

# Palestine, a Jewish Question



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By

Richard Wagman

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .....	vii
Michael Warschawski	
Acknowledgements .....	x
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
Chapter Two .....	6
An Idea of the Conflict, a Conflict of Ideas	
Chapter Three .....	29
One State? Two States?: The Debate	
Chapter Four.....	38
Youth: Hope for the Future?	
Chapter Five .....	47
Where is the Centre? Where is the Diaspora?	
Chapter Six .....	81
Those Israelis Who Resist: Remarkable Groups	
Chapter Seven.....	96
Those Israelis Who Resist: Exceptional Personalities	
Chapter Eight.....	115
The Role of Religion: A Choice between Judaism and Zionism	
Chapter Nine.....	135
Israel: From Corruption to War	
Chapter Ten .....	152
Refugees and Prisoners: Jewish Questions?	

Chapter Eleven ..... 162

Conclusion

Glossary..... 179

## PREFACE

*By Michael Warschawski, a Franco-Israeli. Mr. Warschawski is the cofounder and President of the Alternative Information Center whose offices are situated in West Jerusalem (Israel) and Beit Sahour (the occupied West Bank). Journalist, writer and a historical leader of the Israeli extra parliamentary left, Michael Warschawski is now one of the main figures of the anti-colonialist movement in Israel who works for a just peace in the region.*

Richard Wagman is above all an activist, an activist of that old generation for whom political undertakings were a way of life. He's an anti-capitalist, an anti-racist, an anti-colonialist, for whom his political combat knows no boundary between domestic and foreign struggles. "Charity starts at home"? For Richard, this phrase is meaningless, unless we consider humanity to be his home. In other words—although for a lot of people this has become a thing of the past—Richard Wagman practices what he preaches in terms of internationalism.

And yet being an internationalist doesn't mean not having an identity. And the identity that Richard Wagman claims is neither Canadian—even if he kept the accent—nor French, even if he made the choice to adopt France as his new country, but Jewish. It's a cultural identity and not a religious one, imbedded in history and not in a text, even less so as an intrinsic characteristic which could transcend history.

It's undoubtedly because he refers to this Jewish identity that he was the first, and for a long time one of the only, to reply to the call of Maxim Ghilan—another such Jew without a homeland—to constitute the French section of the International Jewish Peace Union, of which he was for a long time the president, treasurer and... one of the only members.

France and its republican conception of secularism—so unique that this concept is difficult to translate into another language—is not the ideal playing ground to constitute a left-wing organisation based on an ethnic or religious "community". In neighbouring Belgium, on the other hand, the Union des Progressistes Juifs de Belgique (UPJB—Union of Belgian

Jewish Progressives) exists since the 1930s and still continues to be part of both the Belgian left and the Belgian Jewish landscape. But in France, Jewish left-wing organizations (Communists or Bundists) have basically disappeared along with the disappearance of the Jewish proletariat. In France, people like us are French, they're on the left—and so they're French leftists. Any other identity is perceived in progressive circles as reflecting a regionalist or community mentality ("community" in the French sense of the term is another word which cannot be translated into English, for instance). It is therefore seen as being reactionary or at least retrograde.

I remember one fine day when I happened to be in France, some comrades had asked me to help them gather signatures of French Jewish personalities for a petition against the war in Lebanon, entitled "Not in our name". What a chore to obtain the signature of my friend Daniel Bensaïd, or of Professor Schwartzberg, for whom expressing oneself as a Jew was a problem! "I'm French, I'm a left-wing activist, I'm a doctor, but 'a Jew'? It's of no interest to the general public" was the answer I got from the famous cancer specialist before he finally accepted to add his name to the list.

Being from Canada—a multicultural country *par excellence*—undoubtedly explains a lot about the enthusiasm with which Richard Wagman took up the challenge of the call put out by Maxim Ghilan. For a long time he remained practically alone in this adventure, which took on the name of the French Jewish Peace Union (UJFP—Union Juive Française pour la Paix). It was the Intifada which ended up pushing other left-wing Jews to join UJFP and to transform it into an organization which rapidly made a name for itself. At a time when members of established Jewish organizations unconditionally support the criminal policies of Israeli leaders, it's important that "another Jewish voice" be heard, and this is the case more than ever after the bloody "conquest" of 2001 and the cynical campaign of Jewish-French community leaders aiming to identify criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. It has become another Jewish voice, but it has also become a Jewish-Arabic front which can break this premeditated lie. Numerous Arab activists in France felt the need to show that their combat for Palestine had nothing to do with anti-Semitism. This need encouraged them to look for Jewish partners in the struggle for the rights of Palestinians. UJFP was one of the only Jewish organizations to reply to their call.



Paradoxically, Richard Wagman found himself relatively marginalized in UJFP where the new members—relatively to the size of this organization—don't really have the Jewish fibre: the alternative celebrations of Passover dear to Richard's heart aren't a huge success in an organization in which the majority of activists take more of a position on the Palestinian question than on Jewish identity. Is it by chance that Richard was not a part of the famous 11<sup>th</sup> civil mission in Palestine/Israel which consolidated the alliance between UJFP and the Association of Maghrebin Workers in France (ATMF—Association des Travailleurs Maghrébins de France) and which determined to a large extent the heart of the action program of UJFP over the last decade? Indeed, for the last ten years, the activists of UJFP and ATMF demonstrate together in major national rallies, behind a common banner which reads "Jews and Arabs United for Justice". UJFP in the years following 2000 is no longer the UJFP which was for a long time identified with Richard Wagman, but nobody can deny him the paternity of this important organization working for solidarity with Palestine.

The book of which this short text is a preface isn't a book of UJFP or on UJFP, but a collection of texts by Richard Wagman. As such it reflects its author, his positions, his subjects of interest and his fields of political activism. An author who is both at the centre of political action in France but who also—by his origins—is able to go beyond the strictly French perception which too often characterizes the analyses of the left in a country which nevertheless pretends to have been the cradle of universalism. Let us hope that this book will stimulate other activists in the solidarity movement with Palestine, but also other left-wing Jewish organizations in France to examine seriously their own positions at a time which is perhaps not favourable to triumphant victories, but which is certainly favourable to necessary and indispensable evaluations.

Michael Warschawski

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

If you think that this book is about the State of Israel, you're mistaken. And if you think that it deals basically with Palestine, you're getting closer, but that's not quite it either. It's rather a book about Jewish people. These pages are not consecrated to Israelis but to Jews throughout the world, through the prism of a question which is haunting them, just as communism used to haunt Europe, to quote a celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher of Jewish origin. That question is of course the question of Palestine. It should be noted that the majority of the world's Jewish population doesn't live in Israel but in other countries of Asia, Europe, America and Africa, as well as in Australia. We should also recall that the Palestinian cause isn't a controversial subject for Arabs: the support of the latter can almost be taken for granted. Of course Palestine is a question which represents a challenge for the international community as a whole. But it's especially a Jewish question, to the extent that—at the present time—most Jews are far from being active supporters of the Palestinian cause. That's an understatement.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Palestine is *the* question which haunts the Jewish community,<sup>2</sup> giving rise to various reactions. Sometimes it evokes sentiments of rejection, of denial, relegating this issue to the subconscious mind. Sometimes it evokes feelings of shame and guilt. Such sentiments can even lead to hatred and violence. Amongst other Jews the Palestinian issue provokes doubt, confusion, and despair: it puts into question previously unchallenged ideas which they grew up with. And amongst still other

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<sup>1</sup> And yet this has not always been the case. For more information on this subject, see the remarkable work by Yakov Rabkin, *A Threat from Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism*, Zed Books, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> In this book, the expression "Jewish community" is used in the broad sense of the term. It therefore refers to all Jews: believers and atheists, practising Jews and those who do not practise, whether they be members of a Jewish organization or not. It does not only refer to the formal Jewish community structures which claim to be representative of the Jewish population as a whole.

Jews, the Palestinian question provokes regret, an impression of a missed opportunity, the sensation that we could have proceeded otherwise, that we could have settled the conflict a long time ago. For other Jews, the Palestinian question arouses compassion, empathy, even nostalgia, especially for the generation of expatriated Jews who were born in North Africa or the Middle East, and who remember a peaceful, easy-going, pleasant coexistence with their Muslim neighbours under the palm trees of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen, Iraq or other countries of that vast region known as the “Arab World”. For other Jews, the Palestinian question arouses feelings of solidarity, fraternity, a longing to get together. Some of them compare the plight of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation to the fate of their ancestors in the ghettos of Europe. If a lot of them are politically on the left, we can say more generally that minorities and oppressed people tend to identify with resistance against exclusion, against racism and against oppression. That explains the feelings of solidarity towards Palestinians. Whatever the case may be, in the Jewish community, no one is left aside in this book, as no one in the community is indifferent to the Palestinian question.

For a large number of Jews, consciously or unconsciously, the Palestinian question gives rise simultaneously to all kinds of feelings. In the course of events, the state of mind of certain Jews can switch from denial to acceptance, from rejection to fraternity, from doubt to lucidity, from hatred to compassion, from violence to reaching out to the “adversary”, from shame to redemption in action, which brings them to adopt a clear position, more in phase with the universal values very dear to the Jewish tradition.

We will explore in detail these contradictory feelings through a historical examination of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an examination of the recent evolution of Jewish thought caught up in this painful conflict and, of course, we will examine the means to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma for once and for all. As for a lot of other conflicts which have torn humanity apart, this one is not a fatality like an earthquake or other natural catastrophe which human beings cannot prevent. It’s a useless conflict and as such, resolving it constitutes an undeniable public service. This duty—which is that of the international community—is especially a duty of the Jewish community for reasons which we will examine.

Can the State of Israel last for a long time in the foreseeable future? This question interests a good number of Jews. But it’s not a Jewish question.

Jewish questions are difficult questions which call specifically upon the members of this community, made up of more than 15 million people throughout the world. In other words, they are questions which address themselves to the conscience of Jewish people, questions which shake up their deep-rooted beliefs and which pose to them personal challenges in the light of the universal Jewish tradition. In this angle, the creation of the State of Israel, 70 years ago, was not a truly Jewish question. However, in our day and age, the perspective of the creation of a true Palestinian state and the fate of this people is a Jewish question *par excellence*.

It goes without saying that this modest work may be of interest to Jewish readers. But not only. It may also interest those who would like to understand the Jewish minority which has left its mark in history, from Antiquity to the present day. Lastly, it addresses itself to all those concerned by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, anxious to put an end to this bloody chapter of contemporary history.

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—in the Orient—a sovereign political Jewish entity was created. It was officially recognized as such, having all the attributes of administrative autonomy. It was the first time this happened since the Jewish kingdoms of Antiquity. Was it the State of Israel, created in 1948? No, it was the Soviet Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidjan, created in 1934! A strange detour of History, an experience which was basically unknown to the general public and quickly forgotten, but it's well worth being examined to see to what extent it differs from the Israeli experience. We can't characterize Birobidjan as being "Zionist", even if it was conceived as a land of asylum for Jews where the official language was Yiddish. At the height of its glory there were only 30,000 Jews in Birobidjan, "their" region where, paradoxically, Jews were never a majority. Nevertheless, contrary to Palestine, there was no colonisation imposed on the lands of the native peoples there, nor were those peoples displaced, nor were they dispossessed, there was no armed conflict, no expulsions, no racist laws against non-Jews, no "security barrier", no Jewish military presence to "control" and repress other peoples, no political prisoners, not a single death, and no wounded victims following the creation of this Jewish autonomous region. This situation is diametrically opposed to the one which exists in the Middle East!

After the October Revolution in 1917, the "Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia" proclaimed the "equality and sovereignty of peoples". The federal constitution written under Lenin in 1924 guaranteed

a territory to each national minority. But there was a little problem: the Jews were the only Soviet nationality that wasn't a majority anywhere on the territory of the USSR. In 1928, a decree designated Birobidjan as a land allocated to the Jews, with the possibility for them to create a "national Jewish territorial administrative entity". This was accomplished by Stalin in 1934. But contrary to other minorities seen from Moscow as being an "annoyance"—such as the Tartars of Crimea, who were deported to Central Asia—there was no forced displacement of Jewish populations. The Jewish settlement of Birobidjan was carried out exclusively by volunteers.

What were the true motives of the "Little Father of the Peoples"? It was undoubtedly not a concern to scrupulously respect the Soviet constitution, nor a sudden philo-Semitism. Growing Jewish immigration in Palestine exercised a certain attraction for a number of Soviet Jews, but this was considered by Moscow—and rightly so—as an imperialist colonialist project. Furthermore, the Soviet government wanted to "reinforce" the zone around the Amour River, situated in a border region, historically contested by China. At the same time, Stalin undoubtedly wanted to kill two birds with one stone by thus "getting rid" of "his" Jews, those of the European Soviet republics (Russia, the Ukraine, Moldavia, White Russia and those of the Caucasus). A large number of them, who were part of the intelligentsia, were critical of his repressive policies. During the advance of the Hitlerian armies on the eastern front in the course of the Second World War, a large number of Soviet Jews went underground or enrolled in the Red Army, preferring to die as combatants rather than disappear in the Holocaust. A large number of Jews who did not take up arms were exterminated by the Nazis but some of them sought refuge in Birobidjan, thus saving their skin. After the war, most of them came back to the European part of the USSR.

When all is said and done, we can conclude that the experience of this autonomous Jewish region was a failure as it never spontaneously attracted a large number of Soviet Jews. This far away territory was not their historical homeland, contrary to the European Soviet republics. They never really felt at home there. This experience therefore died a natural death even if—until this very day—there is still a small Jewish population in this remote zone of Siberia. But the contrast with Israel sticks out like a sore thumb. Birobidjan was perhaps an autonomous Jewish political entity but it wasn't "Zionist" by any stretch of the imagination given the criteria

which characterize the State of Israel and the conflicts which this state has produced.

As far as the painful Israel-Palestinian question goes, let's have a look at the development of this conflict. Without being the 100 Years War, it nevertheless goes back to a little more than a century.

## CHAPTER TWO

### AN IDEA OF THE CONFLICT, A CONFLICT OF IDEAS

*The 1880s:* Anti-Semitic pogroms<sup>3</sup> covered with blood the ghettos and shtetls<sup>4</sup> in Tsarist Russia and the territories that it controlled in Eastern Europe. A resurgence of age-old anti-Semitism spread to Central Europe.

*1894:* A Jewish journalist of Austrian origin, Theodor Herzl, correspondent in France, was flabbergasted to witness the outbreak of the Dreyfus affair. He concluded that if the Jews are not safe in the “homeland of human rights”, they’re not safe anywhere.

*1897:* The first Zionist congress was held in Basel, Switzerland, with the participation of its inspirer, Theodor Herzl. This congress chose Palestine as the location to carry out the achievement of its national project, the creation of a Jewish state. And yet this gathering was practically confidential, bringing together only a few dozen participants. It was held in this small Swiss border town because pressure from the Jewish community prevented their leaders from renting a hall in Germany or France.

And yet in the year 1897 another event took place which was to directly affect the lives of the world’s largest Jewish community at that time. The Bund (General Union of Jewish Workers of Lithuania, Poland and Russia) held its founding convention in Vilnius. It quickly rallied millions of members. The Bund—both a trade-union federation and a political party—organized a considerable part of the Ashkenazi<sup>5</sup> working class in a powerful labour movement, on a program of social emancipation and cultural autonomy. The Bund was clearly anti-Zionist.

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<sup>3</sup> Pogrom: a Russian word designating the massacre of Jews.

<sup>4</sup> Shtetls: Jewish villages and small towns in Eastern Europe.

<sup>5</sup> Ashkenazi: a word which literally means “German Jew”, it designates Jewish people originally from Central and Eastern Europe.



1899: Hertzl wrote his book *The Jewish State*, which constitutes the theoretical basis of Zionism. At that time, the Zionists were an infinitesimal minority in the Jewish community, rejected by just about everyone, from rabbis to secular figures of Yiddish culture. In comparison, the Bund had already become a mass organization.

1905: The “third aliya” (Jewish immigration in Palestine in the framework of the Zionist project) progressed at a snail’s pace, but already provoked a few skirmishes between the new immigrants coming from Europe and the country’s Arab inhabitants.

1907: Ber Borochoy, a Russian Jew of Ukrainian origin, created the Poale Zion (“Proletarian Zion”) movement, whose objective was to promote the creation of an entity in Palestine in order to enable the Jewish working class to develop itself normally, which was prohibited in the Tsarist Empire. Once the class struggle triumphs, the emancipated Jewish proletariat could take power and edify a socialist state. Borochoy distinguished himself from the Bund, the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Russian Anarchists who saw the future of the Jewish working class in the framework of a revolutionary Russia, without the Tsar and his regime. After the death of Borochoy in 1917, a large number of his partisans revised Poale Zion’s project, as they realized the importance of the sedentary Arabic civilisation in Palestine, previously described as a land without a people. At the very most this land was described as a desert visited by a few caravans of nomadic Bedouins passing through from time to time.

1915: In the middle of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire disintegrated and Palestine (an Ottoman province) became the pray of other foreign powers.

1916: A secret agreement was signed, known as the Sykes-Picot Accords (named after the British and French Foreign Ministers at that time). It forsook the attribution of different territories in the Middle East to foreign powers once the Great War comes to an end. In this arrangement—made without consulting the local populations—Palestine was attributed to Great Britain. The existence of this agreement was revealed to the world a year later and just a few weeks after the Russian Revolution by *Izvestia* and *Pravda*, two Soviet newspapers.

*1917:* Palestine fell under English domination and the British crown made vague promises of “independence” to the Arabs of this territory. As soon as such promises were made, London immediately renounced on them through its Foreign Minister, Lord Balfour. The latter affirmed to the Zionist organization that his government would react favourably to the creation in Palestine of a “homeland for the Jewish people”.

Although the above-mentioned event entered the history books as being a cornerstone of the future State of Israel, it took place almost confidentially. Few people heard about it at that time. And yet just five days later a major event in world history took place which concretely affected the lives of millions of Jews: the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd! The latter emancipated Russian Jews in the fields of equal rights and social progress.

*1922:* The Society of Nations (the forerunner of the UN)—which was created after the Great War to prevent other armed conflicts—accorded to Great Britain a mandate for Palestine, whose announced objective was to lead the country to independence.

It was also in 1922 that the Communist Party of Palestine (CPP) was founded as the section of the Communist International by left-wing members of Poale Zion, trading in Zionism for Marxism. The party created the Histadruth (unique trade-union federation) and from the very start fought for a worker’s state with equality of rights between Jews and Arabs in the framework of a socialist revolution. Founded by Jewish activists who broke with Zionism, it quickly recruited and developed a strong base both among Jewish and Arab workers.

*1929:* During the stock market crash which plunged western countries into the Great Depression, cohabitation between the Arab population and their new Jewish neighbours—who had arrived from Europe—increasingly posed problems. There were disputes concerning land, resources and markets. There was especially the arrogance of the colonizers, who came in the frame of mind of expropriating land by more or less legal means, while giving themselves the mission of “civilizing” the barbarians of the Arab Orient. Violent incidents broke out in the beginning of the decade. On 24 August 1929, Palestinian Arabs, Jews and British soldiers engaged in a fratricidal bloodbath. Among the Palestinian victims, 133 Jews and 116 Muslims were killed.

*1936:* General strike. Not only in France, but also in Palestine. And yet the “Arab revolt” was not only a “Popular Front” demanding social rights like in France. It was an uprising of Palestinian merchants, artisans, workers and peasants against British domination, but also against the big Arab landlords and against Zionist colonization.

*1937:* So as to ease the tension which had been increasing since the beginning of the general strike, the Peel Commission, nominated by the British government, advanced the first partition plan for Palestine, proposing to divide it into two entities: a Jewish part and an Arab part.

*1930s and 1940s:* Following the increase of anti-Semitism in Europe, with Hitler coming to power in Germany and the outbreak of the Second World War (with the Final Solution implemented by the Nazis), the Zionists ceased to be an infinitesimal minority in the Jewish community and became a majority. The Russian Revolution of 1917 emancipated Soviet Jews (as the French Revolution did in 1793), but Stalin got in the way. After the Moscow trials and the Siberian gulag, the Jewish population massively turned towards a land of emigration, looking for asylum. As perspectives of the American dream were refused, Palestine was the only solution left as an alternative destination.

And yet this movement was not homogenous. The “General Zionists” worked for a Jewish state but were basically unaware of the existence of the Arab population in Palestine. In any case, they were implicitly for separation (the Jews on one side, the Arabs on the other). Vladimir Jabotinsky’s “Revisionist Zionists”, who openly identified with the far right and terrorist methods, were nostalgic partisans of Mussolini. They pruned the expulsion of the Arabs from Palestine in order to edify a Jewish state. Marxist currents such as Hashomer Hatzair (“Young Guard”, the youth section of the forerunner of the Labour Party) developed the kibbutz movement (collective farms) to edify socialism, but without understanding much about the Arab population and its aspirations. What’s worse, they provided the Jews of the Yishuv<sup>6</sup> with armed protection against the Arabs! The “Brith Shalom” movement (Alliance for Peace) was a left humanist current which worked for independence from British domination in the framework of strict equality between Jews and Arabs. Its emblematic

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<sup>6</sup> Yishuv: designates the Jewish communities in Palestine whose members immigrated there with the objective of creating a Jewish state. This term does not designate the Palestinian Jews who were already there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and who did not participate in the Zionist national project.

leaders—notably Rabbi Judah Magnes and the philosopher Martin Buber—were influential. Unfortunately, they were a minority and were rapidly overtaken by the radicalisation and the violence which triumphed in the shadow of the Hitlerian genocide.

After the Liberation, the World Zionist Organisation (WZO) chartered a boat—Exodus—which left Europe to navigate towards the port of Haifa in 1948. On board were survivors of the death camps. Repulsed by the British at its arrival on the coast of Palestine, the boat brought its passengers back to the horrors of Germany, which considerably shocked world opinion. The doors of the United States (the preferred destination of the refugees) were closed to Jewish immigration during the genocide.

*1947:* A new organization called the United Nations (which relayed the former Society of Nations) voted one of its first resolutions in 1947, two years after the capitulation of Hitler and the surrender of Imperial Japan. After difficult negotiations and intensive lobbying carried out by the partisans of a Jewish state (WZO, Jewish Agency), the UN voted the partition of Palestine with a very tight majority, in which only one vote made the difference. Great Britain had to withdraw in order to enable the creation of two states: a Jewish state and an Arab state. Even if the Yishuv only accounted for 30% of the total population in Palestine, the UN partition plan proposed 55% of the territory for a Jewish state. At that time, there were only 1,660,000 inhabitants in all of historical Palestine, as opposed to 12,000,000 today. Even if the UN partition plan was favourable to the Zionists (given the proportion of Jews in the total population), WZO wanted more. At the end of the day, it was weapons that traced the borders in favour of the Jewish state, which included 78% of the territory of historical Palestine by the end of the first Israeli-Arab war. David Ben Gurion proclaimed the State of Israel (the name was chosen in reference to Biblical terminology) on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1948. As for the Arabs of Palestine, they are still waiting for the creation of a true state and not just the recognition of a virtual state by the UN. During the vote in 1947, the representatives of the Arabs (the Arab League, the Mufti of Jerusalem and a few influential families, including the Husseinis) were opposed to the partition of Palestine, preferring a single state where Jews and Arabs could live together, in equality, without British domination.

*1948:* This Israeli-Arab war did not only result in the creation of a Jewish state. It also resulted in the “Nakba” (catastrophe), the expulsion of between 600,000 and 800,000 Palestinians from their homes. The Arab

combatants (notably the Jordanian Legion, the Egyptian army and those Palestinians who took up arms) promised them that they could reintegrate their homes “in a few days, at the most in a few weeks” when Palestine will be liberated. Seventy (70) years later, these displaced persons, their children, their grandchildren and—for some of them—their great grandchildren are still waiting in refugee camps in Gaza, on the West Bank, in Lebanon, in Syria and in Jordan. They are the eternal losers of this conflict.

During this war, the far right Jewish militias (Irgun, the Stern gang)—one of whose leaders was Yitzhak Shamir, a future Prime Minister of Israel—invented terrorism in the Middle East. Not only with the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, but also with the massacre of civilians in the village of Deir Yassin, where the bodies of the victims—men, women and children—were thrown into a well. The objective of this atrocity was to make the Arab population flee. Imitating the far right militias, the “regular” Zionist forces (Haganah, Palmach) didn’t hesitate to partake in such crimes. It was only many years later that Arab combatants imitated these methods, reinventing terrorism as a weapon of war, and turning it against the Jews.

*15 May 1948:* The day after the proclamation of the State of Israel, *L’Humanité*, the French communist daily, displayed a curious title on its front page: “A great victory for the Palestinian people”. At that time, the word “Palestinian” referred to the Jewish people of this territory. This terminology did not yet apply to the others, which were referred to generically as “Arabs”. This anecdote showed that the French Communist Party, its newspaper and the other Communist Parties of the world echoed the Soviet position on this question. It was indeed the USSR which was the first country to recognize the young Jewish state, in which it saw the project of a socialist society with the armed struggle against the British Empire, with its kibbutzim and its moshavim (collective farms and workers’ cooperatives). It especially recognized in this state a potential geo-strategic ally in a rapidly changing Middle East, confronted with American imperialism which also had its eyes on this region, rich in oil resources. The young Israeli army was first supplied in arms and munitions by Czechoslovakia, a member country of the Soviet Block. The affirmed support of the United States vis-à-vis Israel only came afterwards. In 1948, American diplomatic relations with the young Jewish state was resumed by de facto recognition. The fate of the Arabs (as that of the Jews) was of little importance to Stalin and Truman, the successor of

Roosevelt during the Yalta accords which redrew the borders of Europe, as well as borders beyond the Old Continent.

*1940s* : In the middle of the Second World War, before, during and after the Liberation, three main visions confronted each other on the fate of Palestine: that of the colonial power (Great Britain), that of the Zionists and that of the Arabs.

The British government, coherent with the recommendations of the Peel Commission in the 1930s, favoured the creation of autonomous Jewish and Arab provinces, in a federal framework, within mandatory Palestine. The Zionists, true to their project conceived at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, remained steadfast on the principle of territorial and political separation: the partition of Palestine in two entities, in order for the Jews to edify their state on a part of this territory. For the Zionists, the presence of an Arab population was considered to be—at the best—a nuisance. The fate of the Arabs of Palestine was not their main preoccupation. As for the Arabs, they were also loyal to their initial position: an independent Palestine in the framework of a single state, confirmed in London in 1946 at the “Palestine Conference”.

*1948*: Despite the vote of the UN for the partition of Palestine into two states, it was warfare which had the last word. At the end of the first Israeli-Arab conflict (“War of Independence” for the Israelis, “Nakba” for the Palestinians), the Haganah, Palmach and Irgun (the main Jewish militias at the origin of the future Israeli army) won control over 78% of historical Palestine, leaving only 22% to its Arab inhabitants, who were nevertheless much more numerous.

Palestinian Arabs in Jerusalem-East and on the West Bank became subjects of King Abdallah 1<sup>st</sup> of Jordan, while those of Gaza became the subjects of King Farouk of Egypt. Nasser was not yet in power in Cairo and the Suez Canal was under international control—especially the control of Great Britain—the former colonial power.

*1956*: The Suez war broke out, a conflict triggered by a Franco-British aggression against Egypt. Its young nationalist president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, turned towards the Soviet Union and dared to proclaim the nationalization of the canal. Israel took advantage of this conflict for its own purposes, allying itself with the Franco-British offensive in the hope of weakening the new Egyptian Republic, which it considered to be a

threat to its interests. Under the pressure of international diplomacy, Israeli forces withdrew from their advanced positions once this conflict came to an end. But this posture created a turnabout in the foreign policy of the young Hebrew state. It now aligned itself on the foreign policy of the European imperialist powers, and soon on American foreign policy.

*1964:* The PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) was created by the Arab regimes and for a long time manipulated by them. But it was shortly after its official launching in 1964 that the effective control of this organization was assumed by a young engineer born in Cairo by the name of Yasser Arafat. Palestinian nationalism took on rapid expansion.

Once the control of the PLO was in the hands of Fatah, Arafat's party, the latter developed a narrative centred on the interests of the Palestinian people in terms which had until then scarcely been heard, neither in Palestine, nor elsewhere.

At this point the new Charter of the PLO called for the creation of a democratic, secular and socialist state in all of historical Palestine. This position was based on the same principle which animated the anti-Apartheid guerrilla movement of the ANC in South Africa: "One man, one vote". In appearance, it was perfectly normal. But for Israeli Jews (clearly a minority from the Mediterranean to the Jordan), it represented an absolute horror, fed by the fear that they would be "pushed into the sea" by the Arabs. This fear was a myth, but Israeli leaders—on the left and on the right—knowingly maintained the fear of this virtual threat. Until this very day, it is largely fear which governs Israeli society and its choices.

*1967:* Three years after the creation of the PLO, the Six Day War broke out. The Israeli authorities blamed Arab armies which deployed their forces along Israel's borders. But the work of the new Israeli historians underline that the Israeli political elite had decided to provoke a "preventive conflict" against its neighbours, way before the first shot was fired. All of this constituted reprisals against the blockade of the Israeli port of Elat, imposed by the Egyptian navy...

Whatever the origins of this lightening-quick war, its outcome was clear for all to see. Israel decimated Egyptian aviation, humiliated the Jordanian Legion, inflicted a bitter defeat on the Syrian army, then occupied the Sinai, Gaza, Jerusalem-East, the West Bank and the Golan Heights (the latter territory belonging to Syria).

The Israelis danced in the streets, convinced of their military superiority, hammering the nails into the coffin of peaceful coexistence, blaming their Arab neighbours for being weak, for being divided and for being incapable of overcoming their problems. The word “Palestinian” had not yet entered the general vocabulary. Such a military celebration wasn’t difficult to predict, but it announced nothing positive for coexistence between the two peoples of the region.

*1968:* In France, it was the student revolt and the general strike of May 68. In Czechoslovakia, it was the Prague Spring. In Vietnam, it was the Têt offensive of the Viet Cong. In Palestine, it was the battle of Karameh. This armed action of the Palestinian Resistance was one of the rare—if not the only—military operation carried out by Palestinians which succeeded in holding the Israeli army at bay and inflicted on it what we can qualify as being a rout. This battle was the decisive event which put the PLO on the political map. It was in the wake of this military victory that Arafat’s fedayin<sup>7</sup> won the prestige from which they benefited amongst the Palestinians, comforting the dreams of return (or at least of revenge) for hundreds of thousands of refugees.

*1969:* During a meeting of the Palestinian National Council (PNC – the representative body of the PLO, the Palestinian parliament in exile), the Palestinian organization reaffirmed its traditional position: for the creation of a single democratic, non-confessional state throughout historical Palestine. Although this appeal sounded like wishful thinking given the relationship of forces, it nevertheless expressed the historical aspirations of the Palestinian national movement.

*1970s:* History with a capital “H” tells the story of Black September which took place in Jordan in 1970, where the monarchy in power in Amman perpetrated a terrible massacre against the Palestinians on its territory. The PLO was forced to abandon Jordan as a base for its operations against Israel.

But history with a small “h” tells us that this painful experience was doubled by another one. The dust of the Six Day War had hardly settled when the Israelis—then led by the Labour Party of Moshe Dayan, Yitzak Rabin and Shimon Peres—didn’t hesitate to colonize the new occupied territories, in flagrant violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and of

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<sup>7</sup> Fedayin: Palestinian combatants.



UN resolutions. Indeed, a few months after the conflict, in 1967, the United Nations General Assembly had adopted Resolution 242, calling for the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the territories it just conquered.

The first settlements were created by an extremist political-religious organization, “Gush Emunim” (Block of the Faithful), a kind of Israeli “taliban” group. Even though Gush Emunim is squarely on the right-hand side of the political spectrum—it’s even a far right nationalist and messianic movement—its settlements were tolerated, protected and even financed by successive governments, both left and right. In the beginning, Labour Party leaders thought that they could control the Gush Emunim fanatics. But like the Golem in Jewish mythology which arose from the ghettos, the monster produced by the State of Israel quickly escaped the control of its creator.

A small group of lucid Israelis tried to have their voices heard. They were immediately marginalized and denounced as naive dreamers or worse, as traitors. They were reduced to silence.

*1973:* It was the first major military defeat suffered by Israel: the Yom Kippur War. The “Jewish state” survived. But at the price of heavy casualties in the armed forces: 3,000 deaths and 8,000 wounded. It was a precedent never attained in the country’s history, nor repeated since. Israelis started to doubt that their supposed military invincibility could in and of itself assure their security.

The Prime Minister in office at that time was Golda Meir. In the course of her mandate at the head of the government, she pronounced the famous phrase: “There is no Palestinian people”, which says a lot on her thinking but also on that of a good number of her compatriots. A few years will be necessary before the Israelis abandon the concept of the inexistence of the Palestinian people. The lessons learned from this war and American pressure led them to normalize their relations with Egypt and brought them to the Camp David Accords in 1978. These accords resulted in the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai, occupied during the Six Day War.

*1974:* At a meeting in Cairo, the PNC (Palestinian National Council) accepted for the first time the perspective of a reduced state structure, i.e. the idea of edifying a national authority on only a part of historical Palestine. The resolution adopted, written by Arafat, called for the creation of a Palestinian state “on any liberated part of Palestine”. The ink with

which this statement was written wasn't yet dry before it was denied as a *desirable* perspective. The traditional position of the PLO was reaffirmed: for a single democratic, non-confessional state for Palestine as a whole. The war on the ground was transformed into war of vocabulary. It's not as bloody but it's just as aggressive, because it was like a dialogue of the deaf. Israel refused to recognize the Palestinian people and vice versa.

1975: For the first time, a meeting of the PNC, still in exile, implicitly recognized the State of Israel, as it demanded that the "Zionist entity" (a euphemism used by the PLO) implement Resolution 242 of the United Nations, which orders Israel to withdrawal from the territories that it occupied in 1967. The PNC took advantage of the opportunity to proclaim the "State of Palestine". A perfectly virtual event, this proclamation was nevertheless solemnly made.

1976: Israeli police opened fire on its own citizens at a demonstration in Galilee, causing numerous deaths and injuries. The citizens in question were Arabs, also designated as "1948 Palestinians" (those who didn't flee during the 1948 war, as well as their descendants). Each year, "Land Day" commemorates the repression inflicted by the State of Israel against a category of its own citizens. The memory of this tragic event contributed to leading these Israeli Arabs to forge a Palestinian identity.

1978: This year marked the signature of the Camp David Accords between the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and the Egyptian President Anwar Al Sadat, leading to the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai, occupied since the Six Day War.

But another event, which did not make headlines in the international press, was perhaps of an event greater significance. Observing the military impasse, a group of 300 Israeli reserve officers created a movement they called Shalom Arshav (Peace Now). We're talking about the "naive dreamers" referred to above and who warned their compatriots of the trap of a prolonged occupation. Their movement met with unexpected success. A few years later, during an <sup>n</sup>th operation staged by Tsahal<sup>8</sup> in Southern Lebanon, they once again took to the streets in 1982 to protest against this new military adventure, which proved to be a disaster for the Lebanese civilian population. Surprisingly, they were joined by thousands, tens of

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<sup>8</sup> Tsahal: a transliteration from Hebrew meaning "Israeli Defence Forces", the acronym used to designate the Israeli army. This term sometimes has an affectionate connotation for those who defend the action of this army.

thousands, then hundreds of thousands of their fellow citizens, a good number of whom were conscripted soldiers, soldiers in civilian clothing and officers of intermediary rank. These security professionals knew that in the absence of a political solution, the mere force of arms could not guarantee a future for a “Jewish democratic state” in the Arab Orient. The organization which called for these demonstrations, which mobilised up to 400,000 persons in Tel Aviv—that is 8% of the country’s total population—became a mass movement in a few weeks. Its slogan, “Give up the Territories in exchange for peace”, was a conjunctural way to express the desire for a two state solution. In the following years, a number of associations and parties belonging to the Zionist left, close to Shalom Arshav, were created with evocative names: Coalition for Peace, Meretz<sup>9</sup>, Labour Doves, Netivot Shalom<sup>10</sup>, the Green Line, etc.

Of a left-wing Zionist leaning, the mobilisations around the Peace Now pole enabled Israel’s far left to emerge from its marginality. Matzpen—the far left organization—followed by an entire series of pacifist NGOs, anti-colonial associations and well-known intellectuals no longer hesitated to publicly criticize the blindness of the government in power. For once, they were heard by a broad public.

*1982:* Israel waged war in southern Lebanon, pushing its forces as far as Beirut. Its soldiers, who controlled the entrance of the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in the suburbs of the capital, let the far right Lebanese Phalanges enter the camps, enabling the atrocious massacre they perpetrated against civilians there. This war crime, which tarnished the image of Israel throughout the world, gave a thrust to a movement of conscientious objectors in the Israeli army. Four hundred thousand (400,000) people demonstrated in Tel Aviv for an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon but the PLO was definitely chased out of Beirut. With the help of France, Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian leadership were evacuated by sea and were able to establish new headquarters in Tunis. When the chiefs of staff of the PLO got geographically further away from Palestine, the hope of seeing the emergence of a Palestinian state also gets further away.

*1987:* The first Intifada<sup>11</sup> broke out and violence overtook the Occupied Territories. The war of words was transformed into a war of stones. The

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<sup>9</sup> Meretz: party of the secular left, represented in the Knesset.

<sup>10</sup> Netivot Shalom defines itself as the only organization in Israel that is religious, Zionist and for peace.

<sup>11</sup> Intifada: “uprising” in Arabic.

repression was merciless but Palestinian children didn't run away from Israeli army tanks. This movement—a spontaneous one—started in Gaza, the poorest of the Palestinian territories, without any direct link to the PLO leadership in exile. A new generation of Palestinian leaders, forged in the heat of the struggle, emerged in the Occupied Territories. An increasing number of Israelis understood that their powerful army had brought them neither peace, nor security. The idea of a political process to resolve the conflict was making its way, slowly but surely.

*1988:* After a year of the Intifada, the PNC, which met in Algiers, reminded whoever cared to listen that the State of Palestine—which it proclaimed in 1975—indeed exists. In its deliberations, it reaffirmed in its own way its implicit recognition of the “Zionist entity” by taking a stand for the edification of an “independent Palestinian state next to Israel”.

In the meantime, Hamas (Arabic acronym for the “Islamic Resistance Movement”)—which is not a member of the PLO—was developing, especially in Gaza where it was born, then on the West Bank. For the Islamic fundamentalists of Hamas, the recognition of the State Israel was out of the question. And the diplomatic process was abandoned: Hamas thrust itself into the armed struggle. Sometimes it attacked the occupation army and sometimes it attacked Israeli civilians in suicide bombings, which became its speciality. In the absence of any real political willingness to negotiate—and for which a considerable part of the Israeli population was ready—the nightmares of Arab terrorism came back to haunt the inhabitants of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Netanya and other cities.

The political position of Hamas was clear: against the idea of partitioning Palestine, this movement took a stand for the liberation of all of historical Palestine and the creation of an... Islamic state! It should be recalled that Palestinians are traditionally fairly secular, not exactly known for religious fanaticism. Knowing that a significant part of the Palestinian people is composed of religious minorities (Orthodox Christians, Druzes...), the idea of an Islamic state is far from being unanimous, that's the least we can say. But despite this factor Hamas was winning ground, especially because of a rejection of the discredited leaders of the PLO, of their corruption and of their incapacity to improve the living conditions of their people by a so-called “peace process” without any concrete results on the ground.

Aside from that, in the context of the “struggle against Islamic terrorism” so dear to the neo-conservatives, numerous Israeli political leaders considered that the religious Arab parties (Hamas, Islamic Jihad) had denatured the political process in the region and aggravated the security situation, with the irruption of radical Islam on the Palestinian political scene. Their memory is short-lived. We should recall that this situation, which is indeed worrisome (and which constitutes in particular an internal problem for Palestinian society), is only the retort of the phenomenon initiated by the Jewish religious parties. A considerable number of seats in the Knesset were occupied by parliamentarians from Shass<sup>12</sup>, the National Religious Party<sup>13</sup> or a party called “United Judaism of the Torah”.<sup>14</sup> Extremist rabbis have sat as members of parliament and even as ministers well before the first imam was ever elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council. As for the bodies of the PLO—a totally secular organization—they have no representatives of religious parties.

*1991:* In the traces of the first Gulf War, the Madrid conference opened on October 30<sup>th</sup>, bringing together Israeli and Palestinian political representatives in the same hall. Newspapers throughout the world made their headlines on what was announced as being a precedent (officially). In fact, Israeli criminal law punished with a steep fine and a prison term any Israeli citizen who dared meet a member of the PLO! And so a number of tragic-comical scenes took place in which Hanan Ashrawi, a personality of Jerusalem-East and head of the Palestinian delegation, would leave the room to call Yasser Arafat on the phone, who gave his approval (or not) on this or that declaration. She would come back to the negotiating table with her answer: “yes” or “no”. Everyone knew that it was the PLO’s chief of staff that spoke through her, but the Israeli delegation couldn’t admit it, despite all evidence. In fact, Israeli opponents had often met emissaries of the PLO underground for many years; it was a well-known state secret. Representatives of the Israeli government had done the same, without however admitting it in public, as it was prohibited for ordinary citizens. This hypocrisy took on the appearance of an opéra bouffe. After almost a hundred years of conflict, the citizens of the occupying power didn’t yet have the right to meet representatives of the occupied people.

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<sup>12</sup> Shass: Sephardic religious party (right)

<sup>13</sup> National Religious Party: Ashkenazi formation, whose main electorate is to be found in settlements of the Occupied Territories. Dissolved in 2008 to join the “Jewish Home” (a far right party).

<sup>14</sup> “United Judaism of the Torah”: coalition of orthodox Ashkenazi formations (right).

*1993:* On September 12<sup>th</sup>—that is the day before the signing of the Oslo Accords—a major event took place, completely swept under the carpet by “Oslo”, but perhaps more significant than said Accords. For the first time the State of Israel officially recognized the Palestinian people and its legitimate representative, the PLO. Better late than never!

*1993:* On September 13<sup>th</sup>, the day after mutual recognition, the famous Oslo Accords were solemnly signed on the lawn of the White House in Washington by Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzah Rabin. This act put an end to exile for the PLO leadership. The organization firstly set up its offices in Gaza, then moved to Ramallah, on the West Bank. These historical Accords also created the Palestinian Authority (PA), with real political powers, even if they were limited. The Oslo Accords foresaw—after an intermediary period of five years—the creation of a Palestinian state in the Occupied Territories. In appearance, history was on the move and the perspective of a Palestinian state—even on a reduced part of historical Palestine—was actually on the agenda. Upon the announcement of the signing of this document, and despite legitimate criticisms against these imperfect Accords, numerous Israelis rejoiced. And numerous Palestinians did the same. One could almost see the light at the end of the tunnel.

*1994:* As soon as the Accords were signed, those who put so much hope in them were rapidly disappointed. During the official ceremony at the White House, in the presence of American President Bill Clinton, the entire world saw on their television screens the hesitation with which Rabin shook Arafat’s hand. As soon as the document was signed, it was violated. Israel broke almost every provision of the Accords, be it on the release of political prisoners, on the freeze of colonization, on the occupier’s consent for Palestinians to hold elections within the foreseen deadlines, on negotiations in good faith concerning various dossiers still to be finalized (water, borders, settlements, status of Jerusalem, refugees, etc). A few months later, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by an extremist settler who didn’t forgive him for having retroceded to “Arabs” a portion of Jewish sovereignty over “Greater Israel”.

There was another pitfall. As of its creation, the PLO represented all of the Palestinian people: those on the West Bank, in Jerusalem, in Gaza, “1948 Palestinians” (citizens of the State of Israel), refugees in the camps and Palestinians exiled abroad. As for the Palestinian Authority, it only represented those who live in the Occupied Territories. It hardly represents