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, the analysis conducted above reveals that Zionism and Orientalism are deeply-intertwined phenomena as it pertains to predicting the potential success of the peace process. Indeed, because the degree of exclusion found in

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different forms of Israel's dominant politico-religious ideology can directly shape the structures of discursive exclusion associated with different variants of Zionism, there is an important case to be made that the form of Zionism prevailing in the context of any given negotiations has direct bearing on the promise of the peace process. With this, understanding the manner in which different instantiations of the peace process have led to success versus failure, the association between Zionism and Orientalism is absolutely crucial to understanding the variance which we find in this regard. Ultimately, then, it is clear that the different manifestations of these ideologies as structures of power are incredibly potent in shaping the prospects for peace which exist in the otherwise intractable context of the long-running Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

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