

The bi-national idea in Israel/ Palestine: past and present

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ABSTRACT. This article reviews four different advocacies of bi-nationalism in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Despite the differences in their context, content and style, let alone in motivations and implications, the four advocacies – the ‘old school’ and the ‘new school’ of Jewish bi-nationalism, contemporary Palestinian bi-nationalism, and bi-nationalist advocacy that comes from outside observers – present certain similarities which reduce their chances of becoming a mainstream option: (a) in all cases bi-nationalism is not the most desirable option; (b) they all gained momentum on both sides in periods of instability – due to transformations in the power relations between them or when the conflict reaches a point where the violence seems to become unbearable; (c) all these bi-nationalisms present a rather uneasy mixture of moralistic arguments and pragmatic ones; (d) in all cases the people who embrace the bi-national model are intellectuals. This gives their recommendations a touch of ‘ivory tower’ overrationalisation, further reducing their public appeal.

Introduction

On 9 January 2004, Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) stated that if no progress in negotiations with Israel was soon achieved, the Palestinians would seek a single, Jewish–Arab state rather than pursue the two-state solution (*New York Times*, 10 January 2004). Even if only a tactical move meant to create a sense of urgency on the Israeli side, this statement marked a sharp departure from the official policy of the PLO and then the Palestinian National Authority since 1988.¹ Palestinian reactions to Qurei’s statement were mixed: it was applauded by those who basically dislike the two-state solution, but most speakers of the Palestinian mainstream strove to provide persuasive excuses for this seemingly strategic shift. For instance, Labour Minister Ghassan Khatib asserted: ‘Qurei was only intending to warn Israelis and the international community’ (Khatib 2004). The American administration’s response to Qurei’s statement was immediate and sharp: Secretary of State Powell averred that the roadmap and hence the two-state formula is the only ‘game in town’ (*New York Times*, 10 January 2004). The official Israeli reaction was even more blunt: ‘Mr Abu Ala has threatened to

call for a binational state, but he may just as well call for a Palestinian state on the moon' (*ibid.*).

The bi-national idea, however, is neither new to the region nor a Palestinian invention. In fact, it was Jewish groups during the British Mandate era that first advocated bi-nationalism, that is, the sharing of political powers equally between the Jewish and Arab communities in Israel/Palestine, their relative sizes notwithstanding. With Israel's establishment as a Jewish state in 1948, the bi-national idea seemed doomed to political oblivion. Yet today, over fifty-five years later, against the background of the collapse of the Oslo process, the eruption of the second Palestinian intifada, the *de facto* Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and especially the changes in the Jewish–Palestinian demographic balance west of the Jordan River, this seemingly forgotten notion appears to be making a political comeback. This time, however, most advocates of bi-nationalism are on the Palestinian side, with also a few on the Israeli side. Some outside observers, too, now advocate bi-nationalism as a remedy.

The main aim of this paper is to examine the bi-national idea from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. It therefore considers bi-national advocacy along two lines of comparison: (1) the time line, i.e. between the prestate and the present-day arguments for the bi-national idea on the Jewish side; and (2) the ethno-national line, i.e. between the rationales and programmes of today's Palestinian, Israeli and external bi-nationalists.

The bi-national concept and practices

Bi-nationalism is a theoretically rather equivocal notion that carries different meanings for different ethno-national groups, depending mainly on their relative position in the relevant power structure. On the most technical level, the term bi-national refers to a country or territory in which 'two, and only two national cultures are afforded pride of place, with juridically entrenched rights for control of shares of the state's resources, positions of authority, symbols, etc.' (Lustick 2001/2002). On the substantive level, however, it reflects mutual recognition of the two ethno-national collectivities' rightful claims to the land. Since the technical and substantive facets do not always coincide, a technical or *de facto* bi-nationalism or bi-national state of affairs should be distinguished from a political framework that is based on a bi-national cognition or state of mind. *De facto* bi-nationalism is an 'actual', often unplanned, situation that evolves when a territorial unit is cohabited by two collectivities with separate national identities. Unless one or both of the collectivities develop exclusive claims to this territory, the bi-national situation may remain latent, even unnoticeable, for a long time. However, if and when such claims are put forward, an ethno-national conflict which is probably violent, is highly likely to develop. If, however, the claims are not mutually exclusive, in rare cases the sides may instead settle at an

early stage for less than total control over the land, and opt for a bi-national political framework. Nonetheless, in most cases, such a settlement is reached only after the costs of a violent confrontation prove unbearably high.

The power relations between the two national collectivities largely determine the respective prospects of the confrontational or accommodating scenarios. Usually, a small and weak national minority is not in an effective position to forcefully demand its rights over a territory dominated by a larger and stronger majority. Nor is the majority group expected to be attentive to such claims if advanced by a feeble contender. When, however, the two sides are more or less evenly matched, the sharing option may appear more attractive than the clashing option. Often, however, the contending collectivities do not operate on the basis of objective estimations of their respective capabilities but, instead, out of mutual perceptions of their relative strength. Furthermore, each side calculates its moves based on subjective assessment of the likely future power relations. Thus, if the weaker side believes it will become much stronger because of a demographic change or some other development, it may well press claims that seem totally baseless under the existing power relations. Likewise, if the stronger collectivity expects to lose its relative advantages, for example, by falling behind demographically, it may act from a position of weakness despite its current pre-eminence.

The Realist school of international relations postulates that national collectivities are never motivated by altruistic or moralistic considerations. If so, bi-nationalism appears to be a counterintuitive political option because it means relinquishing actual or potential power positions to a disliked if not hated 'other'. As bi-nationalism implies the conscious relinquishing of the nation-state in its normative form, the 'selling' of this model requires very distinctive conditions and a clever 'marketing' strategy. One argument, admittedly quite weak politically speaking, that proponents of this 'deviant' political formation advance is the moralistic one. Only rarely, however, can such argumentation be translated into a political strategy of voluntarily transforming power relations from domination to a structure based on sharing. This may happen when the moralistic argumentation is sustained by external pressures, or when widening sectors at home conclude that the immoral pattern of domination also entails concrete dangers to the dominant group's well-being.

As noted, bi-nationalism can take several forms. Of the following five models, the first three indeed are only *de facto* bi-national but do not reflect a bi-national political cognition. The other two are *both de facto and de jure* bi-national models. Forms of bi-nationalism, then, include:

1. A unitary state with a dominant national collectivity, allowing the other national collectivity that resides in the territory no collective political rights whatsoever and subjecting it to a discriminatory set of laws and regulations, aimed specifically at controlling the 'dominated' group.

2. A political system that grants the nondominant national/ethnic group a certain amount of cultural autonomy and perhaps even equal individual human and civil rights, but no collective political rights, which are reserved for the dominant group only.
3. A classical liberal democracy, cohabited by two national groups and functioning on the principle of 'one person, one vote'. Neither of the two national groups is granted *collective* political rights, since the only individual identity recognised here is the civic one. In this model the linkage between the state and its citizens is direct, and is not 'filtered' through ethnic or religious institutions or loyalties.

Unlike the former three, the next two models involve authentic bi-national cognition and structure:

4. A parity-based bi-national framework in which not only are the members of the two national groups granted equal human and civil rights, but the two groups as such are entitled to equal collective political rights whatever their respective numerical sizes.
5. Consociational democracy is today the most refined bi-national arrangement. It recognises collective ethno-national rights and, by some cantonal or other arrangement agreed upon by the elites of the two national collectivities, guarantees that both groups get a fair share of the political powers (Lijphart 1969).

Out of frustration and despair at the collapse of the Oslo process and its repercussions, various alternative solutions, including bi-nationalism, have been examined. As explained above, bi-nationalism is neither side's dream; rather:

Bi-national or other single-state solutions seek to secure what is needed by abandoning what is strongly desired; Jews and Arabs are to share the land, resources, recognition, and immigration opportunities afforded by a single state ruling the whole land, but at the cost of having to forever encounter each other in micro and macro struggles to achieve a distribution of those resources which each side feels is as much as it can get of what it deserves. (Lustick 2001/2002).

Who, then, has advocated or is advocating such a basically unattractive regime, and why?

Bi-nationalism in Israel/Palestine

Jewish advocacy of bi-nationalism

The 'old school'

For many devoted Zionists, it came as a severe blow to realise that implementing the dream of the Zionist movement – the ingathering of the Jews in the land of their forefathers and the building of a national home for the Jewish people – bluntly interfered with the life of the Arab community in the same land. Although warnings in this regard were expressed as early as

1907–08 (Epstein 1907/1908), awareness of the hostility that massive Jewish immigration created among the Arabs was minimal. In any case, as a weaker ethno-national group that expected to get stronger and larger in the foreseeable future, the Jewish mainstream reacted to the first manifestations of Arab resistance by seeking power first through numbers, i.e. by creating a Jewish majority in the land, and later by fortifying Jewish political domination through the establishment of a Jewish state. A small minority, however, rejected these strategies as early as the 1920s, denouncing them as immoral for disrespecting the national rights of the Palestinians and for putting the Jews and Arabs on a collision course. Instead, this minority position advocated a bi-national arrangement. Thus, in 1925 the Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace) group was formed with the aim of promoting Jewish–Arab understanding and co-operation. The members of Brit Shalom, some of them prominent figures in the political or academic establishment, believed that the domination of one people by another would lead to severe friction and, eventually, war. At least in its early days, Brit Shalom’s bi-nationalism could be described as optimistic: it was meant to forestall the conflict before it ripened. Switzerland and Finland were the examples of successful bi-nationalism that encouraged Brit Shalom. In practical terms, the group advocated creating a legislative council based on Jewish–Arab parity, which would run the affairs of a bi-national state in which the two peoples would enjoy equal rights irrespective of their relative size at any given time.

The wave of violent Arab riots against the Jews in 1929, known as the ‘disturbances’, were a severe blow to the group since they suggested that time was running out faster than they expected. Brit Shalom warned that these ‘occurrences’ were not a sporadic, transitory phenomenon but the beginning of a national liberation struggle that would only get fiercer if not properly handled. Nevertheless, as noted, the chances for bi-nationalism to be adopted when other, more ‘natural’ options have not yet been tried, and failed, are slim. Indeed, Brit Shalom was harshly attacked by the mainstream and accused of defeatism. The fact that they spoke their minds while the murdered Jews were not yet buried infuriated their rivals even further, and the Zionist establishment denounced them as either pathologically naive or traitors. It is important to note that the bi-national advocacy of Brit Shalom and its successors in the prestate days was not echoed on the Arab side. Given their numerical superiority, the Palestinians rejected a parity-based regime. Those few Palestinians who were ready to co-operate with Brit Shalom, such as Fawzi Darwish el-Husseini and Sami Taha, had no political or intellectual standing in their own community (Husseini was assassinated because of his belief in bi-nationalism in November 1946, and Taha in September 1947).

Apart from Brit Shalom, however, the group most identified with it is Ihud (Union), which was led by Martin Buber and Judah Magnes and was active from the early 1940s till the establishment of the state, though it continued its activities until the mid-1960s. Ihud was established in 1942, almost a decade after Brit Shalom had expired. By that time the conflict was already an

undeniable and very violent reality. Moreover, Ihud operated against the background of World War II and the catastrophe of European Jewry. Its members believed that bi-nationalism offered the only way of saving both the Jewish community in Palestine and the survivors of the Holocaust. They did not deny the Jewish people's special attachment to the Land of Israel but maintained that together with the Arabs living in Palestine they must develop the country without one side imposing its will on the other. In their submission to the Anglo-American Commission (1946), Magnes and Buber, who represented Ihud, argued, in stark contrast to the position presented by the Zionist establishment, that since both Jews and Arabs had a national claim to Palestine, it could neither be an Arab state nor a Jewish one. They also rejected the partition option, saying it was impractical and a 'moral defeat for everyone concerned'. Instead, they recommended that a bi-national state be formed in which Jews and Arabs would share power. According to this parity-based model, Jews and Arabs would have equal representation in a democratically elected legislative council, and the head of state would be appointed by the United Nations Organisation, with each community exercising autonomy in cultural matters.

Indeed, the bi-nationalism of Brit Shalom and Ihud had a strongly moralistic aspect. They saw it as a natural derivation of the Jewish tradition of antimilitarism – the victory of the spirit over the flesh. At the same time, they promoted bi-nationalism as the only practical solution that might be acceptable to both sides. Whether moralism (Razabi 1993) or pragmatism (Hattis 1970; Hermann 1989) was their main point of departure is a matter of academic dispute. Whereas the first school argues that their deviant position stemmed from their belief in the uniquely moral, nonviolent mission of the Jewish people, the second one maintains that these bi-nationalists recognised the reality of a majority Palestinian population in Mandate Palestine. Thus they emphasised not the ideal but the reality, a reality that Zionism needed to grasp if it was to succeed. Undoubtedly, though, the strongly moralistic flavor of the two groups' agendas helped their critics to present them as dangerously naive. Their deviant positions on limiting immigration and on establishing a Jewish state, it was argued, undercut the whole Zionist enterprise and ruined its image in Gentile eyes.

The establishment of Israel as a Jewish state in 1948 and the concomitant bloody war, which brought in its wake the Palestinian *nakba*, made the bi-national idea irrelevant. Nevertheless, the dispute between the mainstream and the bi-nationalists left deep traces in the Israeli collective memory. Prestate bi-nationalism was equated with dangerous naivete in the milder analyses, and with disloyalty and even treason in the harsher ones.

The 'new school'

The tiny camp of today's Israeli bi-nationalists can be divided into two subgroups. First there are those, mostly belonging to the radical, non-Zionist or even anti-Zionist Left, who favor this model *per se*. Second are those who

would prefer a different scenario but have concluded that the existing geopolitical and demographic realities dictate bi-nationalism.

The bi-national idea was already raised by a few Israelis in the 1970s, and again, strongly but by very few, soon after the launching of the Oslo process. Political activists of the radical Left, such as Michael Warschawski of the Alternative Information Centre and others, warned against the pitfalls of the Oslo paradigm, claiming that the Palestinian state to be established in this framework could not be viable but would only be a Bantustan-type entity. For this they mainly blamed the expansionist Zionist ideology and the Israeli government, while also criticising the Palestinian Authority's impotence and inability to defend its people's interests: 'If Arafat had not accepted the conditions laid out at Oslo, this miserable agreement might have remained a mere position paper . . . ' (Ben Efrat 1997; see also Pape 1999, Warschawski 2001). These activists called for the adoption of the PLO's 'secular-democratic state' model, which they referred to as bi-national in essence. However, theirs was a cry in the wilderness; it was heard, if at all, only within small circles of the Left and was mainly understood in the context of the internal rivalries between the Zionist and non-Zionist components of the peace camp.

Until very recently, however, bi-nationalism was not a significant (albeit highly contested) option in the Israeli repertoire of possible solutions to the Israeli–Palestinian strife. Thus, when in the summer of 2003 the weekly supplement of the *Haaretz* daily published a lengthy interview with two public figures, Meron Benvenisti and Haim Hanegbi, in which both expressed their support for a bi-national, Israeli–Palestinian state, many within and outside Israel were taken by surprise. In this pathbreaking interview Hanegbi, a well-known figure of the radical Left, admitted to his initial support for the Oslo process (Shavit 2003). Yet as time passed and the process seemed to be leading nowhere, he came to view Oslo as a mistake – a diversion of everyone's attention to Israel's rhetoric rather than its deeds, namely, the ongoing settlement expansion. Therefore, dwelling on sweet memories of his childhood in Mandatory Jerusalem amid Jewish–Arab harmony and coexistence, Hanegbi asserted that Israel was unable to free itself from its expansionist mentality since 'it is tied, hands and feet, to its core ideology of dispossession and original mode of action'. His conclusion was that: 'Only binational cooperation can save us. Only this can transform us from foreigners in our land to locals, to natives' (*ibid.*).

Hanegbi's bi-nationalism is rooted in both moral and practical arguments. Thus, while maintaining that 'it is impossible to live with such an ongoing evil . . . '. He also states in practical fashion:

the story of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel is over . . . In order for Jewish sovereignty to be maintained there needs to be a uninational framework that will surround itself with a wall and retain its isolation, but such a construct is contradictory to the spirit of our time. Israel as a Jewish state can no longer exist here. (*ibid.*)

Hanegbi does not offer a clear bi-national blueprint, but he concludes in a very Brit Shalom-like spirit:

One should come to terms with the fact that we shall live here as a minority. A Jewish minority that will not be squeezed between Hadera and Gedera but could reside also in Nablus, Baghdad, and Damascus and could take part in the democratization of the Middle East. (*ibid.*)

Benvenisti, the second interviewee in this scandalstirring article, is also a nonconformist but comes from the heart of the Israeli establishment. Having warned prophetically for years that the ever-growing settlement project was becoming irreversible, his shift to bi-nationalism reflects much frustration and pain: Israelis, like the Afrikaners in South Africa, should realise that the present discriminatory regime ought to be dismantled, since it has failed to impose its hegemony over the dominated collective, and replaced it with a regime of individual and collective equality. Like Hanegbi, Benvenisti also admits to making a mistake in the past – in his case, defining the Israeli–Palestinian struggle as a national one when the correct definition, he now acknowledges, is that of a struggle between natives and settlers/colonisers, resulting from the atavistic hatred of those who feel dispossessed by foreigners. Separation, then, is no longer an option, and the entire Land of Israel should be regarded as a single geopolitical entity (Shavit 2003). Although in this interview Benvenisti did not describe the details of the bi-national arrangement he suggested, he mentioned some combination of a horizontal sharing of powers on a parity basis and a vertical (territorial) one, a federalist structure that would include the entire land west of the Jordan River and be divided into several ethnic cantons. In an article published a few months later, however, Benvenisti advocated the consociational model, ‘which recognizes the collective ethnopolitical rights and enables cooperation in the government at the national level while guaranteeing well-defined political rights for minorities’ (Benvenisti 2003). He views such an arrangement as based on a cantonal division under a federal umbrella. Such an arrangement, he states, also enables maintaining ‘soft’ borders and constructive ambiguity, which facilitates handling symbolic issues such as Jerusalem and even the refugees and the settlers (*ibid.*). He also states his pessimistic bottom line: ‘I am not happy with what I have just suggested. . . . We are not going to have peace here. Even if there is some binational arrangement, it can only manage the conflict. At its outskirts, however, violence will always prevail’ (Shavit: 10–14, 2003).

The publication of the interview with Benvenisti and Hanegbi by a major Israeli newspaper brought strong aftershocks, including many letters to the editor and opinion columns in the printed and electronic press. Paradoxically, for reasons to be explained below, the most negative reactions came not from the Right but from the Centre and moderate Left, both supporting one or another version of the two-state solution. For example, Yosef Gorni, a

mainstream Zionist historian, fiercely attacked Benvenisti, who is also a historian along with his other professional activities:

As Benvenisti knows very well, this approach [bi-nationalism] is a complete non sequitur. . . . This is essentially because of the national spirit and history of the Jews and the Arabs. Both peoples find it very difficult to have minorities in their midst. . . . Furthermore, this idea also has a deplorable moral aspect, as it is unthinkable to legitimate such collective discrimination, by which all other peoples of the region, besides the Jews, will be entitled to a national state of their own. (Gorni 2003)

Another mainstream critic (Shacham 2003) fiercely attacks Hanegbi: 'better not to bamboozle us with some bi-national phrasing when what one actually means is a regular state, with a majority and a minority, with the majority defining the rights of the minority' (*ibid.*). His criticism of Benvenisti is no gentler: 'The use of the phrase "bi-national paradigm", which sounds so intelligent, cannot compensate for the total lack of thinking on how such a state can be established and function' (*ibid.*). Shlomo Avineri, a prominent political scientist and former director-general of the Foreign Ministry, states categorically: 'A binational state? There is no such thing. Simply put: nowhere in the world has a conflict between two national movements been resolved by squeezing two national movements, holding each other's throats, into the boiling pot of a binational state' (Avineri 2003). Clearly alluding to Benvenisti, he continues:

What happened to them [i.e. the advocates of bi-nationalism who were not part of the radical Left but came from the mainstream] was that they simply collapsed in the face of the Palestinians' determination and resistance and their readiness to sacrifice themselves, reaching the conclusion that Zionism can never win and hence should be given up altogether. (*ibid.*)

Interestingly enough, there is also some opposition to the Hanegbi and Benvenisti-style bi-nationalism on the radical Left, the traditional (albeit tiny) support base in Israel for the PLO- style, secular-democratic bi-national state. These voices maintain that dividing the entire country into cantons a la Benvenisti has a misleading ring of plausibility. Israel boasts a First World economy, while the Palestinian-populated areas belong to the Second or even Third World. In such a situation, where the Jewish cantons are 'haves' and the Arab ones 'have-nots', the chances of real equality under the new federal or other framework are practically nil. Yet the question is idle, the argument goes, because there is no apparatus for realising this concept anyway; there is nothing to motivate Israel, which has brought Arafat to his knees and divided the Palestinian national movement, to enter into such an adventure (e.g. Ben Efrat 1997).²

As noted, the Right's criticism of the 'new school' bi-nationalists was surprisingly mild, apparently because any plan that implies retaining the Land of Israel as a single unit is appealing – with some amendments – to supporters of that principle. Thus, in November 2003 the Yesha (Judea, Samaria and Gaza) Council released its own 'bi-national' plan as the solution for the conflict. It divides the entire historic Land of Israel into ten cantons, each of

which would have cultural autonomy, with their boundaries delineated according to the ethno-national composition of the population in the specific region. These cantons would come under a federal umbrella. However, according to this plan's principle of division, only two of the cantons would be Palestinian, thereby guaranteeing a Jewish majority in parliament (Eid 2003). The right-wing activist and journalist Israel Harel proposed another bi-national model: 'We should take the Arabs on both sides of the Green Line as one body and the Jews on both sides as one body, and give the Arabs Jordanian citizenship and the Jews Israeli citizenship' (Harel, in Susser 2003). There are, however, moderate right-wingers who fear that if such positions are embraced, the bi-national reality may impose itself on the land and destroy the settler community from within. Thus Yair Sheleg, a journalist living in a settlement yet writing in *Haaretz* (which is left-of-center on Israeli–Palestinian relations), urged his fellow settlers to agree to the two-state solution before it was too late. With their powerful opposition to evacuating even the smallest, most isolated outpost, Sheleg argues, the settlers have created a balance of deterrence with the government. Sheleg urges the settlers to stop pressuring the government and concludes: 'In specific moments of their life, individuals often agree to undergo painful operations, including amputating this or another organ of their body so as to save their life. The same level of responsibility such individuals take regarding their private life could be expected from those who aspire to be in the leadership position regarding the good of the nation (*ibid.*).

Palestinian bi-nationalism

As mentioned earlier, during the British Mandate era there was practically no significant counterpart on the Arab side for the Jewish groups advocating bi-nationalism. However, support for *de facto* bi-nationalism (although not termed as such) emerged in the 1970s with the PLO's advocacy of a single secular-democratic state to be established in the entire territory west of the Jordan. However, almost at the same time as the 'new school' of Israeli bi-nationalism emerged, bi-nationalism – this time referred to as such – emerged on the Palestinian side as well, and for very similar reasons: the collapse of the Oslo process and the repercussions of the second Palestinian intifada. The failure of the political negotiations and the extremely high price paid by the Palestinian people for their resort to violence, namely, Israel's reoccupation of the territories, signaled to certain Palestinians, mostly intellectuals living in the Diaspora, that an independent Palestinian state was unattainable: '... developments since Oslo have raised serious questions about the attractions of a separate state as a vehicle for expressing Palestinian aspirations and advancing Palestinian interests' (Abu Odeh 2001/2002).

Among Palestinian bi-nationalists, too, different subgroups can be identified. The first consists of people, like the late Edward Said, who maintain that

a bi-national state should not be seen as a short-term egress from the present dismal entanglement but as a long-term guiding principle, even if currently it is unpopular and viewed as unrealistic: ‘So although a binational state now seems like a totally long shot and completely utopian, not to say to many people a crazy idea, it is the one idea that will allow people to live together – and not exterminate each other’ (Said, in Barsimian 1999). So as not to be accused of one-sidedness, Said and his followers have cited Jewish interests in their programme: ‘We did not focus enough on ending the military occupation as a moral imperative or on providing a form for [the Israelis’] security and self-determination that did not abrogate ours. . . . Israeli Jews and Palestinians are locked in Sartre’s vision of hell, that of “other people”’ (Said 2001). Brit Shalom and Ihud in the past, and the ‘new school’ Israeli bi-nationalists at present, have pointed to the smallness of the country as an impediment to other solutions. Likewise Said:

Israeli Jews and Palestinians are irrevocably intertwined. The place is so small that you cannot possibly completely avoid the other side. . . . The involvement of each in the other . . . suggested to me that some mode of arrangement has to be established that allows them to live together in some peaceable form. And it’s not going to be through separation. (in Barsimian 1999: 3–4)

The second subgroup of Palestinian bi-nationalists – much more visible and of course intimidating from the Israeli point of view – regards the bi-national arrangement as merely the first step in creating a technically bi-national state but with a Palestinian majority (El-Sakka 2003: 11). Both subgroups, however, view the PNA’s effort to establish an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel as futile and far too costly. A third group of Palestinian proponents of bi-nationalism see the bi-national rhetoric as a means only. Well aware of the Jewish apprehension of a bi-national arrangement, they advocate using it as a tactic to advance the two-state option. Many interpret Qurei’s statement discussed above along these lines. Most of the Palestinian bi-nationalists, however, espouse the ‘one person, one vote’ model. In practical terms, like the PLO pre-Oslo position, they call today for establishing a secular democracy with Arabs (Muslim and Christian) and Jews as equal citizens in the territory of Mandatory Palestine (Article 2.2, Association for One Democratic State in Palestine/Israel – Bylaws in English). The shift from *de facto* to acknowledged bi-nationalism entailed in such plans has been recognised and warned against even by Palestinians: ‘one should distinguish between “bi-national” and “secular democratic” states. These terms cannot be used interchangeably, especially when they are so freighted with associations, as is the case in the Israeli–Palestinian context (Said, in Barsimian 1999: 3–4).

Professor Sari Nusseibeh, currently president of Al-Quds University and one of the two leaders of the Ayalon-Nusseibeh Israeli–Palestinian people’s campaign for a two-state solution, became the first Palestinian openly to advocate the bi-national idea during the first intifada (1987–92). Since Israel at the time refused to recognise the Palestinians’ right to a state, he

maintained, the Palestinians should demand that Israel annex the territories and grant them full civil rights (in Rubinstein 2003). Exactly like the old-school Jewish bi-nationalists at the time of the Israeli-Jewish struggle for national liberation, and again like many of them an academic, Nusseibeh was also denounced by his own people, then in the midst of a struggle for an independent Palestinian state. He was called a defeatist and a nonpatriot, living in his ivory tower and knowing nothing of his countrymen's miseries, needs and desires.

Indeed, Nusseibeh's views on this matter remained politically peripheral, as at that time the hope for establishing an independent Palestinian state was still high. As noted earlier, when the prospects for a 'natural' political configuration appear strong, bi-nationalism has little chance of gaining public support. With the waning of that hope in the late 1990s, however, the bi-national idea gained more currency among the Palestinians, particularly because it well accorded with the increasingly popular Islamic movements' refusal to accept the territorial compromise entailed in the two-state solution, which the PLO has favored since the late 1980s. Lama Abu Odeh, a prominent Palestinian-American professor of law, asked in a controversial piece published in the *Boston Review* late in 2001: 'If the two-state solution is no longer physically possible, and demography is creating its own inexorable facts, what can serve as a framework for a settlement?' (Abu Odeh 2001–2002). The answer given by a growing number of Palestinian intellectuals is: 'If history cannot serve as a common basis for legitimisation, let us consider doing so on the basis of mutuality and equality. In other words, on the basis of equal political and civic rights in one state, with one-man, one-vote' (Khalidi 2003).

What advantages does the bi-national solution offer the Palestinians? Abu Odeh analyses the expected benefits in greater detail. First, it seems unlikely that Israel, even if an independent Palestinian state is established, would renounce its colonialist interests and let it develop as Britain and France did vis-à-vis their former colonies. Therefore, by adopting the bi-national model rather than basing their claims on a right to national self-determination, Palestinians would appeal to constitutional liberalism with its conception of individuals – whatever their race, religion or ethnicity – as equal, rights-bearing members of a single political society. Thus, rather than attaching their claims to a contiguous territory, Palestinians would attach their claims to Israeli resources as national citizens of the state of Israel (and as a historically persecuted minority). Second, so long as Palestinians try to establish their independent state, Israeli military figures will remain the main players in the negotiations. However, if they set out to negotiate their status within the state of Israel as citizens, Israeli jurists, who, Abu Odeh believes, are preferable to generals for the Palestinians, would play the primary role. Third, Palestinians would be far better off economically if they attached their legal claims directly to the resources of the state of Israel as a *national* budget rather than hoping to benefit from national economic development within a nominally, yet not practically, independent Palestinian state. Fourth, under a two-state solution

the Palestinian labor force would remain outside the scope of Israeli labor regulations because of its foreign status. Bi-nationalism, in contrast, would offer the possibility of labor alliances inside Israel with other groups of unprotected workers. Fifth, a bi-national state would foster alliances between Palestinians currently under occupation and Palestinian Israelis to jointly, and hence more effectively, combat the discriminatory Israeli land and housing policies. Furthermore, a civil rights agenda within a bi-national state would condemn Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza in terms of discrimination in the distribution of land and water resources, rather than as invasions of national territory. Finally, says Abu Odeh, bi-nationalism is more promising for Palestinians because the mobilising agenda for political activism would appeal to civil rights rather than to the current 'anti-colonial struggle to achieve national independence', and that appeal, in turn, would meet with greater sympathy in the United States.

The emerging Palestinian advocacy of bi-nationalism has drawn mainly negative reactions from the Palestinian community itself, from external observers, and most of all from Israeli Jews. The Palestinian mainstream had strongly opposed the bi-national idea; it was claimed that a bi-national state i.e. the development of a new Jewish–Palestinian identity, means relinquishing the Arab–Palestinian identity and reshaping the Palestinians' ties with the Arab world. Salim Tamari, a highly respected Palestinian sociologist, argued that bi-nationalism had failed to attract broad Palestinian support because it does not offer a 'programmatic position but [is] simply the expression of a desired outcome: an ideal, not a plan' (Tamari 2001/2002). Moreover, he observed, the Palestinian bi-nationalists had not addressed the problem of overcoming institutionalised Zionism, nor, on the other side, the difficulty of overcoming the general Palestinian resistance to being incorporated into a Europeanised, industrialised society.

External critics mostly referred to the impracticality of the bi-national idea: 'Abu-Odeh seems to have studiously avoided thinking about any of the real problems facing single-state solutions, and to have substantially exaggerated elements of the situation that would seem conducive to it' (Lustick 2001/2002). The Israeli critics are, as expected, divided along the Left–Right rift. Those on the Zionist Left, while acknowledging Israel's contribution to the Palestinian disillusionment with the two-state solution, express reservations: 'Adopting a one-state strategy, then, is an immense undertaking; a huge gamble. It risks sizeable Palestinian and Arab vested interests. It could prolong and escalate the conflict considerably . . . ' (Alpher 2003). Those on the Right, however, who basically see the Palestinians as foes, seek to expose the hidden agenda of Palestinian bi-nationalism:

. . . the Arabs have never viewed 'bi-nationalism' as a true partnership between two equal nations sharing sovereignty over a specific territory. Based on adamant rejection of the Jewish right for statehood, or indeed for any moral claim to equal rights in Palestine, they have perceived 'binationalism' as a unitary state comprising the whole of Palestine in which Jews would be reduced to permanent minority status at the

sufferance of the Arab-Muslim majority, a modern-day version of the *ahl al-dhimma* system of 'protected non-Muslim minorities' in the House of Islam. . . . Abu-Odeh's 'binationalism' seeks to subvert Israel in one fell swoop by flooding it, not only with millions of Palestinian refugees and their descendants but also with the 2.5-million-strong Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza. . . . such a 'binational' state would be tantamount to Israel's immediate destruction. (Karsh 2001/2002)

Klien-Halevi states in a similar manner: 'The notion that Palestinians and Jews, who can't even negotiate a two-state solution, could coexist in one happy state is so ludicrous that only the naive or the malicious would fall for it' (Klein-Halevi 2003).

External advocacy of bi-nationalism

Recently, amid mounting criticism of Israel's reoccupation of the territories, seen by many as facilitated by America's strong backing, outside observers have also begun pointing to the bi-national option as a more promising way out of the imbroglio. Whereas in the past this would have been avoided because bi-nationalism implies abolishing Israel as a Jewish state, and therefore connotes anti-Zionism if not anti-Semitism, today such advocacy is no longer taboo in certain intellectual circles in the United States and Europe.

A correspondent for *The Guardian* recently observed:

It is scarcely surprising that Palestinian enthusiasm for the two-state consensus is eroding. The Oslo agreement may have brought the Palestinian leadership home, but also required them to act as security sub-contractors for Israel in what amounted to a souped-up colony. . . . If the 'two state' moment has been and gone, some ask, then why not instead fight for equal rights, South Africa style, in a single binational state that has in practice existed in Palestine since 1967. (Milne 2004: II)

One of the most unexpected external proposals in this direction came recently from Libya. President Muammar Qaddafi advocated in his 'White Book' the founding of 'IsraTine' (or Isratine), a state in which Palestinians and Israelis can live together on an equal footing (Qaddafi 2004).³ Other suggestions are less 'imaginative' and more concrete. These observers all declare the Oslo process to be beyond repair: 'The Middle East peace process is finished', asserts Tony Judt, a British-born Jewish professor at New York University. 'It did not die; it was killed. . . . On the corpse-strewn landscape of the Fertile Crescent, Ariel Sharon, Yasser Arafat, and a handful of terrorists can all claim victory, and they do' (Judt 2003). Helena Cobban, a commentator well known for her pro-Arab interpretations of regional affairs, paints a similar picture: 'The road map which the Bush administration and its allies have pursued throughout the past year – cannot be salvaged. . . . Its death marks not just the latest in a long series of debacles in Washington's attempts at Israeli–Palestinian peacemaking. It could also mark the end of the long-pursued concept of a two-state solution' (Cobban 2003). And the Mennonite Central Committee's representative to the Palestinian territories reflects: 'A

viable two-state solution to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict is dying; perhaps it is already dead’ (Weaver 2003).

The proposed bi-national model’s fatal implications for Israel as a Jewish state are clear to the ‘external bi-nationalists’:

... what if there were no place in the world today for a ‘Jewish state’? ... It is not such a very odd thought ... Western civilization today is a patchwork of colors and religions and languages. ... In today’s ‘clash of cultures’ between open, pluralist democracies and belligerently intolerant, faith-driven ethno-states, Israel actually risks falling into the wrong camp. (Judt 2003)

Cobban tries to be more ‘positive’: ‘The end of the dream of a monocultural “Jewish state”? Yes. But in the Holy Land, as in South Africa, it could be the start of a hopeful new chapter in human history’ (Cobban 2003). These authors feel the need to emphasise strongly Israel’s responsibility for creating the impasse in the peace talks: ‘Israel continues to mock its American patron, building illegal settlements in cynical disregard of the “road map”’ (Judt 2003); ‘continued implantation of Israeli settlers and their supporting infrastructure into the West Bank has brought about a situation in which the establishment of a viable Palestinian state looks impossible’ (Cobban 2003). From there the way to advocating a bi-national solution is very short: ‘In South Africa, once supporters of apartheid figured out that no amount of repressing or fencing off blacks and no amount of punishing military raids against the country’s neighbors could bring them peace, they finally settled for that good old standby of democracies: a one-person-one-vote system within a unitary state. ... So why not in Israel/Palestine?’ (*ibid.*). Judt puts Israel in a different historical context, yet draws a similar conclusion:

Israel’s ethno-religious self-definition, and its discrimination against internal ‘foreigners’, has always had more in common with, say, the policies of the post-Hapsburg Romania, than either party might care to acknowledge. ... The very idea of a ‘Jewish state’ ... Jewish religion have exclusive privileges from which the non-Jewish are forever excluded – is rooted in another time and place. Israel, in short, is an anachronism. (Judt 2003)

Judt outlines four possible scenarios for the future; the first three are obviously unacceptable: (a) withdrawal to the 1967 borders, within which Israel would develop a semi-apartheid system, ‘remain[ing] a Jewish state and a democracy, albeit one with a constitutionally anomalous community of second-class Arab citizens’; (b) continued occupation of the territories, whose Arab population would shortly become the demographic majority; (c) transfer, meaning that Israel would keep control of the territories while ejecting the overwhelming majority of the Arab population. As for the fourth option, Judt explains: ‘The true alternative facing the Middle East in coming years will be between an ethnically cleansed Greater Israel and a single, integrated, binational state of Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians’ (Judt 2003). The Mennonites’ representative to Israel/Palestine admits that if Zionism necessarily means the creation and preservation of a Jewish demographic majority at the expense of the rights and well-being of Palestinians,

then advocacy for a bi-national state is indeed anti-Zionist. Other Zionisms, however, such as a 'cultural Zionism' that looks for a revitalisation of Jewish life in the land while not depending on sovereign and demographic control might emerge as possibilities compatible with a bi-national vision (Weaver 2003).

As expected, such advocacy of bi-nationalism has not been well received by those who define Israel as first and foremost a Jewish state and therefore regard such revisionist ideas as a plot to destroy it as such. When the external bi-nationalists are not Jewish, the Israeli and Jewish reaction is rather mild because they are not really expected to care about Israel's fate. In Judt's case, however, the critics caustically attributed his position to a lack of national pride and psychological weakness:

Judt calls his article 'Israel: The Alternative'. But let us read strenuously. A binational state is not the alternative for Israel. It is the alternative to Israel . . . I detect the scars of dinners and conferences. He does not wish to be held accountable for things that he has not himself done, or to be regarded as the representative of anyone but himself. . . . These old anxieties. . . . Why doesn't he simply delete his Zionism or his support for Israel from his inventory of multiple elective identities? (Wieseltier 2003)

Judt's article drew even harsher criticism in Israel. Thus the deputy editor of *Haaretz*, who is not 'suspected' of holding right-wing views, expostulated:

Sixty years after the attempt to wipe out the Jewish people in Europe, after which the countries of the world were kind enough to allow Holocaust survivors to build a national home for themselves, along comes a historian who specializes in Europe and proposes that the Jews commit suicide. That they once again become a minority, only this time a minority in a Palestinian nation-state wedged between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. Can an idea be ludicrous and dangerous at the same time? Judt proves that the answer is yes . . . (Esteron 2003)

Summary and conclusions

This article has reviewed four different advocacies of bi-nationalism. The first advocacy, the 'old school' of Jewish bi-nationalism, envisaged a regime based on parity. It was morally oriented, yet no less pragmatic. This school did not regard bi-nationalism as an optimal arrangement, but as the only one that might prevent a deterioration into violent strife. This appeasing posture, however, did not meet a positive Arab response. These bi-nationalists, many of whose predictions about the conflict proved highly accurate in the ensuing years, were ostracised by their fellow Jews. Denounced as defeatists, cowards, naive and dangerous to the Zionist endeavor, their idea was widely perceived as politically irrelevant.

The second advocacy, the 'new school' of Jewish bi-nationalism, is even more pragmatic than its predecessor. In fact, the salient feature of this bi-nationalism is pessimism about the viability of Israel as a Jewish entity amid the regional realities of the last decade. Although a Jewish state alongside a

Palestinian one is still the preferred solution for today's Israeli bi-nationalists, under the circumstances they see this as a nonstarter. They view bi-nationalism as the last resort for saving Israeli Jews from themselves, from the repercussions of their expansionist and nationalistic drives that, according to this outlook, may well lead to Israel's physical collapse under the demographic and other pressures created by the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories. With a collection of individuals promoting this idea rather than a group like Brit Shalom, it is not well articulated or coherent in terms of the envisaged regime structure. The mainstream and, apparently, the majority on the Israeli side fiercely opposes and attacks this idea. They view bi-nationalism as neither guaranteeing the physical safety of Jews in Palestine nor ensuring their ability to maintain their collective identity and express it publicly.

The third type of bi-nationalism, also contemporary, is found on the Palestinian side. Here as well, the advocates are individuals, mostly intellectuals, and not any political body. Furthermore, like its Israeli equivalent, Palestinian bi-nationalism is highly pragmatic and is mainly concerned with attaining the Palestinians' national interests in the present nonconductive state of affairs, not with some moralistic vision of regional justice or 'positive peace'. Unlike the Israeli plans, however, most of the Palestinian ones involve a *de facto* model that is almost identical to the former agenda of the PLO: a secular-democratic state in Mandatory Palestine in which Jews and Palestinians would have equal, individual civil and human rights but not collective rights. In most cases, then, Palestinian bi-nationalism reflects an expectation for a change in the regional power equation, which would help the Palestinians translate their future demographic advantage into a political one. The Palestinian mainstream's negative reactions to this model do not, then, stem from a concern that it implies losing political control but from a refusal to opt for an artificial Jewish-Palestinian civil identity, and to give up a distinctive historical identity as part of the Arab and Islamic worlds.

The fourth advocacy of bi-nationalism comes from outside observers. In most cases their recommendations, perhaps based on their personal experience as citizens of well-established, multicultural, liberal Western democracies, fail to take into account both sides' desire to maintain their national identity. In fact, many Israelis argue that the use of the term bi-nationalism by these 'outsiders' is highly misleading because what they actually advocate is a PLO-style secular, liberal democracy, while offering no practical mechanisms to guarantee either side's collective rights and in particular Israel's right to remain a Jewish state, and even the physical safety of the Israeli Jews in a not so benevolent environment.

Despite the differences in content and style, let alone in motivations and implications, there are certain similarities among these four versions of bi-nationalism. First, in all cases bi-nationalism is not the most desirable option, and most of the various advocates acknowledge this. Evidently, this idea has gained momentum on both sides in periods of transformation in the power

relations between them, mostly though not only because of demographic changes: the massive Jewish immigration to Palestine from the 1920s to the 1940s, which threatened the Arabs, and the much higher birthrate of the Palestinians, which is now very intimidating to the Israeli Jews. Second, when the conflict reaches a point where the violence becomes unbearable, as in 1929, or with today's mutual killings of Israelis and Palestinians, the sense of urgency seems to intensify at least to the extent that individuals of a certain kind are willing to relinquish 'natural' aspirations for statehood and make do with artificial constructs such as bi-nationalism. Third, all the bi-nationalisms dealt with present a rather uneasy, often unbalanced mixture of universalistic, moralistic arguments and very sober, pragmatic ones. This creates the impression that either the moralistic reasoning is a fig leaf for national aspirations, or the supposedly pragmatic arguments are not actually realistic. Last but not least, in all cases the people who embrace the bi-national model are intellectuals, not practicing politicians or even experts who take part in national decision-making. This gives their recommendations more than a touch of 'ivory tower' overrationalisation and detachment from reality.

Taking all things into account, the major question that arises is to what extent bi-nationalism is today a feasible political panacea for the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Apparently, no 'objective' or 'authoritative' answer can be given in this case, since the issue at stake is normatively highly loaded and since primordial identities that do not bow to 'rational' calculations are clearly involved. Overall, though, for several reasons this solution's feasibility can be assessed as rather low without much risk of imposing some 'exogenous' logic on national agendas or of being refuted shortly by events. To start with, technically speaking it is quite obvious that if the present demographic trends are not reversed and if the Israeli occupation of the territories is not ended and a separate Palestinian political entity established, then a *de facto* bi-nationalism, rooted in the Palestinians' much higher birthrate, will prevail in the historical Land of Israel/Palestine in two to three decades (e.g. Soffer 2003). Yet, as mentioned at the outset, once a clear demographic advantage is achieved or is likely to be achieved by one ethno-national group (in this case the Palestinians), its interest in opting for a *de jure* bi-national arrangement becomes minimal or disappears. The same applies to the former majority ethno-national group (in this case the Israeli Jews) that is threatened with becoming a minority; opting for a bi-national set-up means acknowledging its demographic and political defeat. Therefore, it is much more likely that before the former balance of power is reversed, the latter group will try and pre-empt such a development by unilateral, sometimes aggressive moves.

Furthermore, politically speaking, at present neither the Israeli nor the Palestinian political elite has abandoned the vision of 'two states for two peoples'. In fact, as mentioned earlier, on both sides extremist, still relatively small, groups advocate *de facto* (rather than *de jure*) bi-nationalism. In addition, whereas establishing a bi-national order and achieving political

accommodation requires a convergence of interests and a normative consensus between the two collectivities' elites, today the cleavage between the Palestinian and Israeli leaders is so wide that the chances of them reaching such a level of co-operation are practically nil.

Last but not least, even if a miracle occurs and the two sides' elites arrive at an agreement on a bi-national framework, it can be expected to be very fragile. Divisions based on ethnic identities are highly likely to be resistant to consociational management. Ethnic groups, like Israeli Jews and Palestinians, are not defined by the fact that they follow certain leaders. Therefore 'if the present leaders agree to something on behalf of their followers, it is always open to some rival to denounce the terms as a sell-out and to seek to gather support for repudiating them' (Barry 1975). Thus even if a bi-national Israeli/Palestinian framework is formally established, it is highly likely to collapse shortly afterwards.

Notes

1 According to some sources, the PA had sent a previous (discreet) memo in the same spirit to the American administration on 7 October 2002 (Perlman 2002).

2 Whether or not one accepts this specific argumentation, apparently the notion of a binational state is indeed an existential anathema to almost all Israelis (Susser 2003). The figures indicate minimal inclination in Israel today toward a binational solution, particularly compared to the two-state model. In a survey in 1999, when asked to choose between the two models, 58 percent of the Jewish respondents opted for a two-state solution and only 15% favored the binational model (11% preferred some other solution to the conflict; 7.5% said there was no way out of it; 8.5% had no clear opinion). However, in late 2003, when 78% of Israeli Jews supported the two-state solution, only 6% (!) favored the binational one (11.5% saw no possible solution to the conflict; 4.5% did not know) (Peace – Index, October 2003). These figures point to an interesting phenomenon: although the escalation in violence and the deterioration in Israeli-Palestinian relations from 2000 to 2003 have driven some intellectuals away from the two-state solution, the general public has strengthened its support for such a solution, probably because of the sharp decrease in its trust toward the other side and in the apparent prospects for peaceful coexistence. Indeed, when asked about the possibility of Jews and Palestinians being citizens with equal rights in a single state, only 11% of the Jewish interviewees said this was highly or fairly possible whereas 85.5% said it was almost or totally impossible. Furthermore, only 16% thought it would be possible to guarantee the physical safety of the Jewish community in such a framework (*ibid.*).

3 The name 'IsraTine' combines the first part of the word Israel with the last part of the word Philasteen (the Arabic pronunciation for Palestine).

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