

# Arab Factor in Palestine

• by David Ben-Gurion

MUCH CONFUSION and perplexity prevail among us with regard to the Arab issue.\* Some dismiss it as insignificant while others regard it as decisive, and both are exaggerated views. Indeed, none of our political problems is subject to as many quack solutions as the Arab Problem. One of these solutions is summed up in the term Bi-National State. If the term Bi-National is intended only to point to the fact that in Palestine there are Jews and Arabs, then the denotation is correct; but the indication of a fact solves no problem. No one in the Zionist movement seeks the expulsion of the Arabs from Palestine. On the other hand, if the term Bi-National means the establishment in Palestine of political equality between Jews and Arabs regardless of their numerical proportions, then this is a vague version of a clearer and more concrete term—that of political parity. Our movement requires such political parity during the transitional period of the mandatory administration. In fact, the Seventeenth Zionist Congress declared that the Jewish people aim to bring about in Palestine peaceful and amicable relations between Jews and Arabs on the principles that, "regardless of the numerical size of either of the two nationalities, neither shall dominate or be dominated by the other."

However, the main political problem of the Arab factor does not consist in the achievement of peaceful relations between the Jewish and Arab inhabitants of Palestine. It is not a question of the relations between two existing and static national bodies, living together in one territorial or political frame. Palestine to us is not the land of its existing inhabitants. Our right in Palestine is not the right of the Palestinian Jews, but of the entire Jewish people which is scattered the world over and of which only 3% live in Palestine. The importance of Palestine for the Jewish people lies not in its being the habitat of 400,000 Jews, but in its being a place for continuous and expanding Jewish immigration. From this viewpoint, there is in the term Bi-National a perversion of ideas and a national danger.

This term, unless it be void of any content, means that with regard to Palestine the Jews and Arabs share equally in the governing institutions of the country for the duration of the mandatory period, regardless of the respective numbers of Jews and Arabs resident in the country during this period. But to say that Palestine is a land of two nations, the Jewish nation and the Arab nation, is a double perversion of Zionist truth, both with regard to the Jews and to the Arabs. For, the rights of the Jews in Palestine are different from the rights of the Arabs; and the difference in these rights is not formal but essential and reaches the essence of the Palestine problem. Palestinian Arabs have the rights proper to all inhabitants of the country. Armenian and Ethiopian inhabitants of Palestine are entitled to the same rights even though their numbers are small. However, the Arabs of Syria, Iraq, or Saudia, have no rights in Palestine. On the other hand, the right which the Jews have in Palestine, is their right not as inhabitants of the country, but as Jews, whether they live in Palestine or in any other country. The fundamental Jewish right, the right which some Arabs deny and which is the main issue in the present struggle, the right which is our only national hope—is in reality the right in Palestine of non-Palestinian Jews, the right of immigration. It

is not the strained relations between the Palestinian Jews and their neighbors that is the real difficulty in Palestine. In the main, the Arabs are not contesting the civil rights of the Palestinian Jews. Even the Mufti did not dare state clearly before the Royal Commission that he would deny the rights of those Jews who are already living in Palestine. I do not mean to imply that the existing *Yishuv* is safe. The Assyrians of Iraq had no claims of immigration, yet the Arabs massacred them and forced them out of their native land which they had inhabited for thousands of years. At all events, the motto of the recent uprising was not the expulsion of the Jews from Palestine, but the stopping of further immigration. The fight of the Arabs, their physical and political fight, is carried on against Jewish immigration. And this right of Jewish immigration stands as a contradiction to the Bi-National theory. The Jewish and Arab claims are not equal with regard to Palestine; nor are there any moral, political, or realistic grounds for such equality.

The Arab inhabitants of the country are entitled to all civil and political rights, not only as individuals but also as a national body, in absolute equality with the Jews. But these rights affect solely and exclusively the Arabs of Palestine. They consider themselves native Palestinians and are entitled to all the rights and privileges of native citizens. However, non-Palestinian Arabs—inhabitants of Syria, Iraq, and Saudia—have their own native lands and their own states. They have neither needs nor rights, politically or morally, in Palestine. This is not the case with the Jewish people, a people deprived of a homeland, of soil and of work in the whole world. Palestine is their only homeland; and all Jews have a share in it and a right to come to it. This right is endangered when the term Bi-National State is used, when the *Jewish People* and the *Arab People* are viewed in the same light with regard to Palestine. A Bi-National State may mean either both Jewish and Arab immigration or the prohibition of Jewish as well as Arab immigration, or it may mean that Palestine belongs either to the Jews and Arabs who inhabit it or to all the Jews and to all the Arabs in the world. Both these assumptions are false and would undermine the very foundation of Zionism. Palestine is not called upon to solve a problem of two peoples, but of one people—the only people on earth that has no homeland outside of Palestine. This solution is not sought at the expense of the Palestine Arabs. There is room in Palestine for all its present inhabitants, Jews and Arabs, and for the whole Jewish people.

One of our complaints against British officialdom since the disturbances is that it attempted, and still attempts, to make of Palestine not only an issue between the native Arabs and the Jewish people, but also an issue between the two nationalities: the entire Jewish people of the world on the one hand, and the entire Arab people on the other. Shall we then voluntarily aid the government in this dangerous misinterpretation of the mandate?

We must not permit ourselves, both from the moral and from the political standpoint, to shut our eyes to the existence of the Arabs in Palestine and to their just needs and rights as citizens as well as a national body. On the other hand, we must not permit ourselves through uninformed excessive generosity to create in Palestine rights and interests for Arab groups who have neither need for land nor have any moral or political grounds for intervention in Palestinian affairs.

\*Delivered before the Council of the Histadrut at a recent session.

In considering the disturbances, we must also avoid misinterpretation. On the one hand, we must guard against the false idealization of Arab violence, in the Communists' vein, as the heroism of a people fighting for its freedom and fatherland. On the other hand, we must not disregard the national factors which undoubtedly played a part in the acts of vandalism, sabotage and murder. We cannot regard the riots solely as an intrigue of foreign powers or as the work of a treacherous administration. No doubt, non-Arabs had a hand in the disturbances: Fascists and Communists, and perhaps other elements. But the Arabs "too" took part in their perpetration. In the disturbances Arab nationalism came to the fore in all its untamed barbarism and brutality, a nationalism whose method of action is violence and whose aim is subjugation and oppression. This is not a movement for national liberty, as we understand such movements. This movement that began after the war, has never sought to improve the conditions of the Arab people, nor produced any positive assets, socially, culturally, or economically. Its main contribution to the history of the country in the past two decades consist in the riots of 1920, 1921, 1929 and 1936. It is no coincidence that the riots have increased with each new outbreak. These riots "educate" the Arab masses, and we must not disregard or belittle the results of this "education".

The latest upheaval, though it did more damage to the Arabs than to us, had a deep effect on the political education of the Arab masses. It strengthened their national solidarity and deepened their sense of kinship with outside Arabs.

We must find a way to reach the Arab people and its national movement, a way that would lead to understanding, to peace and to economic as well as political cooperation. This is not easy; but it is not impossible. There is no point in optimistic delusions, but there is no ground for despair.

Since the Prague Congress we have made many efforts to reach an agreement with Arab leaders both in Palestine and in the neighboring countries. These efforts continued down to and during the disturbances. While nothing of significance resulted, it was not altogether wasted effort. Through these attempts at mutual understanding, some important points of contact were discovered, and some promising possibilities of ultimate accord came to light.

In this connection, I must admit to an erroneous view I held some years back. At the Ahduth Ha-Avodah Conference in Ein Harod 13 years ago, I answered the question "On what grounds shall we meet the heads of the Arab movement" with these words: "We shall never reach an agreement with the heads of this movement. The way to the Effendis and rulers of the Arab people, though it be the shortest and simplest, is not our way. We must follow a longer and more difficult way—namely, the way to the Arab worker. We have no common ground with the ruling class of the Arab people; but we have a common ground, though as yet in theory more than in reality, with the Arab workers".

I still believe now, as I did then, in the bond between us and the Arab workers, though the basis for this bond is still a matter of theory. But today I would not say that the way to mutual understanding is solely through the Arab worker. We must find the way to the Arab people both in Palestine and in the neighboring countries through contact and negotiation with their spokesmen, whoever these are. Today, as at the time of the Ein Harod Conference, "the Arab worker does not exist as an independent force or political factor". We cannot keep aloof from the Arab people and its national movement solely because the Arab worker does not as yet head it. True, we must lend all our moral support and organizational backing to the Arab worker, and help him rise

economically, socially and politically. However, we cannot decide for the Arab people as to who should be its representatives, nor can we allow ourselves to put off our negotiations with the Arabs until such time when their workers can speak for themselves. The new alliance between France and Russia was concluded between Laval on the one hand and Litvinov on the other. Every nation selects such representatives as it desires at the time. If we recognize our need of mutual understanding with the Arab people, we must negotiate with those on whom the people depend at the time.

We have been trying to reach those who now represent the Arab people in order to find a way to political accord. We shall not cease trying until we succeed. We have not been successful in our efforts till now for a number of reasons. The chief reason is our weakness. In the eyes of the Arabs, we are not yet sufficiently strong to be considered worthy allies. International relations are as yet determined by *interests* rather than by just claims. We shall never win over the Arabs by endeavoring to convince them of the justice of our national aspirations. Was it because of his love for the Soviet regime that Laval formed an agreement with Litvinov?—no more than it was because of England's love for justice that she defended Belgium during the war. In order to form an alliance we must become a power worthy of alliance.

The most important factor in the hope for mutual understanding between us and the Arabs, is our growth in Palestine; and the fact that the riots are protests against such growth does not contradict this truth. While it is true that each new outbreak is more violent than the preceding one, we must not overlook these facts: namely, that the last disturbances occurred not during the years of prosperity, but at the beginning of the depression which resulted from the Ethiopian War; that the Arab losses from the disturbances left their marks; and that the resistive and defensive strength of the Yishuv has had an educational effect on the opposite camp. As our growth in Palestine becomes a political fact, so does it deepen the realization of the Arab politicians that it is a fact to reckon with and accept. Arab leaders of the neighboring countries whose political vision is broader, do not identify themselves entirely with the bitter opposition to Zionism of their Palestinian colleagues.

Another reason that our negotiations with the Arabs have so far been unsuccessful is the *weakness* of the Arab national movement. In reality there is no consolidated Arab movement, but various family cliques competing with one another for influence and position. This situation nullifies any attempt at a Jewish-Arab agreement. No leader who may be ready for an agreement with the Jews, will dare voice his opinion for fear of being denounced as a traitor by his opponents. In this primitive background, it is easier to win over the masses by arousing national hatred than by concrete, far-seeing statesmanship.

A third reason for our lack of success in attempting to effect an agreement with the Arabs is the wavering attitude of British policy. We cannot say that the Palestine Government has gone out of its way to bring about a reconciliation between Arabs and Jews.

Despite the lack of official or semi-official accord between us and the Arab movement, however, it is erroneous to think that our continuous attempts at an understanding have met with complete failure. There are influential Arab circles which view the Jewish factor in a positive light both from an economic and from a political standpoint. There is also a noticeable "Jewish orientation" among the Arabs, similar to the "English orientation" and "Arab orientation" that exists among us.

We shall not find a common language with the Arab national movement until we learn to see things from an Arab point of view. Just as we regard our existence as

an end in itself, so the Arabs too regard their existence not as a means to something ulterior, but as an end in itself. Our political orientations are determined not only by their intrinsic ethical merit, but by their practical utility; why, then, should we expect Arab "sympathies" to be determined otherwise? The pro-Jewish orientation among the Arabs will be strengthened if we succeed in convincing them that cooperation with the Jews and with Zionism will be to their advantage politically as well as economically; and that the Jewish factor is not temporary and powerless but cogent and lasting; and that its presence in Palestine is a historical fact not to be annulled or disregarded.

We must not regard the Arab factor merely as something which may benefit or harm us. We deal with an independently functioning body having its own will, its own needs, and its own capacity. Estimates may vary as to the strength of its will, the extent of its needs, and the scope of its capacities; but there can be no doubt as to its actuality. We cannot formulate an "Arab" program solely in accordance with *our* needs and *our* aims. The Arabs are not obliged to be a means to our end. We must ask ourselves: to what degree does the program fit the needs of the Arabs and their aspirations? Without a straightforward and truthful answer to this question we shall achieve nothing.

On this account, I do not favor the organization of the Arab worker solely from the viewpoint of our needs and hopes. The organization of the Arab worker will take place if it is done for his sake. It will endure if it satisfies his needs, not ours. If the Arab worker needs organization, it is for the betterment of his material lot and the improvement of his working conditions, not for the sake of increased Jewish immigration. Those who see in one union for Jews and Arabs the solution to our political problems—which center around the problem of immigration—do not regard the Arab worker as a self-motivated entity, but as an instrument in our hands. The Arab worker or Fellah, being as much an Arab as the Jewish worker is Jew, will never become an instrument in our hands, but will insist on his own will, his own needs, and his own aspirations. Individual exceptions are possible. An individual Arab worker or intellectual may, without ulterior motive of material gain, be lured by the social and cultural aspects of the Jewish workers' movement and devote himself to it wholeheartedly. These are individual exceptions and do not represent the body of Arab workers, the masses of Arab Fellahen, or the Arab intelligentsia. We need the cooperation not of the exceptional exotic Arab, but of the Arab people, of the Arab people as it is, and as it is developing. To be sure, consciously and unconsciously, Arab life and development is influenced by us. Our presence in the land, our economic, cultural, social, and organizational activities, serve as a factor in the development of Arab life. But the direction of this development is not determined by our will and needs, but by the will and needs of the Arabs. They are not obliged to accept our standards of values. To many of us it may appear that this or that is the need of the Arab worker or Fellah. But as long as the latter does not, himself, feel that need, it is not his need. The Arab worker or Fellah is not clay in a potter's hand; particularly if the hand is non-Arab.

The organization of the Arab worker depends on his own needs. It will take place and it will grow—if it is to the advantage of the Arab worker. Indirectly it will also be to our advantage. The raising of living standards among Arab workers will help us guard our own high standards. All cooperative action with the Arabs in general, and particularly with the Arab workers, when it is to the benefit of both them and ourselves, is directly also a political blessing. It enhances peace in the land. We

must, therefore, expand the economic and social cooperation between us and the Arabs as far as we can: between Jewish workers and Arab workers, between Jewish farmers and Arab farmers, between merchants and manufacturers, of both nationalities. Every cooperative effort of this type is useful in itself and enhances the cause of peace. But economic cooperation does not solve the political problem, and we must find a way to political cooperation. Such cooperation will be possible when a common ground is created for political partnership for which the first condition is the existence of the two partners. As yet, not all the Arabs consider the Jew as a political entity. They still hope to retain sole ownership of the land politically, and sole ownership appeals to them more than even successful partnership.

It is no coincidence that the Arab leaders in the neighboring countries are more inclined to Jewish-Arab political cooperation than Palestinian Arab leaders. Distance broadens the horizon and clarifies perspective. The forest is not hidden by the multitude of trees. There are, however, other factors operating in the Palestinian Arab movement.

The darkest and most ominous days in the recent disturbances were not the days of the riots in Jaffa, of the guerilla attacks from ambush, or of the horrors in Safed, but rather the days of Nuri Pasha. It seemed to us then, that, with the connivance of the local and perhaps even of the London government, we were suddenly facing not only an uprising of the Palestine Arabs, but an anti-Zionist confederation of the entire Arab world, of Saudia, Transjordan, Yemman, Syria, Iraq and Egypt. It seemed that the real mastery of Palestine, which for some months was held not by the Mandatory Government but by the "Supreme Moslem Council", passed into the hands of a pan-Arab representation which dictated not only to us Jews but also to "His Majesty's Government". Thanks to our desperate efforts made late in August and early in September in Jerusalem, London and elsewhere, this menace was removed. Nuri Pasha was exiled and the London Government published on, September 7th, a statement declaring that it could not tolerate the methods of violence and terrorism with which Arab leaders sought to influence His Majesty's Government; that such acts must promptly and vigorously be put to an end. As we know, however, on its way from London to Jerusalem and to the Hills of Nablus, the order lost much of its vigor and the end was put off from day to day. Finally the Arab kings again intervened, and the strike and the violence ended as if "by themselves". The hidden hand continued for a long time—and for all we know is still continuing—to frighten the authorities with the Pan-Arab scare-crow of a combined anti-Zionist uprising of Syria, Iraq and Saudia.

In the meantime, however, the whole front has changed. Nuri Pasha, who placed himself or was placed at the head of the anti-Zionist alliance of the Arab world, has been removed from his position and is now an exile in Egypt. The new government of Iraq turns its back upon the Pan-Arab world. Iran (Persia) and Turkey, the two powerful neighbors of Iraq, interest her more than the intrigues of the family clique of the Arab nobility in distant Palestine. The "Supreme Moslem Council" which vowed to ban the Royal Commission, sent a delegation to Iraq. The delegation was quietly told that the Iraq Government could not disregard the blessings of the Zionist undertaking for the entire Near East; and that this government did not view with favor the violent fight of the Palestine Arabs against the Mandate and the Mandatory Government. At the return of the delegation, the Supreme Council broke its vow and appeared before the Royal Commission.

In Syria, the other center of the Pan-Arab movement,

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an autonomous government was in the meantime established. The responsibility of organizing a self-governing state now falls upon the Syrian leaders. They must now solve economic, financial, military and social problems with their own resources. They can no longer be satisfied with propaganda and political agitation against the foreigners, the Zionists. They must now worry about unemployment, taxation, defense. On top of all this, they are facing trouble from another source. At the end of the war, France had sliced off the district of Alexandretta, a Turkish speaking region, from the defeated Ottoman Empire, and included it in the Syria Mandate. Now, before the ink had dried on her Treaty of Self-Government, Syria was challenged by the Turkish Government with a forceful demand that she return the District. In fact Turkey has already gotten half her wish, for, with the approval of England, the District of Alexandretta was declared autonomous with Turkish as the official language. Now self-governing Syria is facing the danger of spreading Turkish influence as Turkey is becoming a powerful political factor in the Near East. More than ever, Syria is now interested in gaining friends, and is not likely to belittle the Jewish factor as she had done before.

Our importance to the Arab world around us does not depend on one phraseological version or another of our national aspirations, but on the actual power which we will attain in this country. Our friendship with the Arab people will be achieved not only because we need it, but also because they will need it. We shall not achieve an easier understanding with the Arabs by limiting the scope of Zionism in theory and in practice. A weak, exigous, undetermined Jewish *Yishuv* is no political ally. Our rapid growth in strength, which is needed in itself, is also a primary expedient for an eventual political partnership between Zionism and the renascent Arab people around us. This partnership which already exists in potentiality looks towards a rapid materialization of Zionism in all its political content and scope.

There may still be some harsh clashes ahead of us. We are still facing grave dangers on both fronts—the English and the Arab. Only through the intensification of our efforts and strength, economically, politically, morally, and physically, can we withstand these dangers, and render alien and hostile forces helpful and friendly. In the wide world our strength is almost null. Among the mighty powers now engaged in struggle we are insignificant. But in this small corner of the globe, in Palestine—we are a decisive factor. The fate of Palestine will be determined by us. This is the decree of the history of the Jewish people and of the history of Palestine. For, we are the only people on earth for whom the question of Palestine is a question of life and death.

Our strength and hope in Palestine are based upon the *singularity* of our relation to the country; upon the *singularity* of our historic status in this place; and upon *the singularity of destiny and vital interests that bind us, and only us to this land*. In the conflicting forces against which we come in our historic progress, we must distinguish between temporary, and between fundamental and immutable historical forces. The temporary forces sometimes aid and sometimes hinder us; but in the scale of history, only the fundamental and permanent forces activating our effort, will hold the balance. These are:

The horrible distress of the Jewish masses abroad.

The creative powers and the will for redemption alive within us.

The latent possibilities of this barren and impoverished land.

The blessing which the Zionist effort brings to Palestine, to its inhabitants, and to the whole world.