

The Postage Stamp Question:
A Key to Peace in Palestine
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By
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Assalamu Alaikum, Shalom Aleichem, dear friends on Vibes.

I am flattered by the large number of viewers who clicked to my Vibes interview last September, and I am honored by this opportunity to address your candid comments.

Naturally, some of my answers in that interview were deemed unsatisfactory to some viewers. For example, my characterization of the root causes of the current wave of violence as an "ideology of tantrum" was criticized for ignoring the political injustices suffered by Muslims (to which I am not oblivious), and my insistence on differentiating acts of deliberate cruelty from other forms of violence was not deemed essential by some readers. But I believe the main source of disagreement can safely be attributed to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which some commentators felt I have not treated with due attention to the Palestinian side.

I have decided therefore to devote this conversation to that painful conflict and, moreover, to deviate from conventional analyses and go directly to what I consider the core of the conflict, an issue that I call: The Postage-Stamp Question.

I will begin with some background material, much of it derives from my own experience as a native of Tel Aviv.

Imagine yourself waking up one morning to find a newspaper headline: "Majority of Palestinians support the Zionist dream of Theodore Herzl and David Ben Gurion". Surely, you would rub your eyes in disbelief, glance at Abu Maazen's latest speeches, and conclude that it must be April's fools day.

It is not. The title of the January 19, 2005, article in *The Palestine Chronicle* reads loud and clear: "Majority of Palestinians Support Two States," followed by: "Some 54 percent of the Palestinians support a two-state solution on the basis of the 1967 lines, with border corrections and no massive return of refugees, confirming that there has been a change in Palestinian public opinion since the death of Yasser Arafat."

True, the article does not mention Zionism or Zionist dreams but, from everything I know about the history of Zionism — and I grew up in an avid Zionist family — an independent Jewish state within some recognized and friendly boundaries is precisely what Zionism has been aiming to achieve since 1896, when Herzl wrote his booklet "Der Judenstaat" ("The State-of-the-Jews"). Therefore, anyone who

endorses the now fashionable two-state solution also endorses the aims of Zionism, and might as well be called a "Zionist at heart."

Indeed, since neither Herzl nor the Balfour declaration of 1917 outlined any specific borders for the intended Jewish state, the struggle in the first half of the 20th century was not over borders, but over the very idea of creating a national home for the Jewish people in ANY part of Palestine. The Arabs viewed such idea as a dangerous reincarnation of European colonialism, while Jews viewed it as a legitimate move of repatriation to their historical homeland.

Readers whose sentiments towards Zionism were shaped by slogans such as "Zionism is Racism" (UN 1975), "Zionism is not Racism" (UN, 1991), "Zionism is a cancer" (Opinion, Al Jazeera, May 2004), and "Zionism is a disease" (Speakers at the 2004 PSM conference in Duke University) would naturally wonder whether Zionists' aspirations were indeed as modest and innocuous as described above, and whether Arab objections were aimed against those modest aspirations. Most Israelis believe this to be the case, and they cite the following sequence of historical events as evidence.

Zeev Jabotinsky, by far the most ambitious hard liner of all Zionist leaders wrote in 1937 "we beg merely for a small fraction of this vast piece of land" [1]. That same year, when the British appointed Peel Commission proposed a two-state solution, with a Jewish state on approximately 25% of the current area of Israel, the Zionist leadership accepted (after a fierce debate), while the Arabs retorted with the famous: "not even the size of a postage stamp."

In November 1947, when the UN General Assembly voted for a partition plan with an independent Palestinian state on about double the size of the West bank and Gaza (it included the entire Galilee and big chunks of the Negev) the Zionist leadership accepted (this time enthusiastically), and the Arabs rejected. (A five-army attack followed in May, 1948, when the state of Israel was established.) The fact that this rejection took place before the emergence of the Palestinian refugee problem is seen by Israelis as a proof that the core of the conflict lies not in settlements, refugees, borders or resource disputes, but in the "postage stamp" ideology.

The next indicative development took place three years prior to the 1967 war, at the first Arab League summit meeting in Cairo, January, 1964. At that time, Jordan controlled the West bank and Egypt governed Gaza; both regions were entirely free of Jewish presence. A peace agreement with Israel would have created a Palestinian state which, according to The Palestinian Chronicle, would satisfy most Palestinians today. Yet the Arab League collectively called for "the final liquidation of Israel" [2], and formed the PLO a few months later. The Arab Summit conference in Khartoum, August 1967, sheds additional light on sentiments toward the fundamental Zionist idea. Now Israel controlled the West bank and Gaza, and started radiating land-for-peace overtures toward Nasser and King Hussain of Jordan [3]. These overtures were rejected by the Khartoum conference with the famous three NO's: "No recognition, no negotiation, no peace" [4]. Israelis took an especially sober notice of the "No negotiation" phrase,

and interpreted it to mean: "Not even the size of a postage stamp; your very presence in the middle east is unacceptable and will remain so till the end of days." It was this unfortunate phrase that gave a misguided ideological legitimacy to the settlement movement: "If we are destined to live by the sword till the end of days, we might as well do it from a position of strength...."

In 1988, Arafat recognized Israel existence and the Oslo process began. To many Israelis, that recognition signaled the end of the "postage-stamp" ideology, and brought Rabin and the peace camp to power. However, in the aftermath of the Oslo breakdown, leaders of the shattered Israeli peace camp confessed in public that they had been fooled all along. [5]. Their major complaints were that Arafat's recognition of Israel was kept out of the collective consciousness of the Palestinian people; compromises were not discussed in public, incitement continued unabated, and the PLO charter, explicitly calling for the destruction of Israel, remained unaltered (Farouq Kadoumi, 2004.). Arafat's formal recognition of Israel as well as the whole Oslo exercise were perceived by ordinary Palestinians as a "Trojan Horse" in a grand scheme aiming toward a Palestinian state "from the river to the sea" [6].

Indeed, to this very day, not a single Arab leader has publically acknowledged Zionism as a legitimate national movement.

In view of this history, my Israeli friends are monitoring with great optimism the poll cited in The Palestinian Chronicle, and are asking themselves: "Could this be a signal of a true change in attitude?". I would now like to explain why this question is so pivotal to peace in the middle east and why all other issues — suicide bombing, refugees, rockets, separation wall, settlements, holy places etc. — are but surface manifestations of that key question.

To understand the significance of this question we must recall that Israeli society is secular — 70% of Israelis do not practice Judaic rituals and do not believe in the afterlife or divine supervision of one's actions and thoughts. The cement of Israeli society is not Judaic religion but Jewish history, and that history is intimately tied to the land of the bible — the birth place of the Jewish nation.

Denying Israelis the right for sovereignty over some part of this land would amount to denying the essence of their national identity which, in turns, would commit their collective memory to images of homelessness, persecution, and genocide. Thus, while world attention is focused on terrorism, occupation, border corrections, separation walls, and other news-making items, Israelis attention is attuned to one and only one indicator: their Postage Stamp, namely, whether Palestinians accept their right of repatriation, in sovereignty, to some part of their ancestral land. It is for this reason that Arafat's remark (to President Clinton) that Jews never had a Temple in Jerusalem did more damage to the peace process than all terrorist acts put together. It signaled to Israelis that the Postage Stamp ideology is not dead after all, and it warned them that, no matter what agreement they sign, it can easily be broken by some incident and burst into an all out "just war" against the colonial postage stamp.

All analysts understand that a prerequisite to any peace process in the middle east is the revitalization of the Israeli peace camp – the same camp that brought Rabin to power and got shattered at the breakdown of the Oslo process. It is only this camp that can give an Israeli government the political backing to dismantle settlements and provide resources to ensure a viable Palestinian state. And, as I have explained before, Israelis would flock to the peace camp if and only if it can pave the way to the Zionist dream of a legitimate postage stamp. Public opinion polls, like the one reported in the Palestinian Chronicle are therefore extremely encouraging, especially if they are echoed in the Palestinian media and the Palestinian schools curriculum.

This is, my friends, my Postage Stamp narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and I welcome your comments. Critics of my analysis can fall into one of two categories:

1. Arabs do not really object to Zionism on a postage-stamp scale.
2. Jews do not deserve a sovereign postage-stamp because they are a religion, not a nation.

I would be curious to see which of the two categories receives more votes on Vibes and I would be glad to pursue the discussion accordingly.

One request though, if your comment falls into the first category, please back it with an explicit statement: "Zionism is a legitimate national movement!". I will advertise your statement among my Israeli friends and, inshallah, we will thus be making a meaningful contribution to world peace.

References

- [1] Zev Jabotinsky, "Medinah Ivrit" Tel Aviv 1937, pp. 79.
- [2] Avi Shlaim, "The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World, W W Norton and Co. New York, NY, 2001, pp. 230). Source: Haytham al-kilani, Military strategy in the arab-Israeli Wars, 1948-1988 (arabic) (Beirut, 1991, 260)
- [3] (ibid, pp. 256).
- [4] (ibid, pp. 258).
- [5] e.g., Interview with Haim Shur, Maariv, June 2001.
- [6] Faisal Hussaini, Al-Arabi, Egypt, June 24, 2001, MEMRI translation.

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