THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

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ONE

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I

Palestine and the Palestinians

Until roughly the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, everything to the east of an imaginary line drawn somewhere between Greece and Turkey was called the Orient. As a designation made in Europe, "the Orient" for many centuries represented a special mentality, as in the phrase "the Oriental mind," and also a set of special cultural, political, and even racial characteristics (in such notions as the Oriental despot, Oriental sensuality, splendor, inscrutability). But mainly the Orient represented a kind of indiscriminate generality for Europe, associated not only with difference and otherness, but with the vast spaces, the undifferentiated masses of mostly colored people, and the romance, exotic locales, and mystery of "the marvels of the East." Anyone familiar with the political history of the late Victorian period, however, will know that the vexing, mostly political "Eastern Question," as it was called, tended then to replace "the Orient" as a subject of concern. By 1918 it is estimated that European powers were in colonial occupation of about 85 percent of the globe, of which a large segment belonged to the regions formerly known simply as Oriental.[1] The romance of the Orient was thus succeeded by the problems of dealing with the Orient, first in competition with other European powers maneuvering there and second with the colonial people themselves in their

struggles for independence. From being a place "out there," the Orient became a place of extraordinarily urgent, and precise detail, a place of numerous subdivisions. One of these, the Middle East, survives today as a region of the Orient connoting infinite complexities, problems, conflicts. At its center stands what I shall be calling the question of Palestine.

When we refer to a subject, place, or person in the phrase "the question of," we imply a number of different things. For example, one concludes a survey of current affairs by saying, "And now I come to the question of X." The point here is that X is a matter apart from all the others, and must be dealt with apart. Secondly, "the question of" is used to refer to some long-standing, particularly intractable and insistent problem: the question of rights, the Eastern question, the question of free speech. Thirdly, and most uncommonly, "the question of" can be used in such a way as to suggest that the status of the thing referred to in the phrase is uncertain, questionable, unstable: the question of the existence of a Loch Ness monster, for example. The use of "the question of" in connection with Palestine implies all three types of meaning. Like the Orient of which it is a part, Palestine exists in another world from the habitual Atlantic one. Palestine is also in some way what the most thorny international problem of postwar life is all about: the struggle over, for, and in Palestine, which has absorbed the energies of more people than any other for a comparable period of time. Finally—and this is a main reason for this book—Palestine itself is a much debated, even contested, notion. The very mention of the name on the one hand constitutes for the Palestinian and his partisans an act of important and positive political assertion, and on the other, for the Palestinian's enemies it is an act of equally assertive but much more negative and threatening denial. We need only recall here that demonstrations on the streets of major American cosmopolitan centers during the late sixties and much of the seventies were led by factions saying either "Palestine *is*" or "There is no Palestine." In Israel today it is the custom officially to refer to the Palestinians as "so-called Palestinians," which is a somewhat gentler phrase than Golda

Meir's flat assertion in 1969 that the Palestinians did not exist.

The fact of the matter is that today Palestine does not exist, except as a memory or, more importantly, as an idea, a political and human experience, and an act of sustained popular will. My subject in this essay will be all those things about Palestine, although I will not for a moment pretend that Palestine, for anyone now living and writing in the West, is not "the question of." Yet even to admit that is already to venture into a relatively unfamiliar field. For too many people who read the press, who watch television and listen to the radio, who pretend to more than a smattering of political knowledge, who confess to expert opinions on international controversy, the Middle East is essentially the Arab-Israeli conflict (dispute, problem, struggle, etc.) and little more. There is a considerable reductiveness in this view, of course, but what is really wrong with it is that most of the time it literally blocks Palestine from having anything to do with the Middle East of today, which since September 1978 seems entirely symbolized by Menachem Begin, Anwar al-Sadat, and Jimmy Carter locked up together at Camp David. A considerable majority of the literature on the Middle East, at least until 1968, gives one the impression that the essence of what goes on in the Middle East is a series of unending wars between a group of Arab countries and Israel. That there had been such an entity as Palestine until 1948, or that Israel's existence—its "independence," as the phrase goes—was the result of the eradication of Palestine: of these truths beyond dispute most people who follow events in the Middle East are more or less ignorant, or unaware.[2] But what is most important is the continuing avoidance or ignorance of the existence today of about four million Muslim and Christian Arabs who are known to themselves and to others as Palestinians. They make up the question of Palestine, and if there is no country called Palestine it is not because there are no Palestinians. There are, and this essay is an attempt to put their reality before the reader.

Much recent history involves the Palestinians, and like their present actuality, it is a history dispersed in likely and unlikely places. No foreign affairs symposium, scholarly book, or moral

attitude taken is complete without some reference to Palestinian (sometimes also known as "Arab") terrorism. Any self-respecting director planning a film on some current, and probably invented, enormity would not pass up the occasion to introduce a Palestinian into his cast as a sort of card-carrying terrorist. Films like *Black Sunday* and *Sorcerer* come immediately to mind. On the other hand, the Palestinians have canonically been associated with all the characteristics of refugees who—depending on the occasion—fester in camps, are a political "football" being used by Arab states, are a breeding ground for communism, tend to procreate like rabbits, and so forth. More analytic and hardheaded commentators have frequently remarked that the Palestinians constitute an elite in the Arab world. Not only do they seem to have the highest educational attainment of any other national group there; they are also well placed in sensitive positions in sensitive places in the overall Arab polity. Such pressure points as oil ministries and installations in the Arabian Gulf, economic and educational advisories, all these plus a large segment of the Arab upper bourgeoisie (bankers, entrepreneurs, intellectuals) are occupied by Palestinians, all of whom are supposed to be hungry for trouble and revenge.

Lastly and most recently, for the first time since 1948, American political debate has turned to the Palestinian problem. Beginning with President Carter, it is no longer considered a sign of rank anti-Semitism to say that Middle Eastern peace must at last take the problem of the Palestinians into serious consideration. A "Palestinian homeland" and the thorny issue of Palestinian representation at proposed peace conferences are enormously important questions now challenging public consciousness. Because of its first post-1948 appearance as an independent item on the United Nations General Assembly agenda in 1974, embodied in Yasir Arafat's controversial appearance there, "the question of Palestine" has irritated and penetrated the general awareness in a new and possibly propitious way, although Palestinian self-determination was first voted on affirmatively at the United Nations in 1969. (General Assembly Resolution 2535B expressed

grave concern "that the denial of [Palestinian] rights has been aggravated by the reported acts of collective punishment, arbitrary detention, curfews, destruction of houses and property, deportation and other repressive acts against the refugees and other inhabitants of the occupied territories," and then went on to "reaffirm the inalienable rights of the people of Palestine." One year later, Resolution 2627C recognized "that the people of Palestine are entitled to equal rights and self-determination, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.")

Despite these unambiguous determinations, the Palestinians remain so *specialized* a people as to serve essentially as a synonym for trouble—rootless, mindless, gratuitous trouble. They will not go away as they ought to, they will not accept the fate of other refugees (who have, apparently, simply resigned themselves to being refugees and therefore are contented as such), they cause trouble. Recent crises involving the Palestinians in Lebanon and Jordan are cited as instances to prove the point. And if the commentator happens to be more sophisticated, he may also allude to the "fact" that the Palestinians are part of what is doubtless a fearsome event, the resurgence of Islam.[3] According to this somewhat paranoiac view, if even the President of the United States refers to the Palestinian problem as an intrinsic part of the Middle East peace, it is because of Muslim oil, Muslim fanaticism, Muslim blackmail.

What all such material partially screens is something totally intractable, something that totally resists any theory, any one-plus-one explanation, any display of feelings or attitudes. I refer to the plain and irreducible core of the Palestinian experience for the last hundred years: that on the land called Palestine there existed as a huge majority for hundreds of years a largely pastoral, a nevertheless socially, culturally, politically, economically identifiable people whose language and religion were (for a huge majority) Arabic and Islam, respectively. This people—or, if one wishes to deny them any modern conception of themselves as a people, this *group* of people—identified itself with the land it tilled and lived on (poorly or not is irrelevant), the more so after an almost wholly

European decision was made to resettle, reconstitute, recapture the land for Jews who were to be brought there from elsewhere. So far as anyone has been able to determine, there has been no example given of any significant Palestinian gesture made to accept this modern reconquest or to accept that Zionism has permanently removed Palestinians from Palestine. Such as it is, the Palestinian actuality is today, was yesterday, and most likely tomorrow will be built upon an act of resistance to this new foreign colonialism. But it is more likely that there will remain the inverse resistance which has characterized Zionism and Israel since the beginning: the refusal to admit, and the consequent denial of, the existence of Palestinian Arabs who are there not simply as an inconvenient nuisance, but as a population with an indissoluble bond with the land.

The question of Palestine is therefore the contest between an affirmation and a denial, and it is this prior contest, dating back over a hundred years, which animates and makes sense of the current impasse between the Arab states and Israel. The contest has been almost comically uneven from the beginning. Certainly so far as the West is concerned, Palestine has been a place where a relatively advanced (because European) incoming population of Jews has performed miracles of construction and civilizing and has fought brilliantly successful technical wars against what was always portrayed as a dumb, essentially repellent population of uncivilized Arab natives. There is no doubt that the contest in Palestine has been between an advanced (and advancing) culture and a *relatively* backward, more or less traditional one. But we need to try to understand what the instruments of this contest were, and how they shaped subsequent history so that this history now *appears* to confirm the validity of the Zionist claims to Palestine, thereby denigrating the Palestinian claims.

In other words, we must understand the struggle between Palestinians and Zionism as a struggle between a presence and an interpretation, the former constantly appearing to be overpowered and eradicated by the latter. What was this

presence? No matter how backward, uncivilized, and silent they were, the Palestinian Arabs *were* on the land. Read through any eighteenth- or nineteenth-century account of travels in the Orient—Chateaubriand, Mark Twain, Lamartine, Nerval, Disraeli—and you will find chronicled there accounts of Arab inhabitants on the land of Palestine. According to Israeli sources, in 1822 there were no more than 24,000 Jews in Palestine, less than 10 percent of the whole, overwhelmingly Arab population. For the most part, it is true, these Arabs were usually described as uninteresting and undeveloped, but at least they were there. Yet almost always, because the land was Palestine and therefore controlled, in the Western mind, not by its present realities and inhabitants but by its glorious, portentous past and the seemingly limitless potential of its (possibly) just as glorious future, Palestine was seen as a place to be possessed *anew* and reconstructed. Alphonse de Lamartine is a perfect case in point. He visited in 1833 and produced a several-hundred-page narrative of his travels, *Voyage en Orient*. When he published the work, he affixed to it a *Resume politique* in the form of a series of suggestions to the French government. Although in the *Voyage* proper he had detailed numerous encounters with Arab peasants and town dwellers in the Holy Land, the *Resume* announced that the territory was not really a country (presumably its inhabitants not "real" citizens), and therefore a marvelous place for an imperial or colonial project to be undertaken by France.[4] What Lamartine does is to cancel and transcend an actual reality—a group of resident Arabs—by means of a future wish—that the land be empty for development by a more deserving power. It is precisely this kind of thinking, almost to the letter, that informed the Zionist slogan formulated by Israel Zangwill for Palestine toward the end of the century: a land without people, for a people without land.

For Palestine has always played a special role in the imagination and in the political will of the West, which is where by common agreement modern Zionism also originated. Palestine is a place of causes and pilgrimages. It was the prize

of the Crusades, as well as a place whose very name (and the endless historical naming and renaming of the place) has been an issue of doctrinal importance. As I said above, to call the place Palestine and not, say, Israel or Zion is already an act of political will. This in part explains the insistence in much pro-Zionist writing on the dubious assertion that Palestine was used only as an administrative designation in the Roman Empire, and never since—except of course during the British Mandate period after 1922. The point there has been to show that *Palestine* too is also an interpretation, one with much less continuity and prestige than *Israel.* But here we see another instance of the same mechanism employed by Lamartine: using a future or past dream to obliterate the realities lying between past and future. The truth is, of course, that if one were to read geographers, historians, philosophers, and poets who wrote in Arabic from the eighth century on, one would find references to Palestine; to say nothing of innumerable references to Palestine in European literature from the Middle Ages to the present. The point may be a small one, but it serves to show how epistemologically the name of, and of course the very presence of bodies, in Palestine are—because Palestine carries so heavy an imaginative and doctrinal freight—transmuted from a reality into a nonreality, from a presence into an absence. My more important point is that so far as the Arab Palestinian is concerned, the Zionist project for, and conquest of, Palestine was simply the most successful and to date the most protracted of many such European projects since the Middle Ages. I say this as a relatively simple historical statement, without at this stage wishing to say anything about the comparative intrinsic merit of Zionism against that of earlier projects.

Palestine became a predominantly Arab and Islamic country by the end of the seventh century. Almost immediately thereafter its boundaries and its characteristics—including its name in Arabic, *Filastin*—became known to the entire Islamic world, as much for its fertility and beauty as for its religious significance. In the late tenth century, for example, we find this passage in Arabic:

> Filastin is the westernmost of the provinces of Syria. In its greatest length from Rafh to the boundary of Al Lajjun (Legio) it would take a rider two days to travel over; and the like time to cross the province in its breadth from Yafa (Jaffa) to Riha (Jericho). Zugar (Segor, Zoar) and the country of Lot's people (Diyar Kaum Lot); Al Jibal (the mountains of Edom) and Ash Sharah as far as Ailah—Al Jibal and Ash Sharah being two separate provinces, but lying contiguous one to the other—are included in Filastin, and belong to its government.
>
> Filastin is watered by the rains and the dew. Its trees and its ploughed lands do not need artificial irrigation; and it is only in Nablus that you find the running waters applied to this purpose. Filastin is the most fertile of the Syrian provinces. Its capital and largest town is Ar Ramlah, but the Holy City (of Jerusalem) comes very near this last in size. In the province of Filastin, despite its small extent, there are about twenty mosques, with pulpits for the Friday prayer.[5]

In 1516, Palestine became a province of the Ottoman Empire, but this made it no less fertile, no less Arab or Islamic. A century later the English poet George Sandys spoke of it as "a land that flowed with milk and honey; in the midst as it were of the habitable world, and under a temperate clime; adorned with beautiful mountains and luxurious vallies; the rocks producing excellent waters; and no part empty of delight or profit."[6] Such reports persist in profusion through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not only in travelers' accounts but, by the end of the nineteenth century, in scientific quarterly reports published by the (British) Palestine Exploration Fund.

Despite the steady arrival in Palestine of Jewish colonists after 1882, it is important to realize that not until the few weeks immediately preceding the establishment of Israel in the spring of 1948 was there ever anything other than a huge Arab majority. For example, the Jewish population in 1931 was 174,606 against a total of 1,033,314; in 1936, Jewish numbers had gone up to 384,078 and the total to 1,366,692; in 1946 there were 608,225 Jews in a total population of 1,912,112.[7] In all these statistics, "natives" were easily distinguishable from the arriving colonists. But who were these natives?

All of them spoke Arabic, and were mainly Sunni Muslims, although a minority among them were Christians, Druzes, and Shiite Muslims—all of whom spoke Arabic too. Approximately 65 percent of the Palestinian Arabs were agricultural people who lived in about 500 villages where ground crops as well as fruits and vegetables were grown. The principal Palestinian cities—Nablus, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Acre, Jaffa, Jericho, Ramlah, Hebron, and Haifa—were built in the main by Palestinian Arabs, who continued to live there even after the encroaching Zionist colonies expanded very close to them. There were also a respectable Palestinian intellectual and professional class, the beginnings of small industry, and a highly developed national consciousness. Modern Palestinian social, economic, and cultural life was organized around the same issues of independence and anti colonialism prevalent in the region, only for the Palestinians there were the legacy of Ottoman rule, then Zionist colonialism, then British mandatory authority (after World War I) to contend with more or less all together. All Arab Palestinians, almost without exception, felt themselves to be part of the great Arab awakening stirring since the last years of the nineteenth century, and it is this feeling that gave encouragement and coherence to an otherwise disruptive modern history. Palestinian writers and intellectuals like Hakam Darwazeh, Khalil Sakakineh, Khalil Beidas, and Najib Nassar, political organizations like the Futtuwa and Najada, the Arab Higher Committees, and the Arab League of Arab National Liberation (which argued that the Palestinian question could only be solved by Arabs and Jews together)[8]—all these formed great national blocs among the population, directed the energies of the "non-Jewish" Palestinian community, created a Palestinian identity opposed equally to British rule and to Jewish colonization, and solidified the Palestinian sense of belonging by whichever continuity of residence to a distinct national group with a language (the Palestinian Arab dialect) and a specific communal sense (threatened particularly by Zionism) of its own.

From the beginning of serious Zionist planning for Palestine (that is, roughly, from the period during and after World War I), one can note the increasing prevalence of the idea that Israel was to be built on the ruins of this Arab Palestine. At first the idea was stated with a good deal of circumspection, and it was done to fit in with the conceptions of a reconstructing colonialism so crucial to high European imperialism. In 1895, Theodor Herzl noted in his *Diaries* that something would have to be done about the Palestinian natives:

> We shall have to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country.
>
> Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly.[9]

Lord Rothschild corresponded on behalf of the Zionists with the British government in the phase that led up to the issuing of the Balfour Declaration. His memorandum of July 18, 1917 speaks of "the principle that Palestine should be re-constituted as the National Home for the Jewish People." Chaim Weizmann was soon to speak of the fact that the British understood how "the Jews alone were capable of rebuilding Palestine and of giving it a place in the modern family of nations." The Chief Rabbi of England, Dr. J. H. Herz, spoke eloquently of British "powerful support to the re-establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."[10] None of these statements is clear enough about what is at present to be found in Palestine. The country's "re-constitution" and "rebuilding" unmistakably implies, however, that its present constitution—including hundreds of thousands of Arabs—was to be dissolved (how or where this is to be done isn't very clear) *in order that in its place* was to appear a new Jewish state. The style of these declarations of intent is to leave out any unambiguous reference to the doubtless inconvenient fact that the country was already constituted (if only as a colony) and that its inhabitants were most unlikely to be happy about their "reconstitution" by a new colonial force. But the statements themselves are perfectly accurate: Palestine was rebuilt, it was reconstructed, it was reestablished. Just how brutal these acts were is

indicated, I think, in these remarks by Moshe Dayan in April 1969:

> We came to this country which was already populated by Arabs, and we are establishing a Hebrew, that is a Jewish state here. In considerable areas of the country [the total area was about 6 percent] we bought the lands from the Arabs. Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of these Arab villages, and I do not blame you, because these geography books no longer exist; not only do the books not exist, the Arab villages are not there either. Nahalal [Dayan's own village] arose in the place of Mahalul, Gevat—in the place of Jibta, [Kibbutz] Sarid—in the place of Haneifs and Kefar Yehoshua—in the place of Tell Shaman. There is not one place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population. [*Ha-Aretz*, April 4, 1969]

Even Dayan's terminology, frank as it is, is euphemistic. For what he means by "the Arab villages are not there either" is that they were destroyed systematically. One outraged Israeli, Professor Israel Shahak, who reckons almost four hundred villages were thus eliminated, has said that these villages were "destroyed *completely*, with their houses, garden-walls, and even cemeteries and tombstones, so that literally a stone does not remain standing, and visitors are passing and being told that 'it was all desert.' "[11] There is some unpleasant congruity to the fact that after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 the same policy of destruction was carried out there; by the end of 1969, 7,554 Arab houses were razed, and by August 1971, 16,212 houses had been demolished, according to the London *Sunday Times* of June 19, 1977.

Nor was this all. According to the most precise calculation yet made, approximately 780,000 Arab Palestinians were dispossessed and displaced in 1948 in order to facilitate the "reconstruction and rebuilding" of Palestine.[12] These are the Palestinian refugees, who now number well over two million. And finally we should add that the quantity of Arabs held since 1967 inside the Occupied Territories (which Menachem Begin

claims to have "liberated") is 1.7 million; of them half a million are part of pre-1967 Israel. The transformation of Palestine which resulted in Israel has been an extraordinarily expensive project—especially for the Arab Palestinians.

II
Palestine and the Liberal West

All the transformative projects for Palestine, including Zionism, have rationalized the denial of present reality in Palestine with some argument about a "higher" (or better, more worthy, more modern, more fitting; the comparatives are almost infinite) interest, cause, or mission. These "higher" things entitle their proponents not only to claim that the natives of Palestine, such as they are, are not worth considering and therefore nonexistent; they also feel entitled to claim that the natives of Palestine, and Palestine itself, have been superseded definitively, transformed completely and beyond recall, and this even while those same natives have been demonstrating exactly the opposite. Here again the Arab Palestinian has been pitted against an undeniably superior antagonist whose consciousness of himself and of the Palestinian is exactly, *positionally*, superior. Among the many examples of this expressed and demonstrated superiority there is naturally the Balfour Declaration, made in November 1917 by the British Government in the form of a letter to Lord Rothschild (who represented Zionist interests for the occasion), in which the government undertook to "view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." What is important about the declaration is, first, that it has long formed the juridical basis of Zionist claims to Palestine and, second, and more crucial for our purposes here, that it was a statement whose positional force can only be appreciated when the demographic or human realities of Palestine are kept clearly in mind. That is, the declaration was made (a) by a European power, (b) about a non-European territory, (c) in a flat disregard of both the presence and the