

Fifty shades of Soft Zionism

report on the conference “*Equal Rights for All: A New Path for Israel-Palestine?*” organised by [Independent Jewish Voices](#) & the [Bruno Kreisky Forum](#)
14-16 March 2015, Birkbeck College, London

The Conference Goals

It would be even sadder than reality if the path of equal rights were really *new*. But it's not: the BDS movement explicitly took this path about ten years ago, as did the One Democratic State (ODS) movement, which carries on in the hundred-year tradition of the indigenous Palestinians whose alternative to the British Mandate was this simple and unastounding principle.

I balked while reading the conference announcement: “Shifting attention from discussions focused solely on a one-or-two-state agreement, the fundamental question this Conference seeks to address is how to achieve equal rights for all *who live in Palestine-Israel*.” (emphasis added)

First, no discussion of Palestine focuses *solely* on possible political solutions. Second, why would one want to shift attention away from possible solutions? Isn't that the goal of our efforts, to *solve* this damn thing? Shouldn't the question be what political solutions enable equal rights for all?

Third, the wording excludes, as usual, the Palestinian **refugees**; only the rights of those living between the river and the sea shall be discussed.

Luckily the 2 full days, with speakers of long and intimate experience with the Zionist-Palestine conflict, didn't turn out this way. Almost every speaker mentioned **solutions**. “The two-state solution is dead.” “The two-state solution is dying.” “One one democratic state is the best solution.” “The solution must be bi-national.” “Our vision is ‘Two States, One Homeland’.” “No solution can ignore the refugees.”

Refugees, BDS, ODS

Both Avraham Burg and Leila Shahid, long-time supporters of two states on the 1949 armistice borders, uttered disillusionment and near-adherence to ODS. As a long-term goal ODS got fairly explicit support from Sam Bahour and Michelle Pace and somewhat muted support from Avi Shlaim. But why wasn't an avowed advocate of ODS amongst the speakers?

One audience member noted that if the three **BDS demands** were fulfilled – Right of Return, equality for Palestinian Israeli citizens, and Palestinian sovereignty in the West Bank and Gaza – today's de facto one-undemocratic-state would have turned into a democratic one.

And on the opening evening the conference's best speaker, Sam Bahour, devoted several sentences to the **refugees** who, numbering 5-6 million, form a majority of the

entire Palestinian population. They were mentioned again and again by speakers, if not by the organisers. Bahour, by the way, was the only speaker to explicitly self-identify as a non-Zionist.

Only briefly, and mainly by Avi Shlaim, was the (il-)legitimacy of the Jewish state mentioned, although equal rights for all would imply the end of that state. I believe that while for most participants it is too early to get into this part of the discourse, the Palestinian speakers, especially, should have flagged it up. Hopefully the upcoming U. Southampton [conference](#) will move us closer to being able to talk clearly about Israel's 'right to exist' (as a Jewish state) and the validity or invalidity of the 'Jewish and democratic' state concept.

Collective versus Individual Rights

Solutions again: Moshe Behar claimed that in the Middle East only a collective-rights approach would work. In his hyperbolic and implausible view the contrasting individual-rights approach would even be responsible for much future bloodshed [sic].

I suppose by 'collective' he meant the ethno-religiously defined 'nation', implying a bi-national solution – presumably including the Right of (Palestinian) Return since the Palestinian 'collective' would by definition include all Palestinians. But bi-national solutions, proposed since the mid-1920s, are notoriously hard to define, as would be a penta-national scheme covering the Druze, Christian Arab, Moslem Arab, Arab Jewish and Ashkenazi 'nations'.

Other bi-nationalists were Yossi Rapoport and Limor Yehuda, both proponents of 'Two States, One Homeland'. Also for them the unit is the collective, each having equal rights, but the two states wouldn't be defined geographically and there would be economic freedom and freedom of movement. However, they deny the Right of Return – limiting the number of permits to one equalling the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank allowed to remain there – or something like that. They also uphold Israel's *Law of Return*. This is clearly a racist proposal.

Right of Return, Right to Remain

Regarding Return, several speakers unpacked the concept to include compensation and restitution of property. Avraham Burg related that he had personal experience with the restitution of Jewish property stolen by the Nazi government, provocatively and humorously suggesting Palestinians follow that exact path, using the Jews' own criteria, to re-claim their property within the '48 borders.

Philippe Sands for some reason found it necessary to tell us that while Return and compensation are non-abrogable rights, actual negotiations (should they come to pass) would involve only their partial and imperfect application. An audience member said that might be so, but that *now* is surely not the time to start compromising and fashioning collective deals. I agree.

Speaking again of a single state, an audience member raised the question of the fate of present Jewish Israelis: the PLO in the late 1960s would famously have granted citizenship only to those Jews living in the country *before* the advent of Zionism (and their descendants) – whereas the [ODS movement](#) for instance adheres to the universal Right to Remain of all current residents. The consequences of restitution of Palestinian property for those inhabiting it now would have to be worked out in the courts.

Beyond the 'West Bank and Gaza' Approach

Per Skype Alon Liel patted himself vigorously on the back for liberal Zionists' efforts to get Europeans to recognise the State of Palestine. The various recognition motions of the last six months seemed indeed to have wide support at the conference. An audience member, however, asked at *what price* recognition – wouldn't the motions in fact firm up recognition of Israel as a Jewish state? I personally was against last October's British motion – which recognised Palestine alongside Israel within the two-state framework – for reasons more eloquently put forward by Ali Abunimah, Miko Peled and George Galloway.

Sam Bahour said that his daughter's generation realises that armed struggle and hundreds of UN resolutions had gotten the Palestinians nowhere, wanting now therefore to say to Israel: 'OK, we give up, you win. Where is my medical card?' This is similar to Ghada Karmi's idea that West Bank residents voluntarily 'annex' themselves to Israel, thus shifting the argument to the familiar and simple one of equal rights, making apartheid visible to all, and crucially allying them with the second-class citizens within Israel.

As always, I was driven up the wall by the phrase 'the occupation'. As if the rest of historic Palestine were not also occupied, as it was earlier by the Ottomans and the British Mandatory. And it is a phrase that diverts attention to the West Bank and Gaza only, away from 'all who live in Palestine-Israel', reducing the problem to one of post-1967 rather than 1948 or 1917.

Another quick thought: Why are two-state solutions always framed in terms of the pre-1967 borders, not those of Resolution 181? Were the PA to suggest this tomorrow, would Israel call its bluff?

The Palestinians' Utter Innocence: The Disconnect

I commented from the floor that I think we should place more emphasis on the fact that the persecution of Jews was in Europe and had absolutely nothing to do with the Palestinians. Because of this, the Nakba and the anti-Jewish pogroms and the Holocaust are simply unrelated; Jewish suffering in Europe has no logical place in the Palestine discussion.

My sense was that most attendees are ready to accept this premise, if not its anti-Zionist ramifications. However, Leila Farsakh answered me that while this is

historically true, it is not particularly relevant today; we have to go forward. Perhaps when Avi Shlaim used the concept 'relative justice' he was also claiming that demanding full justice would stand in the way of any solution.

I beg to disagree: Unless this is acknowledged there can be no apology and no reconciliation. The need for a safe haven for Jews can be granted, but the question remains, Where? Not on others' land, surely, if 'equal rights' are to be the guiding light.

Loose Ends

Taghreed El-Khodary told of the time, in Holland, when she was crying in front of the TV as it showed the destruction of her neighbourhood in Gaza. Her 3-year-old daughter came and asked why. Taghreed for the first time mentioned 'Israel' to her, explaining that they were bombing her house. Her daughter replied, 'Call the police!' A new slogan, maybe? ARREST ISRAEL.

Briefly, Limor Yehuda brought the argument that ODS can be ruled out because Israelis would never accept it. But what *does* Israel accept? Nothing. I thought that after 67 years of thinking, criticising and talking we had, in 2015, finally realised that nothing but tough pressure on Israel (sanctions, boycotts, maybe blockades) might get it to come to the table. Israel 'accepts' nothing, but in this sense what it 'accepts', or rejects, is simply irrelevant. It must be *forced* to grant equal rights.

Salma Karmi showed the role of international law not so much in yielding pro-Palestinian decisions but as a way to demonstrate Israel's violations. John Strawson contradicted, showing that international law has only very rarely and weakly bolstered the Palestinian side; Palestinians must rely on politics. Salma re-countered that international law cases had exactly the purpose of influencing politics.

Why Not Go the Last Mile?

I sensed that most people at the conference are still hanging onto the idea of a legitimate Israel, of a Jewish state on Palestinian land, albeit one that goes much, much further in granting equal rights to Palestinians, amounting perhaps to Two Democratic States whose ethno-religiosity would manifest solely in flags and public holidays. This very soft Zionist position is of course in my book not tenable: the right of self-determination for Palestinians necessarily precludes any partition, and it is immoral to leave the refugees out in the cold.

The rights-based approach is laudable, and the conference with its mostly excellent speakers brought the discussion forward. But, as the Arab leadership always knew, and as the Peel, Woodhead and UNSCOP commissions came to know, Zionism and democracy are simply irreconcilable.

Finally, a truly 'new path' would put the Palestinians, their experience and their narrative, at the beginning and the centre and the end of the discussion. This was not done.

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