

ONE PEOPLE TOO MANY?

*Translated from French, this interview with Afif Safieh was published in 1985
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VIVANT UNIVERS: *What does it mean to be Palestinian?*

AFIF SAFIEH: You know, there is a popular saying "Happy peoples have no history". The Palestinian people – should they congratulate themselves, or should they be regretful? – are burdened by a history several thousand years old.

To be Palestinian today means to have been deprived of the elementary right to live in one's country. It means having been displaced by force, time after time, from one place to another, and under conditions of complete destitution. It means having lost one's property, the plot of land which one cultivated, and the home one lived in. It means helplessly witnessing the gradual Judaization of one's homeland, and the removal of the Arab influence and presence from it.

It means having no identity papers like all the other citizens of the world have. It means having administrative problems throughout one's life, from birth to death, a death which is often caused by arms and bombs which have been prohibited by international law but which have been discharged indiscriminately, with a preference for civilian targets, in order to terrorize the population. It means unimaginable complications when one sets out to search for a job, and interminable waits in airports and at borders.

To be a Palestinian means belonging to a family which has been broken up and scattered to all corners of the world. My family, for example, which consists of five people, lives in three different continents. My parents and one sister are in Jerusalem, my brother in Brazil and I am in Belgium. At the time of my father's death two years ago, I could not return to his side "because of the military occupation".

Those who have been able to remain in the country feel unwanted there. They are subjected to daily harassment; they are pushed into an emigration which has nothing voluntary about it. Juridicial harassment (expropriation), economic harassment (unbearable taxes pillage of hydraulic resources), police repression . . . The overwhelming majority of Palestinian adults have already been imprisoned at least once by the occupation authorities. In the prisons, the practice of torture is frequent. When there are protest demonstrations, it often happens that the forces of "order" which "officially" receive orders to fire into the air, prefer to aim at the air which is to be found in the lungs of the demonstrators . . .

V.U.: *How many Palestinians are there today? Where do they live?*

A.S.: There are about five million Palestinians. Seven hundred thousand are in Israel, within its pre-1967 boundaries. One million live in the West Bank and 700,000 in the Gaza Strip, these two territories having been under Israeli military occupation since 1967. One and a half million live in Jordan, 400,000 in Lebanon, 300,000 in Kuwait and 250,000 in Syria. Half a million Palestinians are spread throughout the two Americas. In

every country of the world you will find Palestinian communities of different sizes.

But whether they live in occupied lands, are stuck in refugee camps, or are experiencing exile in a far-off country, all Palestinians share common sufferings and aspirations; to be able to exercise their right of return, their right to self-determination and to national sovereignty.

At the cross section of three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe), Palestine has been throughout time the object of external desires. My father's generation, for example, witnessed three distinct and successive phases of national oppression: Turkish domination until 1917, followed by the British Mandate (1917-1948) which then favoured Zionist penetration (1948). But the last distinguished itself from the preceding aggressions. Zionism, an imported ideology, also recruited its followers abroad. With the aim of transforming Palestine into "a country just as Jewish as England was English", it could not succeed in its enterprise except through the subordination or expulsion of the indigenous population. The Zionist movement, and then the State of Israel, imposed a double human migration on Palestine: on the one hand, the massive expulsion of the Palestinians to the periphery of their national soil and, on the other, the arrival – just as massive – of settlers to replace them.

In this way then, Israel constituted the last colonial project – accomplished paradoxically in the age of decolonisation .

V.U.: But a certain "History" insists on presenting Palestine as "a land without a people" which was to have been offered to a "people without a land". What truth is there in this? Was Palestine really nothing but an uncultivated and arid desert?

A.S.: The Zionist movement is a master in the art of fabricating myths and it appears that the Palestinian people were condemned, not only to have their rights despoiled but to be systematically denigrated as well. It was in order to "legitimise" its visions regarding this monstrosity: that is, the "demographic vacuum" in the country, which would therefore be colonisable without injustice and without remorse. This is a conceptual genocide.

As a matter of fact, many Zionist colonizers left Palestine once they discovered a people like any other, made up of city-dwellers, countryfolk and nomads, all of whom aspired to independence. But that was nothing but the reaction of a tiny minority.

The majority, with full prior knowledge, were to pursue their colonial project and continue to attract new waves of immigrants. And this with the support of Great Britain. Lord Balfour, Minister for Foreign Affairs, was to write, "In Palestine we do not envisage undertaking the consultation of the will of the present inhabitants", explaining that Zionism was, for Great Britain, of greater importance than "the desires and prejudices of 700,000 Arabs who now live in this ancient land".¹

As acknowledged by the British themselves then, 700,000 Palestinians lived in Palestine in 1917. On such grounds as these and according to this logic, how many states which are today members of the United Nations, could be considered "lands without people", available for enterprises of domination and monopoly?

An Israeli intellectual, Saul Friedlander, unable to deny the demographic evidence, was to speak of the confrontation between the "subjective right" of the Jews to Palestine and the "objective right" of the Palestinians in Palestine.² Interesting formulation! Yet, while I might understand what an "objective right" is, I cannot keep from finding the

notion of a “subjective right” strange and even dangerous. It paves the way for so many crimes . . .

As to the second formula, “the people without a land”, would require a lengthy elaboration the limits of this interview render difficult. Nevertheless, permit me to dissipate and refute some of the “admitted truths” which are the most contestable.

Above all, the majority of today’s Jews cannot be among the descendants of the ancient Hebrews of Palestine. Many of them converted to other religions. On the other hand, many people and tribes converted to Judaism. The best known example is that of the Khazars, a tribe of half a million people who massively adopted Judaism in the VIIth century.³ Is the argument of “the historic right” valid then? Is the colonisation of Palestine really “the return after two thousand years of exile”?

Now then, many scholars, such as Maxime Rodinson to cite only one of them, inform us that the present Palestinians have more “Hebrew blood” in their veins than most of today’s Jews.

As to the notion of “divine right”, since there has been the “divine promise” made to the “chosen people”, I – like many Jews moreover – cannot admit this image of a God who would commit the sin of ‘favouritism’, of a God who would be a ‘discriminator’. I prefer to refer to what Golda Meir says to us in her memoirs: “The Jews were the first to have chosen God”. She has not always shown such subtlety and sophistication, but I must admit that this interpretation is by far preferable to that of the “chosen people”, keeping in mind that it was in fact the dignitaries of Pharaonic Egypt who were the first to preach monotheism . . .

Finally, anti-Semitism is above all a Christian and essentially a European phenomenon. The solution to it must be sought in the same countries where it rages, through the struggle for equal rights and responsibilities, through the fight for the right to be different and for freedom of religion, and through inter-community integration. But anti-Semitism and Zionism are two currents which go together and feed each other reciprocally. Thus Israel, through its practices and alliances – which often go so far as to include active support for bloody dictatorships – has come to reinforce if not to arouse anti-Semitism in regions where it was almost nonexistent, for example in the countries of Latin America or the Arab World. Now, both anti-Semites and Zionists try to lead us to believe that anti-Semitism is an uneradicable and eternal feeling . . . I dare to believe, I dare to hope that it is not.

But let us go back to the alibi of the barren, uncultivated Palestine. It is necessary to read the accounts of the Crusades. In them we learn that the Crusaders admitted having learned enormously from the techniques of agriculture and irrigation used in Palestine in that epoch. It would be necessary to look at the figures for external commerce before the XXth century, where we would see that Palestine was not only self-sufficient in food, but exported fruit and vegetables to Europe.

That Israel would have increased the agricultural capacity of the country is not surprising considering the enormous injection of foreign capital and the superior qualifications of the Zionist settlers who came from Europe. But here a great moral question is posed: in the name of what, and since when, does the planting of a tree justify the uprooting of a human being? Since when does the decision to plant a forest justify the uprooting of an entire people?

V.U.: What do you think of the attitude of international public opinion towards the Palestinian problem?

A.S.: I would limit myself to Western opinion. Lately it has evolved considerably. It finally recognises that the Palestinians have suffered an historic wrong and wishes to see them recoup certain rights previously trampled on. But its vigilance and the pressure which it sometimes decides to exercise, are well below that which could be expected of it.

The Palestinians cannot but remember with sadness and bitterness that the enterprise which led to their dispossession and their dispersion was followed by Western public opinion with an admiring, never reproving, regard towards Israel. Insensitive to the trials of the Palestinians, it applauded the exploits – above all the ones of war – of Israel.

This can be explained by the painful and sometimes guilty memories of the atrocities committed during the Second World War. But if the Jews were the direct victims of Nazism, then the Palestinians are its indirect victims. Without Hitler, Zionism would have remained a minority current within the Jewish communities. Without Hitler and his attempts at exterminating the Jews, the Zionist movement would not have benefited from this capital of sympathy which it has used and abused. From this indulgence, this complacency which touches on complicity.

It is important to point out that the first in the West to dare to rebel against Israel's false propaganda were Jews: Maxime Rodinson, Ania Francos, Alfred Lilienthal . . . They believed themselves safe from intellectual terrorism and the accusation of anti-Semitism, but they were mistaken: they were harshly attacked, reviled and threatened. They were accused of "self-hatred" and betrayal . . .

Over the decades, solving the 'Jewish problem' was a high priority objective for Western opinion, even if it meant paying for it with a 'Palestinian problem'. One would have wished that the Palestinians did not exist, that they would have disappeared before the arrival of the settlers. In short, they had committed the wrong of existing.

The Zionist colonisation of Palestine enjoyed great popularity in the West and it was the resistance of the people who were the victims of this dispossession which was to be condemned. The Palestinian was to be described as a brute, a fanatic, and a terrorist. At best, a potential terrorist.

Paradoxically, the Zionists themselves judged this resistance to be . . . normal. Jabotinsky, the master thinker of the Israeli right, was to write, "Has any people ever been seen to give up its territory of its own free will? In the same way, the Arabs of Palestine will not renounce their sovereignty without violence."⁴

Ben Gurion said to Nahum Goldmann: "If I were an Arab leader, I would never sign an agreement with Israel. It is normal, we have taken their country. It is true that God promised it to us, but how could that possibly interest them? Our God is not theirs. There has been anti-Semitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz: but was that their fault? They see but one thing: we have come and we have stolen their country. Why would they accept that?"⁵

In the West, on the other hand, this clarity of perception was forbidden. Philippe de Saint Robert tells us that a reader reproached him for his, "impartiality which is intolerable when Israel is in question."⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre was to write, "Without a doubt they (the Arabs) are right, but can they keep these Israelis from being, for us, also Jews?"⁷ This is why impartiality becomes intolerable and objectivity unwelcome.

V. U.: Why have many Palestinians left their country and their lands?

A.S.: You have probably asked me this question because there are those who claim that the Palestinians left their country of their own accord. This is absolutely contrary to historic reality. But it seems to me that they who have propagated this version as well as they who have let themselves be convinced by it, have never asked themselves the following question: do the civilian refugees coming from combat zones in other conflicts equally automatically lose all rights to return and their property? Of course not!

Thus at the time of the German invasion of France in 1940, thousands of French people left. Once the fighting had ended, they were able to return to their homes, their towns and villages. In Palestine, the civilian population was a privileged target for the Zionist troops who sought to conquer the maximum of territory with a minimum of demography. This is what profoundly differentiates this war in the Middle East from any other conflict.

While the massacre at Deir Yassin (1948), in the course of which 254 peaceful villagers were liquidated in a single night, is the most well-known, it was unfortunately not the only one. Menachem Begin, the one politically in charge and who gave the orders for this carnage, was often to boast loudly claiming that without Deir Yassin, there would never have been an Israel. In his memoirs, he wrote. “The Jewish forces advanced in Haifa like a knife in butter. The Arabs fled in panic, crying Deir Yassin”.⁸ It was necessary to terrorize the population in order to encourage them to flee.

It is useful to remember that according to the cutting up of Palestine contained in the Partition Plan adopted by the United Nations, there was to be a small Jewish minority in the Arab state, while in the territory granted to the Jewish State, the Arab population was equal in number to the Jews who had installed themselves there. For a political movement, Zionism, which wanted, “an Israel as Jewish as England is English”, the presence of these Arabs was inadmissible, intolerable!

In 1948, the State of Israel was admitted to the United Nations but in a conditional manner: it had to permit the return of all the refugees which its violent and brutal birth had flung out along the path of exile.

This resolution had been submitted to a vote by the United States and each year since then it is once again voted on and adopted by the international community. But it has never even begun to be applied. On the contrary, new refugees have regularly come to join the previous ones.

V.U.: *There is often talk of the ‘settlement colonies’ in the occupied territories. What do these implantations represent?*

A.S.: A first remark is called for: it was under the aegis of the Israeli Labour Party that the policy of creating settlement colonies in the occupied territories was begun in 1967. General Dayan, to whom we must grant the merit of frankness, called this process “*rampant annexation*”. Under Menachem Begin and the Likud, it just galloped. But the main difference resides in nothing more than the rhythm.

It is this process of the gradual nibbling away of Palestinian territory which has permitted the creation of the State of Israel: a succession of *fait accomplis*, legitimised afterwards by the always favourable balance of military power.

Since the first hours of its creation, Israel has shown itself to have an insatiable territorial appetite. Its leaders start out from a very elastic conception of the

frontiers of the State which they themselves have carved out. For Israel, right follows from *fait-accomplis* on the ground, both military and demographic.

The peace camp in Israel defends the idea that it is necessary to “liberate Israel of these occupied territories” in order to disentangle itself from this interminable war. Unfortunately, this current is very much a minority. The overwhelming majority of Israeli voters pronounce themselves regularly and . . . democratically in favour of annexation and the denial of the minimal national rights of the Palestinians.

Yet, they would have been well inspired to recall the words of Rabbi Heschel, who had declared, “In a free society, if a few are guilty, all are responsible.” Perhaps one day we might be told in order to justify the oppression of the past that “We did not know”. This talk will be no more credible tomorrow than it was yesterday.

V.U.: What does the P.L.O. represent for the Palestinian people?

A.S.: Put simply, it represents them. Before 1964-65 the Palestinians were threatened with oblivion – because of their dispersion, their lack of organisation. The PLO gave them back both hope and initiative. From objects of history, they have become once again subjects of their own history. The PLO is the incarnation of their aspirations; it is a vehicle and channel for their fight for a concrete objective. With modest means, the PLO has worked on the restructuring of this torn and ‘diasporized’ people.

The mass media have, unfortunately, focused on the military aspect; they have bluntly hidden the immense work which the PLO carries out on a sanitation, educational and economic level in order to preserve the national identity, dignity and cultural patrimony of the Palestinian people.

The PLO is perceived of as a pre-governmental organisation which is already assuming state responsibilities.

The Palestinians have chosen it, and designated it to be their spokesman and their negotiator in the search for the peace they long for so much.

I would not dodge the problem of violence. I know: some identify the PLO with terrorism.

Believe me, the dominated peoples are always the first to wish that an end be put to their suffering, without bloodshed, and the first to hope that their liberation will be accomplished through peaceful mechanisms and institutional channels. But, in reality, no other choice was left to them but to resort to armed struggle in order to confront the state terrorism which they had to face. Remember that Israeli violence has left more Palestinian victims in three days than Palestinian violence has left in three decades. The Palestinians have been sent into mourning a thousand times more than the Israelis.

Why does Western opinion demonstrate such selective sensitivity? Especially when, in such and evident manner, the sufferings are disproportionate to such an extent . . .

V.U.: Now, what future awaits Palestine?

A.S.: Today, there is no ‘just solution’ for Palestine or the Palestinians. Too many disruptions have been imposed by force.

The Palestinians, who are today ‘the Jews of the Israelis’ do not wish to see that tomorrow the Jews of Palestine become in turn the Palestinians of the Palestinians.

We do not seek historic revenge. On the contrary, we want to smash this infernal

dialectic of oppression. If a 'just solution' is inconceivable at the present time, an 'acceptable peace' is nevertheless always possible.

The formula of two neighbouring states on Palestinian territory would render partial justice to the Palestinians. Moreover, this solution conforms to the wishes of the international community and the resolutions of the United Nations.

Unfortunately, two dissident states – Israel and the United States – render the international consensus inoperable.

How could this Palestinian state be born? Three courses are possible:

First of all, a profound change coming from inside Israel. I am among those who had bet on this course and who acted consequently. This way had my preference, essentially for ethical reasons.

If the Israelis, without having been forced to do so militarily or diplomatically, were to restore the territories conquered in 1967 to the Palestinians, or if they were to come back to the United Nations Partition Plan, that would facilitate both authentic pardon and reconciliation. Unfortunately, the 1984 Knesset elections reveal nothing but a further slide towards annexationism or, at best, immobilism.

The second possible course would be a new Israeli-Arab war according to the model of 1973, in order to seriously reactivate the diplomatic front and the search for peace. Besides the fact that war is never a desirable eventuality, the state of the Arab World, with its present divisions and the resulting impotence, render this hypothesis improbable, at least in the short term.

Finally, the third course envisageable, taking into account the fact that the status quo is showing itself to be intolerable and highly explosive, and that Israeli intransigence on one hand and Arab powerlessness on the other do nothing but perpetuate this situation – I am personally in favour of a peace process actively stimulated (I would even say imposed) by the international community, on the basis of the whole set of United Nations resolutions.

The United Nations is still the only framework in a position to reconcile politics with ethics. It could temper the arguments of force, reminding the protagonists of the force of arguments.

If that fails, the spiral of violence would experience an uncontrollable escalation. And the conflict could burst out of its regional framework.

In the Middle East, we have either one people too many, or one State less than what is needed.

It is for each of us to pronounce himself. Must we allow the annihilation of this one people too many? Or must we work to make possible the birth of the State which is missing?

FOOTNOTES

1. In a letter to Lord Curzon, cited by Gilmore D., in *Dispossessed: The Ordeal of the Palestinians*.
2. Friedlander, S. *Reflexions sur l'Avenir d'Israel* p.11.
3. Koestler, A. *La Triaesime Tribu*.
4. Jabotinsky, cited by M. Rodinson in *Peuple Juif ou Probleme Juif?* pp. 121-122.
5. Goldmann, I.N. *Ou va Israel?* and in *Le Paradox Juif*.
6. de Saint-Robert, P. *Lejeu de la France en Mediteranee* p.95.
7. Sartre, J.P. *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 253 bis. 1967, p.10.
8. Begin, M. *La Revolte d'Israel*. Pion 1953, p.160.