

17. Arendt's Shadow

Salam-Schalom from Berlin to the Holy Land

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Hannah Arendt, for those unfamiliar with her biography, traveled intellectually between many 'islands' of thought. She began her life with purely philosophical concerns, which is not surprising when we look at her academic background: in fact, she inherited the tradition of German philosophy through her education in German universities. She was a distinguished student and lover of Martin Heidegger in Marburg and later in Heidelberg, a pupil, and a lifetime friend of Karl Jaspers. It is under the supervision of Jaspers that she wrote her first doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Love in St. Augustine*. For most of the time she spent in universities, Arendt was not interested in political matters. However, when the Nazis rose to power in Germany, Arendt tells us, it was the occasion that made it possible for her to face the fact of her 'Jewishness' – the vehicle that escorted her into politics. The hostility of the Nazis towards Jews, as well as other minorities, turned Arendt's attention towards politics and 'action'. Later, she was intensely engaged in Jewish politics and Zionism as a passionately active member. In the middle of all these events, Arendt declared her divorce from all forms of traditional philosophizing: "I left Germany [escaping from the Nazis] dominated by the idea. . . Never again! I shall never again get involved in any kind of intellectual business. I want nothing to do with that lot."¹ This period of time that she spent involved in Jewish politics is marked by a number of articles on the so-called Jewish Question² and parts of her famous work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and in these articles, we find an explicit, harsh critique of the Zionist ideology, which we are going to discuss in the subsequent remarks.

These early writings on the Jewish Question and Zionism which began in 1937 and lasted for almost a decade are the focus of this chapter as some of these ideas were manifested in Berlin's, Salam Shalom Initiative. Arendt's critique of the Zionist ideology in fact took many directions, and I will only focus on a few in this context,

1 "What Remains? The Language Remains." A Conversation with Günter Gaus. In: Baehr, Peter (2000) *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, pp. 3–22.

2 This collection of articles re-appeared in a volume that bears the same title, *The Jewish Writings*, edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron Feldman (2007) Schocken Books: New York.

namely, her analysis of the actual presence of Arabs in the territory of Palestine, as well as the absence of any serious discussion of Arabs in the Zionist vision ideology.

Critique of Zionism

Arendt's criticism of the Zionist vision of the nation-state is well-known. She actually viewed Zionism as an outdated form of a nation-state. In fact, as we are going to see, she stood firm against those who embraced Zionism, i.e. those who commit themselves to the creation of a Jewish/ethnic national state. Against this national vision, Arendt proposed the establishment of an Arab-Jewish Confederation in Palestine, based on the recognition of the plurality of individuals and the guarantee of their equal rights.

Thinking of a "Jewish state" from a Zionist perspective was, for Arendt, a wrong reaction to anti-Semitism in Europe, as that Jewish state would exercise the same hostility that Jewish people had suffered, but against the Arabs this time. Arendt recognized that such a state could only be established through force, and rightly so, since no people could accept the stealing of their land, or to become stateless overnight, or at best, second-class citizens. Imposing a Jewish nation-state in that way, in her opinion, would only lead to continued violence. Arendt predicted that even "if the Jews were to win the war", they would "degenerate into one of those small warrior tribes about whose possibilities and importance history has amply informed us since the days of Sparta... Thus, it becomes plain that at this moment and under present circumstances a Jewish state can only be erected at the price of the Jewish homeland".³

Arendt advocated a vision of a Jewish homeland where two national identities who inhabit the land, Jews, and Arabs, could live together side by side. She did not advocate, however, a Jewish state which was supposed to take the form of an ethnic political entity that rejected the Palestinian right to a homeland. Arendt's predictions were proven to be correct: Israel since its inception entered a race with itself in terms of armament and military power and this apparent increase in military spending – which is taking over the Israeli budget – was a clear indication of how the country was turning gradually into a security state. Any Israeli government that came to power was haunted first and foremost by the question of security. The subject to be discussed and analyzed remains the same: how can such unilateral security measures affect the peaceful common future of two peoples living together in such a small territory? The Jewish state and society, with its heavy militarization and enormous military budget, as the only state in the region with nuclear armaments and

3 Hannah Arendt (2007) *The Jewish Writings*, Schocken Books: New York, p. 397.

producing high-end military technology, is very much living proof of Arendt's predictions.

Arendt stood firm in the face of Zionist claims calling for establishing a Jewish state on the territory of Palestine, and because of the denial of the rights of those indigenous people she called for a binational state. The idea of a binational state is not new, of course, as it was preceded by some Jewish intellectuals such as Judha Leon Magnes, Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, and others, in addition to some associations such as *Bret Shalom* (covenant of peace).⁴ This idea, binationalism, meant for Arendt that the state should be separated from religion and national identity. Politically, this binational solution necessarily involved Israelis losing their dream of a national state exclusive to Jews only, and Palestinians losing their dream of independent national statehood.

The frightening reality of today in light of the contradictory claims of both Palestinians and Israelis, at least since the Oslo Accords of 1993, might prompt us to think a little “outside the box”; and despite the difficulties facing the one-binational state project, I believe, it deserves some reconsideration, precisely because of the uniqueness of this conflict: as the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis intensifies – a conflict that is almost seventy years old – both parties are aware implicitly that it is impossible for one of them to annihilate the other, and both parties *know* really well that eventually, they *must* come up with an agreement.

In September 2022, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas delivered the coup de grace to the moribund so-called peace process which had begun almost 30 years ago: “Israel has decided not to be our partner in the peace process,” Abbas announced, stating: “Israel is the side that destroyed the Oslo Accords it signed with the Palestine Liberation Organisation.”⁵ This was an official de facto collapse of the negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. At times like this, we will probably find an echo for Hannah Arendt's call for a new discourse and a new solution, or in her own words: a new beginning.⁶ After 30 years of fruitless peace negotiations, many scholars have turned their attention to her early writings in the 1940s, and more specifically, to her critique of Zionism and its push towards the creation of a Jewish state.⁷

4 For more on these influential figures in developing the idea of binationalism cf. Zohar Maor (2013) Moderation from Right to Left: The Hidden Roots of Brit Shalom, *Jewish Social Studies* 19 (2) Winter, pp. 79–108.

5 Mahmud Abbas delivered this statement to world leaders during the UN General Assembly on September 23rd 2022. (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220924-abbas-israel-decided-not-to-be-our-partner-in-peace-process/>).

6 For those who are familiar with Arendt, “new beginning” is a common theme in her major works such as *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*.

7 The list is too long, but it might be useful to point out to a few examples: Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (2011) *Jewish Peoplehood*, “Jewish Politics,” and *Political Responsibility: Arendt on*

There is a problem concerning the difficulty of imagining this one binational-state solution. The main reason behind this is recent Palestinian and Israeli rhetoric reaching a level of contradiction that makes it hard to speak of reconciliation or compromise. This is probably a logical conclusion to the Zionist premises: the Zionists were blinded to other partners on the same land and never considered them their equals. Arendt explained this through historical events: the Zionist program in 1942, issued in Biltmore, called for establishing a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine, and the Atlantic City program that followed referred to a free Jewish Commonwealth covering the entire territory of Palestine without division. In the first program, minority rights were given to the Arab majority; in the second program, Arabs were not mentioned at all! This disregard for the Palestinians, she believed, was due to the increasingly ideological tone of Zionism which went hand in hand with its detachment from commonsense and reality.⁸

But the problem seems to be deeper than just Palestinian and Zionist claims; the problem is one of land to which each of the parties to the conflict claims its right. We know well that one of the parties lost the war, but the conflict continues until today. The truth is that, after nearly seventy years of conflict, this land or the independent state of Jews has not been fully free of fear, and it still finds itself, day after day, in an intense, violent relationship with the non-Jews it governs. The problem of land is linked to a more complex problem of identity: Palestinians want to retain their Arab identity, given the Arab-Muslim region that they want to see themselves as part of, and Jews want a Jewish state as envisioned in the Zionist ideology.

The central question for Arendt, I believe, as an alternative to the two-state solution, is the need to think along the lines of a binational state, to think of the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Zionist Jews and Arabs in a partnership that is based on equal rights. I believe that she really wanted to present a challenging alternative to us, an alternative that is based on the impossibility of getting rid of the other, one that looks at democratic institution-building, transitional justice, and a new constitution. The fact that one cannot get rid of the other is, by the way, becoming an increasing conviction among Palestinians and Israelis each day.

Some scholars believe that this Arendtian vision is detached from reality, not more than a cultural contribution or a dreamy idea. However, I believe that these opinions are a bit hasty. In fact, many factors need to be considered before coming to such a conclusion. First, there are many Israeli and Arab intellectuals and activists today who resent the strong influence of orthodox, radical parties in Israeli and Arab politics, and this belief has persuaded them to rally around the idea of a truly secular

Zionism and Partitions; Gil Rubin (2015) *From Federalism to Binationalism: Hannah Arendt's Shifting Zionism*; Eric Jacobson (2013) *Why did Hannah Arendt Reject the Partition of Palestine?* Idith Zertal (2007) *A State on Trial: Hannah Arendt vs. the State of Israel*,

8 Arendt, Hannah (1978) *The Jew as Pariah*. New York, NY: Grove Press Inc. pp. 131–132.

Israeli society in which citizenship rights are given to all on equal footing.⁹ Second, a new opinion poll (November 2021) conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre (JMCC) showed Palestinians in the West Bank favor one binational state over a two-state solution.¹⁰ Third, there seems to be a revival of the Brit Shalom ideals by some Israelis who speak and write about the importance of de-colonizing Jewish identity and entering the phase of “post-Zionism”; after nearly 70 years of Israeli history, traditional Zionism has secured neither a solution for Palestinians nor an independent existence for Israelis: “Today the two-state idea is in crisis. Most people understand that it’s no longer possible. In addition, Jewish existence itself is in crisis. There’s a sense that our society has become a walled ghetto, armed with nuclear weapons, constantly experiencing a sense of catastrophe. We must find ourselves a vision”.¹¹ Amnon Raz-krakotzkin, an expert on Jewish History at the University of Ben-Gurion, was certainly clear in his conviction that “the idea of separation is unrealistic; it simply doesn’t work. . . talk of separation creates antagonism. It highlights the differences rather than the commonalities.”¹²

From Arendt to the Salam-Shalom Initiative

Echoing this Arendtian spirit, Edward Said wrote:

“I see no other way than to begin now to speak about sharing the land that has thrust us together, sharing it in a truly democratic way, with equal rights for each citizen. There can be no reconciliation unless both peoples, two communities of suffering, resolve that their existence is a secular fact, and that it has to be dealt with as such.”¹³

The practical echo to Arendt’s writing, however, came from the streets of Berlin through the Salaam-Shalom initiative. Although it is no longer operating, it stands as a model. As described in its official website, The Salaam-Shalom initiative was “an intercultural activist initiative”. Established in December 2013 by people

9 The list of intellectuals, leaders, and activists who are in favor of the one state solution are many. To name a few from both sides: Ali Abunimah, Abdalhadi Alijla, Jamal Dajani, Jeff Halper, Gideon Levy, etc.

10 Middle East Monitor, November 26, 2021 (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211126-palestinians-favour-a-one-state-over-a-two-state-solution-poll-finds/>).

11 Elhanan Miller (2012) What would Buber, Scholem and Arendt say today? The Times of Israel July 17 (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/what-would-buber-scholem-and-arendt-say-today/>).

12 Ibid.

13 Said, Edward (1999) The One State Solution. The New York Times Magazine January 10 (<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/10/magazine/the-one-state-solution.html>).

in Neukölln and then joined by others throughout Berlin, it stood for a peaceful co-existence and solidarity and promoted those aims “by implementing various interventions and projects which raise awareness to social and institutional exclusions in mainstream German society”.¹⁴

The initiative began as a response to public statements made by a rabbi marking Neukölln as a ‘no-go area’ for Jews due to the high rate of Muslim population in the area. Rabbi Daniel Alter, the Berlin Jewish Community’s anti-Semitism officer, was open in his statement that Neukölln is a no-go-area for Jews¹⁵, and it seemed that the activists in this movement were unable to ignore that. Salaam-Schalom was co-founded by a group of Muslim, Jewish and many other Neuköllners to counter “racialization and stigmatization that perpetuate distrust and tension along racial lines. . . and to promote Neukölln and indeed Berlin as a no-go area for racism and ethnic hatred.” They asserted that the name “Salaam-Schalom” did not represent “a reconciliation between members of two groups; it is a sign that coexistence already exists on an everyday level.” The movement was very active on social media and appealed to a wider audience. Under the motto “Muslims and Jews are not enemies”, the movement organized numerous open roundtables, workshops, flash mobs, film screenings, and parties in community centers, synagogues, mosques, sometimes in apartments or parks, with hundreds of people attending these events.

At the time, Adi Liraz, an Israeli-born and Berlin-based member, wrote: “Our goal is to create dialogue. . . Not a dialogue that is behind closed doors but rather an open, public dialogue, to show the German society that such a dialogue is possible, that it exists, that it also makes sense.”¹⁶ The movement did not take the natural enmity between Jews and Muslims portrayed every day in the narrative of mainstream media for granted, endeavoring instead to dismantle such dogmas and stereotypes through *personal encounters*. However, the major test of the movement came during the Gaza War of 2014. In the words of the founder of the movement, Armin Langer:

“The Israeli air force bombed Gaza, anti-Semitic riots took place on German streets and the media reproduced anti-Muslim agitation. Several Jewish-Muslim groups disintegrated that summer. Without further ado, the Salaam-Schalom-Initiative invited to a flash mob in the middle of an event of the Palestinian

14 Description by A. Langer at betterplace.org (<https://www.betterplace.org/en/organisations/18152-salaam-schalom-initiative>).

15 His statement was widely reported, e.g., Rabbiner Alter warnt vor immer mehr No-go-Areas. In: BZ Sept. 7, 2012 (<https://www.bz-berlin.de/archiv-artikel/rabbiner-alter-warnt-vor-immer-mehr-no-go-areas/>). This statement came after Alter himself and his seven years daughter were attacked, it is said by four suspected Arab youths because of his identity. There were no witnesses, and the case remains unresolved.

16 Yerni Brenner (2014) In Berlin, Jews and Muslims Fight for Each Other. In: Forward, December 1 (<https://forward.com/opinion/210127/in-berlin-jews-and-muslims-fight-for-each-other/>).

community in Berlin. It was not about peace in the Middle East, but against the anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic agitation in our home country Germany.”

Mr. Langer, emphasizing the role of human connectedness in crushing such abstract enmities, had bigger ambitions: “If we already have the problems in Germany solved, we will also look at the problems of the Middle East.”¹⁷

The Salam-Schalom initiative, unfortunately, has been inactive for a long time. I do not intend to look into the reasons behind its inactivity, since for a young and independent initiative such as this, many practical obstacles and challenges are to be expected. In fact, this is the fate of many other initiatives that focused on the same goal, i.e., coexistence and peacebuilding, either in the Holy Land or outside of it. What is important, however, for our present purposes is to realize that although many of these initiatives may gradually disappear and eventually die, many others will come to life at the same time.

Ruth Marks Eglash writes for the Jewish Insider on a joint online fundraising campaign by “more than a dozen Israeli and Palestinian nonprofit organizations active in various aspects of peacebuilding”,¹⁸ enabling them to sustain their effort and work. This is a significant number of grassroots initiatives working against the backdrop of stabbing, shooting, and violence from both sides. The works of Arendt and her support of a binational state paved the way, I believe, for a deeper understanding of coexistence between two different identities, providing a radical alternative to the homogenous nation-state model promoted by traditional Zionism. The Salam-Schalom initiative was Berlin's echo to Arendt's call for a humanist approach to reconciliation, and a confrontation with the pathological mindset of some groups in the Holy Land, Berlin, and elsewhere in the world.

A two-state solution is destructive for geography and human togetherness since it separates people and turns this small region into Swiss cheese, or to use the words of the Israeli historian cited above: “talk of separation creates antagonism. . . highlights the differences rather than the commonalities”.¹⁹ This is the underlying assumption in the works of Arendt and the Salaam-Schalom initiative. The alternative is unpleasantly simple: If a way out is not based on peace and equality, as in South

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- 17 Armin Langer (2016) Die Salaam-Schalom-Initiative: Ein Bündnis von Juden und Muslimen. In: PaRDeS, Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien e.V. 22, Universitätsverlag Potsdam, pp. 195–198, (https://publishup.uni-potsdam.de/opus4-ubp/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/9976/file/pardes22_195-198.pdf).
- 18 Ruth Marks Eglash (2021) Israeli and Palestinian peace-building NGOs launch joint fundraising drive, Jewish Insider, December 21 (<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/israeli-and-palestinian-peace-building-ngos-launch-joint-fundraising-drive/>).
- 19 Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, quoted in Elhanan Miller (2012) What would Buber, Scholem and Arendt say today? The Times of Israel July 17 (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/what-would-buber-scholem-and-arendt-say-today/>).

Africa after apartheid, the war will continue. Peace must be actively sought, despite the many obstacles. Once we take for granted that Palestinians and Israelis are there to stay, the decent conclusion must be the need for peaceful coexistence and genuine reconciliation.

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