

# Why Palestine?

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I have often been asked—as I have been here—to explain the origin of my interest in the cause of the Palestinians and my reasons for defending them. People seldom fail to draw attention to the extent to which my attitudes seem contradictory: have I not several times mocked nationalist fervor, demonstrated the absurdities to which it so often leads and the crimes it inspires? Have I not frequently expressed my deep revulsion for nationalist speeches? And isn't the Palestinian cause as nationalist as that which is the mainspring of the Zionist movement? Isn't it inconsistent to grant Palestinian nationalism a privileged position in relation to so many others, and particularly in comparison with Israeli nationalism and the form of Jewish nationalism embodied in Zionism?<sup>1</sup>

I make no claim to escape the weaknesses common to human thinking. I merely try to limit their hold. Essentially, I do not believe that my positions are so absurd. To the extent that my arguments have been taken up by others, have converged with their own positions or are likely to be useful, it is perhaps worth my expanding them somewhat here.

First of all—and I want to stress this point—I am in no way exempting Palestinian nationalism from the defects of every form of nationalism. These defects are very clear in the speeches and actions of Palestinian nationalists. The Palestinians are human and it would, indeed, be a miracle if they had escaped the universal consequences of humankind's mobilization for a cause, whether a good or a bad one. Now, I do not believe in

miracles. It would be surprising indeed if they did not idealize their own ethnic or national group, attribute to the latter an essence eternally and entirely good, and, in contrast, “demonize” the enemy, who is always and in every way treacherous. Here, as elsewhere, an irresistible tendency emerges to link the national drama to an alleged eternal cosmic struggle between Good and Evil.

Nationalism is a particular example of a militant ideology. Militant ideological movements have constant characteristics, and Palestinian nationalism no more escapes them than does its enemy, Zionist or Israeli nationalism. Every militant ideological movement also idealizes its cause, and “demonizes” the enemy. Within its ranks there reigns a constant outbidding which throws suspicion on every nuance, on every effort to understand the other, or move away from the utmost degree of demonization. The struggle for power, which is still a universal factor in the political dynamic, is only suspended—and partially at that—to the extent to which the combat imposes discipline. However, many individuals and groups are eager to take it up again and are on the watch for every occasion to begin to do so at the very least. The leadership is constantly tempted by a tendency to broaden and universalize the validity of a tactic which may only be temporary, to present this tactic to the masses and elites as essential and eternal, to presuppose it in past events, and to admit the likelihood of its continuing in the future. The leadership constantly tends to subject all its activities and all its thinking to transitory tactical needs. The intellectuals of the movement are always tempted, in quite parallel ways, by a facile explanation: a conspiratorial vision of history and of the present. In the shadows, the treacherous forces of Evil have always woven cunning plots against Good, and they continue to do so. In any case, it is blasphemous—and dangerous—to express the least doubt as to the eventual outcome of the triumph of the movement, which can but be preparing a glorious future. Among the militants of the rank and file there are many who surrender to the everyday passions of humankind, to all kinds of irrationality aggravated by ignorance, which sometimes go as far as the satisfaction of sadistic impulses.

All of this is apparently the case, and naturally I deplore it. But one must not forget that even the noblest and most admirable causes have been sullied by similar defects, and by corruption and criminal behavior on the part of some of their followers, if not on the part of most of them. A retrospective view of things may easily convince that they should, nevertheless, have been supported. To wait before committing oneself to a

cause until all its representatives, always and everywhere, are without fault or error, is to take refuge in passivity and contribute to the victory of the enemy cause which may be corrupt, not only in the behavior of its followers, but in its objectives. This does not, however, mean that one should condone every action and idea of those one supports in their overall goal.

All nationalisms have major defects inherent in their nationalist character, in addition to the vices which usually adhere to every action of ideological militantism. But it is imperative to establish distinctions at once. A nationalism which aims to subject other nations is despicable and must be fought. A static form of nationalism may be more or less tolerated, and fought only in its more extreme manifestations. But the nationalism of an oppressed nation, which wishes to obtain respect for its collective rights as a nation, must be supported in its essential aim, even if certain of its manifestations are open to criticism.

It could be maintained, and has in fact been maintained (see Albert Memmi<sup>2</sup>), that Zionist nationalism is also the nationalism of an oppressed people, the Jews. It is true that, initially, Zionism drew its strength from the aspirations of the Jews of Eastern Europe who were persecuted and oppressed. However, the solution of a Jewish state as proposed by Zionism to remedy this persecution and oppression was not the only solution. For a long time it was adopted only by a small minority. Powerful Jewish organizations, the Jewish religious authorities, and a considerable number of individual Jews supported other solutions. Jewish nationalism itself, as the concept of a single Jewish nation scattered over the planet, did not necessarily impose itself as an ideology of combat. We know, in fact, that this collectivity, the gathering of the survivors of a very long history riddled with eliminations and assimilations, could only be classified with a great deal of uncertainty: as a fragmented religious community (but many rejected their ancestral religion without ceasing to be considered as Jews by their entourage); as a grouping of formations closer to the ethno-national type, which could have justified several different Jewish “nations” (an ensemble of Yiddish language and culture in Eastern Europe—yet, in the nineteenth century, increasingly participating in the host cultures—communities of Ladino culture and language in one part of the Ottoman empire, etc.. . ?). Few things drew together the existing groups and the many men and women who escaped all of these classifications into a centrifugal movement which, at a precise moment in history, seemed irresistible.

Thus, options other than the ideological constitution of a Jewish people united into one nation and (a not absolutely necessary consequence) a Jewish state, were put forward and made clear. But this Jewish state had to be located somewhere. As a result of circumstances, of the ideological weight of the past, of the ignorance of many, and of the imperialist interests with which the movement was to link itself in order to become effective, the land chosen was Arab Palestine. This fact led the Zionist form of nationalism in the direction of oppressive nationalism. Logically, there were only two ways of transforming a land inhabited by Arabs into a Jewish territory: the subjection or expulsion of the indigenous population. It is not surprising that after the many vicissitudes, in the course of which the responsibilities for this or that negative consequence may be shared, the final result was practices of subjection and expulsion.

It seems clear, therefore—and I think that this should be obvious to every mind free of ideological camouflage—that Zionist nationalism, whatever opinion one may have of the legitimacy of a plan for a Jewish state purely as a plan, took concrete and practical form in the oppression of another people. Consequently, it must be admitted that the Palestinians' resistance to this process falls into the category of nationalist movements of oppressed peoples who deserve support. By this we mean the support of all who are committed to fighting national oppression, and who can allow no exception to this general orientation without being accused of intellectual inconsistency and moral deviation.

This, I believe, is what should justify support of Palestinian nationalism in its present fundamental aim by everyone who proclaims an ethical commitment. Once again, this in no way necessarily implies approval of the programs, strategies, tactics, actions, and ideas which emerge in the organizations through which the Palestinian claim is expressed, and which even dominate them. As in all similar movements, there is a constant and very strong pressure, not only on the part of these organizations, but also by the very nature of things, to link understanding, approval in principle and global approval of the movement with practical support of its actions and trends, and even direct participation in it. Sometimes this becomes a sort of blackmail. Each one is free to judge whether a moral imperative propels him in this direction. Like several million others, I had translated my conviction of the justifiable nature of the protest against the injustice organized by capitalism into participation and enrollment in the Communist movement. This long and hard experience taught me the dangers of

such mixtures. It may present itself as a duty for a Palestinian who has no means of struggling against the oppression of his people other than total commitment. For a non-Palestinian (above all, for a non-Arab), it is more debatable.

For a "Jew," there are more precise and morally more constricting reasons to add to those which must push everyone to at least an understanding of, and overall sympathy for, the protest expressed—well or badly—by the Palestinian movement.

Every Jew, that is, in this case, every man or woman who is considered a Jew, is implicated, like it or not.<sup>3</sup> It is well known that the Zionist movement, from the very outset, intended to speak in the name of all Jews. The development discussed above has given this claim increasing credibility. But, in spite of a too extensive complaisance on the part of the Jewish masses for reasons which are sociologically and psychologically comprehensible—however much the outcome may be deplored—it is not true that all Jews (in the above sense) have approved and do approve the decisions of the authorities of Israel, this state which is the outcome of the endeavors of the Zionist movement. In the past, there was scarcely any need to point this out. All Zionist literature bears witness to the hostility, or at least the lack of enthusiasm, of the Jewish masses for the cause it was defending. The rallying took place little by little. For a very long time, the principal enemies which the Zionists had to overcome were Jews.

Even now, many Jews keep silent through lack of courage, lack of information, or indecision. Many waver, only partly convinced (and when they are convinced, it is above all the indirect result of Arab propaganda). Many, without calling into question the State of Israel which they believe necessary for their safety, who fear the consequences of its destruction, strongly disapprove of some or many of the decisions and directions taken by Israel.

Nevertheless, undeterred, the Israeli authorities continue to speak and act in the name of all Jews on all occasions (except when, contradictorily, they complain of the lack of Jewish mobilization so as to extract more money and support from the Jewish masses). One of the most shocking examples—and, if I mention only this one, it is simply for reasons of space—concerns the compensation obtained from Germany for the mass murder of the Jews during the last World War. Among the millions of Jews massacred, many were anti-Zionist or at least non-Zionist. But that has not prevented the Zionist state from collecting, for its own profit and for the benefit of its projects and decisions, the price of their blood.

In short, all the Jews of the earth find themselves caught up, without having been consulted, in the consequences of decisions taken in Jerusalem by a small group of persons whom they did not choose, and who are in no way their representatives.

To illustrate the shocking and dangerous nature of this, let us take an imaginary example—though similar cases must have arisen many a time, hopefully often without such serious results. Let us not forget that the custom of the vendetta (*tha'r* in Arabic) is as widespread in the Arab world as it is in Corsica and many other societies which have retained something of their traditional structure. Imagine a Jew from a small town in Norway or Venezuela who has never had the least contact with the State of Israel and the Zionist movement. There are, after all, millions like this. Imagine a Palestinian, or even another Arab, whose family has been killed by Israeli bombs or weapons in Hebron, Sidon or elsewhere. Imagine that, convinced by Zionist propaganda of the indefectible solidarity of all Jews with Israel on every point, this Arab avenges himself on this Jew. I am pushing things to the limit to make my example more vivid, but this corresponds to an important aspect of the present situation which no one can deny without being dishonest.

This entire analysis seems to me to demonstrate that—although every person of sound rational and moral judgment will find the Palestinian protest legitimate, at least in essence—the Jews have a particular duty to mobilize against the abuse done in their name, and they have the greatest interest in so doing. A similar situation among an increasing number of ethno-national groups is today creating an abundance of similar imperatives. The national demands of minority groups are increasing, and the tendencies towards assimilation which predominated in an earlier phase are becoming considerably less strong, at least as explicit ideologies. Everywhere, within these groups, organizations for struggle are being formed which put forward programs, develop strategies and tactics, and move on to actions which are increasingly military in form. All claim to be translating the will—at least the implicit will—of all the members of the same ethnic group. The latter are currently held responsible for the actions and plans of these minority bodies. As in the case of the Jews, they frequently experience some aversion to disassociating themselves publicly from their “brothers,” even if they deplore their initiatives. In most cases (the Armenians, etc.), there exist representative organizations which can issue different statements, and distance themselves from these initiatives. Up to the present time, for all sorts of sociological reasons, the major

Jewish organizations have not had this courage and, in a suicidal way, have allowed their adherence at least to the policies decided in Israel to go very far. Let us hasten to add that, in the Palestinian case, the PLO's claim to speak in the name of all Palestinians is, to a great extent, borne out by facts.

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I have, therefore, spoken of the attitude desirable for all Jews. But I have been asked for a personal testimony. My personal motives can, in fact, be added to these general factors and doubtless give them a particular character. I shall not linger too long on these for I have already touched on this subject in earlier publications, and I do not wish to leave myself open to the reproach of excessive complacency.

In the main, this acute consciousness of the Zionist option as not constituting an imperative for every Jew, of its dangers, of the dangers even of every Jewish nationalist trend, stems from the milieu in which I was brought up. It was a milieu composed of Jews who were free of the ancestral religion and often hostile to it, according to the anti-clerical model in European Christian milieux. They were at the same time internationalists, generally—but not exclusively—ideologically oriented towards the socialist ideal in the widest sense and, with regard to everyday life, towards assimilation with the surrounding people. It is important to stress that, before 1939, this was a very widespread attitude in the so-called Ashkenazi milieu, that is, among the Jews of Eastern and Central European origin. According to this attitude, Jewish identity in twentieth century Europe was but a residual phenomenon. It was a question of the descendants of members of an ancient people and/or of an ancient religious community whose assimilation was underway, but not yet completed in the collective consciousness. Thus, public opinion, to a great extent, still classified them as possessing a specific identity, that of "Jew."

I will not go so far as to say that this concept was universal among those who claimed their Jewish ancestry (in the sense of ancestry in the Jewish religious community with its strong ethnic connotations), nor among those for whom this ancestry was known. But it was much more widespread than is thought so today. Other trends indicated their attachment to one of the options described very briefly above. It is useful to stress that those who subscribed to the Jewish faith were generally not attracted by nationalist options.

This attitude, in the half century after 1920, became the official option adopted by the Communist parties and by their Jewish members. But one must be wary of thinking that the Communists had sole rights to it. Only the Communist International expanded it into pedantic theoretical versions equipped—as was the rest of Communist dogma—with the prestige of science, of that curious “science,” set apart from all the usual characteristics of the ordinary sciences, which was called Marxism. This had the effect of reinforcing, through complex reasoning, attachment to the orientation in question. In fact, this in no way altered the fundamental arguments of good sense and fact which were its basis. But the believer’s faith in them was thereby strengthened.

Such was my case throughout my long journey through this secular religion. However, the French Communist Party to which I belonged also obeyed the logic of the political apparatus. It was very closely following a strategy to win members and supporters in France, and votes in the French elections. This committed it not to advance its theoretical ideas on the Zionist option as a general rule. After the advent of the State of Israel and the universal demonstrations of sympathy it received in the West, particularly in France, which spread equally in left-wing Jewish circles, it was not appropriate, politically speaking, to bring up this issue on which the Party doctrine could give rise to opposition, including within its own ranks. The issue was avoided as far as possible. A decision on it was only taken when (as in 1953) the Soviet Union was called into question in that respect. In order to defend the USSR, the “bastion of socialism,” the Party had risked widespread unpopularity and condemnation at the time of the German-Soviet pact, from 1939 to 1941. It could well face lesser waves on the subject of the State of Israel.

My originality was that I was already informed on the subject. I had spent seven years in Lebanon where I had been in direct contact with the problem. Assisted by my specialization in Arab and Islamic studies, I had understood the bases of the Arab attitude toward Israel. This was extremely rare at the time. It has become only a little less so today.

Temperamentally, I find it difficult to tolerate glaring errors, and I quickly feel a desire to fight them, to engage in polemics. In the face of the errors, the untruths, and the obtuseness of which the press and the media were everyday guilty, my exasperation was permanent. The fact that such obtuseness reigned almost to the same degree (in spite of the doctrine) within the ranks of the Party of which I was a member only increased my exasperation.



This is how I came to write articles and give lectures in order to contribute to correcting false opinions with regard to the motivations of the Palestinian movement. Essentially, I attempted to make it understood that this movement had no connection with Hitlerian anti-Semitism. In opposition, particular facts were cited which were real, but no more than details elevated to the rank of explanatory symptoms: the collaboration of the Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini with Hitler, the use in the Arab ranks of reasoning and themes of the type which are clearly anti-Semitic in the traditional sense of the word in the West, that is to say, attacks not directed against particular actions on the part of particular groups of Jews, but against the very essence of Jews as a whole through the ages, judged to be by nature evil and depraved. I attempted to explain that the protest movement, whatever the form and subjects of its propaganda, did not derive its origin and essential nature from such phantasms, but from a concrete fact which constituted a serious grievance: the occupation of Arab Palestine by a Jewish population.

It must be recorded that my efforts and those of the groups and individuals who have come to this position have met with only relative success. The majority of the Western public continues to link the Palestinian revolution, and Arab protest in general, with Hitlerian anti-Semitism. This misleading comparison is encouraged by a considerable number of speeches and publications from the Arab side. Lastly, the publicity given to the "revisionist" theses of Faurisson<sup>4</sup> and others can be mentioned, despite the demonstrations of their falsehood. How can it fail to be apparent that the Zionist theses are strengthened in this way, not only through a reaction of revulsion on the part of the Western public, but also on a purely logical plane? Doesn't this imply speaking and writing as if the great number of Jewish victims of genocide justified the Zionist undertaking? Otherwise, what benefit would it be to the Arabs to support the allegation that fewer Jews perished than is currently maintained?<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, progress has been made. When I was beginning to publish my writings, there was practically no other voice to shake the consensus of Western opinion. The Israeli theses were almost universally recognized as expressing the "real truth," the objective reality. No publisher dared to publish a book which disputed them; no paper printed an article contradicting this version of the facts (except for the Communist press, and only when anti-Soviet propaganda on the subject obliged them to do so); no film was shown which took account of the Arab point of view. Events after 1967 have somewhat shaken this universal complacency and

allowed at least some publicity to be given to the critics of the Zionist project and Israeli propaganda. This breakthrough is still limited. It is sometimes accompanied by errors or deviations. But it does exist, and I am proud to have contributed to it.

*Translated by Margaret Chiari*



1. I am well aware that the designation "nationalist" for the Zionist movement often gives rise to protest on the part of Arab intellectuals. I have already come up against it. This is because in the Arab world, for reasons which are evident, the term "nationalism" has acquired a positive connotation, a sacred aureole. For the Arabs, nationalism is by definition a feeling, a passion, a duty, a praiseworthy, even admirable, movement. Zionism, being in their view something which is in its very essence bad, a perverse undertaking, cannot be nationalistic. It is a project of pure banditry, an operation planned by Satanic manipulators which sweeps along the deceived masses or individuals essentially just as evil. Some ideologists lacking both scruples and rigor, but who have, nevertheless, hoisted themselves up onto a more conceptual plane, have had recourse to a verbal stratagem to extricate themselves from the dilemma set into relief by the revulsion of progressive opinion for certain European nationalisms, and these nationalisms' support of colonial expansion: setting a "nationalism" worthy of praise in the Third World against a pernicious nationalism for which, naturally, Europe provided the model. This represents merely the intrusion of passion

into the rational analysis or self-serving calculation of ideologists who are careful only of their own reputation. Ideologies and ideological movements which put forward as an ideal, rightly or in a manner open to criticism or even detrimental, to promote, defend, extend, or even create a nation, may legitimately be classified in the vast category of nationalisms. They are different, but common traits can be picked out. This in no way prejudices the moral or rational value of the demands which each of them puts forward.

2. French novelist and essayist Albert Memmi was born in Tunis in 1920. He has written interesting novels in the autobiographical vein illustrating the life of Tunisian Jews, followed by a noteworthy psychological essay on the relations between colonizers and colonized in a colonial society. He has also produced some books on the Jewish problem. Although recognizing errors in the Israeli leadership and weaknesses in the Zionist movement, he struggles against the idea that Israel is to be seen as a colonial phenomenon. He maintains that Zionism is essentially a liberation movement of the Jewish people.
3. There has been strong opposition to the arguments derived from the Jewish situation which convinced Jean-Paul Sartre—

more through intuition— that the only definition of a Jew was the perception of a non-Jew who classified him or her as such. Others had long understood this without having expressed it so strongly. I have returned to it several times. One must, of course, exclude from this category those Jews who indicate, by formal adherence to the dogma and resolute practice of the rites, their will to belong to the Jewish religion. If other people consider them as Jews, it is according to their own stated wish. But this is not the most general case, and it was certainly not the case in France until recently. The same uncertainties appear wherever old ethnic or confessional adherences are disintegrating, are no longer clearly apparent to all, or are no longer claimed by all those who could claim them. What is a Catholic in France if not one who declares himself such, or who is considered such? What is a Black in the countries of America where skin color has legal and social significance, but where racial mixtures, whether in the distant or recent past, dilute the color (sometimes to the extreme) in pursuance of Mendel's laws? A man or woman who has white skin but who had a black ancestor is White or Black (socially, and sometimes legally) according to a milieu classifying him or her as such, unless he or she claims to be black. (See, for example, the recent legal case in the United States referred to by Guy Sitbon, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, No. 981 (August 26, 1983), p. 42.)

4. Robert Faurisson, a professor at the University of Lyons, is now the chief figure among French followers of the so-called revisionist school in recent history. His books and papers have aimed to demonstrate that the number of Jews killed in Nazi concentration camps was far less than what is commonly said and taught. In the same way, according to him, the Germans must have killed fewer people in the gas chambers than said in the current histories. Faurisson has few followers in France. He is associated with

some people in Europe and the United States who profess the same ideas. Many of them follow the same path in raising doubts (e.g. Noam Chomsky) about the number of Cambodians killed by the "Khmers rouges." Some are right-wing, others leftists. The common premise is that, since conservatives in the West have an interest in inflating the numbers of victims of mass killing by "the Reds," and since anti-Nazis and Israelis also use the number of Jews massacred for their propaganda, the real number must, therefore, be very much lower. Faurisson himself has been accused of pro-Nazi tendencies.

5. It is sad that many Arabs fall into the Zionist trap by taking up the arguments — in general false — of the so-called "revisionist" writers (the Frenchman Faurisson is the most well-known of these) in order to minimize the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis in 1939-1945. Whatever the exact number of Jews slaughtered, it certainly amounts to several million. Hair-splitting on this figure and on the method of execution in no way diminishes the horror of this systematic slaughter aimed at people only, and in a clearly stated way, because of their real or alleged ancestry. There has been no example of this magnitude for long centuries. Other examples of the same type, but with considerably fewer victims (the Tasmanians, Gypsies, etc.), mass murder as a by-product of war, the transport of slaves, etc., (colonial wars, the Blacks) in no way alter this brutal fact. No more does the fact of the abusive exploitation of the massacre by Zionism and the State of Israel. The Arabs who use this type of argument, I repeat, fully gratify the wishes of the Zionist movement in another way, too. They thus put themselves forward as enemies of the Jews as a whole, and not as enemies of the Zionist plan. This can only help to cause *all* Jews to perceive *all* Arabs as their enemies, against whom they must mobilize.