

Ideals and Interests: the Case of the Arab Transportation network in East Jerusalem

(Or: How particular interests trump national ones)

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Two Palestinian events recently took place on the same day (Tuesday 10th of March) in different cities which project contradictory political trajectories: In Beirut, Lebanon, a general meeting was held by the Palestinian leadership to organize the convening of the Palestine National Council (PNC), the supreme legislative authority of the PLO. The PNC had not met since its last convention in Gaza in 1998, with former President Clinton as its special guest, and Arafat as its head, when it approved the dissolution of its original charter. The Oslo peace process, the promise of two states, the recognition of Israel, the replacement of armed struggle by negotiations as the sole means to achieve Palestinian rights -all these constituted the terms of reference for the convention's proceedings and decisions. But against the background of 20 years of negotiation failures, continuing Israeli colonization of Palestinian territory, internecine Palestinian frictions, and mounting diplomatic pressure against Israel in international fora, last month's Beirut meetings seemed to be preparing for a radical change in Palestinian strategy - a

confrontation direction rather than a cooperation strategy. The nature of an acceptable 'end-vision' of Palestinian strategy -ending the occupation that began in 1967, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and a fair resolution of the refugee problem in accordance with international resolutions- did not change: but the underlying deliberations reflected a readiness -in view of Israeli intransigence- to replace that strategy by one that would bury the idea of an eventual settlement on the basis of two states. As if in line with new PLO stirrings, but also in line with an ongoing though continuing 'lone-wolf' violent incidents in the occupied territories, a Palestinian truck driver in Jerusalem rammed his truck a day earlier into a company of soldiers in Jerusalem, killing at least four persons.

On that same day, a far less dramatic event took place in East Jerusalem -not a lone-wolf act perhaps signaling a frustrated cry for an 'exit' from all things Israeli, but a collective action directed in the opposite direction: Arab transport workers operating Arab-owned bus companies declared a one-day strike. A day earlier, they had put up an advertisement in the local Arab papers warning their customers of their intention, explaining their move, and seeking their understanding and support, which was duly given: the Israeli Ministry of Transport was procrastinating in applying the same deal with them that had been reached with Israeli bus companies and employees, and that had been given legislative force by the Israeli Knesset following a court case brought against the Ministry. The Arab transport companies and workers, in other words, were striking in order to have a Knesset injunction applied to them. These independently owned bus companies -which operated in East Jerusalem and its surroundings from before the occupation began- had finally come together a few years earlier, having

reached a deal with the Israeli Ministry of Transportation in accordance to which Ministry subsidies were used to upgrade and synchronize their operation in the same areas they were operating in the service of their primarily Arab customers.

In Beirut, then, the Palestinian leadership were seeking best means to *separate* from Israel, while on the ground in Jerusalem, Arab bus owners and workers were seeking equalizing measures that imply their further *assimilation* into the Israeli system. I wish here to emphasize the special meanings of the terms I just used: by separation is meant the conscious and politically articulated Palestinian will either to establish a state separate from Israel, or to establish one in place of Israel. By assimilation is meant the politically unarticulated behavior by Palestinians –as individuals or groups- to address their quotidian affairs within and by the rules of the Israeli system. There are many ways in which to try and understand these two opposing trajectories in Palestinian acts. For a start it can be pointed out, rightly, that of the Palestinian territories that came under occupation in 1967, East Jerusalem became an exception in having had Israeli laws applied to it. Unlike bus companies in the rest of the West Bank, then, East Jerusalem companies, as well as all other institutions and individuals in Arab Jerusalem have come over the years to live under a totally different legal regime, requiring different legal instruments than those that were and are now operative in the rest of the West Bank. Perhaps this difference was not pronounced before the establishment of the Palestinian authority after Oslo, and before the first *intifada* of 1988, when assimilationist behavior in various manifestations on the labor and economic fronts was widespread and quite normal across the occupied territories, but it has now come specifically to define the annexed part of these

territories, signaling in part Israel's intentions towards it in potential future negotiations, and in part the population's subjugation to Israeli laws. Therefore this situation –proponents of the separatist strategy will argue- is neither normal nor will it last: at the end of the day, when appropriate international pressure has been brought to bear, separation between Israel and the future Palestinian State will at once recalibrate these sub-structural social, economic and legal relations in Jerusalem, bringing Arab Jerusalem under a Palestinian legal code.

There is, however, another vantage point from which to view the situation: while the separatist strategy is one that has built up an impressive arsenal of international diplomatic support over the years (attested to by UNSC resolution 2343); and while Israel's army redeployment in Gaza back in 2008 has essentially cut off Gaza from Israel, the assimilationist trajectory on the other hand especially on the West Bank has continued to evolve unabated –possibly as a pragmatic management of the failure of total separation. This is none the more obvious than in the economy: there is of course a conscious call for Palestinians to boycott Israeli-produced goods for which there are Palestinian alternatives, and while these calls are dutifully answered the hard truth is that the Palestinian economy is in any case almost entirely dependent on the Israeli one, down to the use of the Israeli currency. This integral networking of business investments, trade and access to and use of primary and infrastructural resources may be a normal condition after 50 years of occupation during which the Palestinian economy has been almost entirely captive to the vibrant and hegemonic Israeli one, the latter boasting a GDP of \$290 billion to the former's \$10. However, beyond the explanation –even justification for the existence of this assimilationist trajectory lies the important question concerning the practical

interests of the parties that have come to constitute its active blocks in the business and labor markets: quarries in Palestinian areas that provide, *inter alia*, building material to settlements are no less vested in this enterprise than Palestinian laborers who seek higher earnings in those settlements, notwithstanding the obviously detrimental *de facto* implications of the settlement project on the potential for a separation leading to an independent Palestinian state. Indeed, the 20% of the Palestinian workforce (some 140,000) generally employed in construction sites in Israel would probably be much higher were Israel to provide more working permits to Palestinian workers, wage earnings there often being three times higher than those in Palestinian areas. So, whether we are considering bus-workers in annexed Jerusalem or businessmen and laborers in the rest of the West Bank, pragmatic considerations –what one might describe as particular *interests*- work in favor of entrenching an assimilationist trajectory –at least among certain sectors of the Palestinian population- even as this runs contrary to the avowed *ideal* of separation.

Before trying to draw what political lessons may be drawn from the above-mentioned trends in the Israeli-Palestinian scene it may be well-worth considering another episode in the life of Israel's occupation –the first *intifada*. 20 years of occupation had already passed by 1987, and the paradoxical symptoms of a schizophrenic reality were already apparent: on the one hand, all aspects of Palestinian daily life were becoming ingested by the hegemonic Israeli structure, possibly making a strategy calling for equal political rights within the system a rational and obvious choice. I explained in an interview at the time how this increasingly obvious and natural process was already discernible by drawing –once again- on the example of buses: how these were viewed at first as they began to run on Palestinian roads in June 1967 as dangerous

enemy contraptions to be avoided at all costs, only to change in time to becoming practical transportation vehicles Palestinians came to use for their transport, and ended up even having Palestinian drivers. Politics, I said, can also follow the path of buses: adaptation to and making best use of being subjugated by the system. However, even as this initially subliminal infiltration process into the system was taking place there was on the converse side of that reality a growing crystallization of a political ideal in political consciousness –the ideal of separating off from that structure and establishing an independent Palestinian state. Once again, the active agent behind that crystallization of a nationalist consciousness was the political leadership –which had come to include, at the time, not just the PLO leadership outside, but also an active student and intellectual elite in universities inside, or under occupation. In other words, two opposite forces were at work in the society at large. In one article I wrote a few months before the outbreak of that *intifada* I likened this schizophrenic situation to one where the Palestinian body (i.e., quotidian practices) had in reality become submerged in the Israeli structure while the head (i.e. an articulated national will) had developed a different and separate political landscape for itself. It was an untenable social condition. The line between the two had to snap: either the head would have to join the body – thus making for a strategy of equal rights within the system, or the body had to be pulled out to join the head –thus making for a genuine separationist movement. As it happened, the first *intifada* was a paradigm of the second model –where the Palestinian body engaged in a civil disobedience movement seeking independence. It goes without saying that it was primarily that *intifada* that prepared the road to negotiations and Oslo, and the hope for a two-state solution.

I bring in that episode in the life of the occupation to mind in order to help us better understand the situation today. Because, if that *intifada* had caused a major rupture in an unfolding practical reality, the last twenty years of trying consciously to build on that rupture and establish a two-state solution has all but failed so far in achieving its purpose. The outcome as it looks today is a half-way structure where, at the political level, neither has the Palestinian body become separate from Israel, nor has the head become ingested into Israel. Indeed, the head –what one might also call ‘the ideal’- remains committed to separation while the body – what one might call ‘interests’- seems to have become even more strongly entrenched in the Israeli structure. I realize that, in this kind of context where one wishes to point out the unfolding of a one-state reality, one normally talks about the Israeli side of the formula (what is commonly called “Israelization” –such as settlements, land expropriations, etc.) rather than about socio-psychological patterns on the Palestinian side, but I think it is important for a full view of the situation to look at the picture from both ends. What may be a question worth asking ourselves in this particular context is how should one expect the production of a new political reality to be influenced or resolved by these two opposing forces or trajectories?

Let me here try to explain further the import of this question: I am not discarding the sudden happening of a theoretically major event –for example, a sudden fell-sweep peace treaty or a conclusive war or a critical transfer of populations or suchlike- that would pull the rug from under the table, essentially changing the forces at play. Clearly, *if* such a momentous event –say a real two-state agreement- were to take place then both Israelization as well as assimilation

would become something of the past, including in Jerusalem. However, the *iffiness* of this hypothesis is so *iffy* that an analysis is warranted of the non-satisfaction of its premise, at least for the foreseeable future. Within that stretch of the future it is only reasonable to expect –on the Palestinian side of the picture- a further unfolding of the two aforesaid trajectories – essentially making for a schizophrenic reality that must, on the Palestinian side, resolve itself once again either by bringing the head to the body or vice versa, without, however, this time, there being sufficient grounds for a civil disobedience campaign seeking separation, as was the case at the time of the first *intifada* in 1988. This is a point worth unravelling: at that time, the conditions for a civil disobedience –namely, the civilian administration by the Israeli army of all walks of Palestinian life- were ‘ideal’, allowing for a Palestinian mass effort to disentangle themselves from this authority, such as the refusal to pay taxes, the collective resignation of all Palestinian personnel –including police officers- working for that administration, the non-adherence to regulations relating to licenses and permits, and so on, leading all the way to the burning of the Israeli-issued identity cards. But that was then. Now, however, the civilian governance of life has essentially become transferred to the new Palestinian Authority – paradoxically, a mark of the first *intifada’s* semi-success, a hallmark of what I earlier called a “half-way station”. The only real point of contact remaining between the population at large and the occupier today is the army, whether at road-blocks, town entrances, or around new Israeli settlement and expropriation projects. That is why both so-called *intifadas* since the 1988 one have been marked by violence –confrontations between soldiers and activists- and failed in translating themselves into a political project, such as formulating a civil disobedience campaign in terms of the struggle for self-governance, or independence. Non-violence

confrontations –for example in areas where Israel has been erecting its separation barrier- do take place. But given the changed conditions from 1988, these are scattered locations, attracting select activists to specific confrontations, and have proven to be unable to gather popular support for a wider civilian resistance campaign against the *status quo*. In sharp contrast , on the other hand, the conditions that incrementally favor a civil campaign that would bring the head to the body –for a campaign, that is, that will instead seek equal rights within the system- are increasingly becoming recognizable as an obvious and more rational choice. The entire paradigm of a so-called ‘solution’, in other words, may well end up being more informed by the assimilation than by the separation trajectory. However, two cautionary remarks are in order here: first, that further Israelization measures in the near future –perhaps encouraged by a changing American administration- are bound to provoke a stronger separationist reaction by the articulated political will of the Palestinian leadership and people, with unforeseen results for the moment. Second, it is not likely that a transformation of this political will in favor of adopting an assimilation paradigm will be sudden –that is, a one-time event- either in form or content. By ‘content’ I mean that it may not reflect itself in a struggle for equal rights, but may instead seek what we might consider half-way measures, such as the development of a momentum towards finding some integrationist regime or the other with Israel, such as federation or confederation, or some other combination of integrality. I shall return to this point below.

I have so far tried to highlight the importance of quotidian interests (of groups and individuals) as a factor influencing political change, or in the production of a new political reality. I have also

made sure to distinguish between these interests and the articulated political interest of the national collective –what one might look upon as the nation’s ideology, embedding its social and political values. My argument has been that, notwithstanding the latter, the former can at the end of the day be the real force behind the production of a new political reality –one that is at odds with the expressed national interest or ideology. I believe that, once we take into account the experience of different nations, we will very soon find history replete with examples of this kind of discrepancy. Often, we will find, the specific interests of certain groups, lobbies or individuals trump the national interest which embeds, as I said, that nation’s political and social values. What I wish now to try to bring into focus is how such particular interests in the region I am discussing can in fact also *preempt* what we called ‘the national interest’, in effect preventing an agreement that would lay the cumulative trajectory of particular interests to rest. Recalling our ‘if question’, I wish now to add to the list of obstacles preventing an agreement one having to do with particular interests.

Here, the first example that may come to mind on the Israeli side is the effect of the electoral weight of the settlement population on politicians and legislators. This is clearly the effect of a strong lobby representing by now a numerically expanding and organized sector of the Israeli population, whose interests conflict with those of the State, assuming that State’s interest is in separation. But besides such a group, the revelations in the past month concerning Israel’s Prime Minister’s double-deals with two competing media empire magnets –deals apparently affecting the Premier’s choice of political figures in his cabinet- tells a very disturbing story: it is one thing if Netanyahu’s real policy determines the partners he chooses. It is another if

financial deals guaranteeing his own position in power become a factor in his choice of partners, at the cost of a genuine search for peace with the Palestinians. Private interests of politicians and political parties have long figured in the decisions they make, in countless cases throughout the world. Some of these may be blatant and conscious. But some may be hidden, even from the actors themselves! Consider for example what some have come to view as the interests of the Palestinian leadership (the PA) itself as an organism in its own right. The contention here is that the PA has come to have a vested interest in self-preservation even as a half-way house authority rather than risking to rock the boat in its relation with the occupying power. The reference here is not just to political leaders and their affiliates but also to the large army of public employees whose incomes and styles of life have come to depend on its existence, as well as to a business and professional class that has found a way to latch on to the PA's different institutions and internationally-funded projects and to benefit from them. The 'capitalization' of the Palestinian society under occupation –PA-associated jobs, business ventures and unprecedented credit-facilities- have created a middle-class especially in the West Bank that is more predisposed to political stability than to a major uprising against the occupation. The informal amalgamation of these interests may well explain the wide gulf separating policy decisions taken by the ruling party's political forum –grass-root political activists calling for a suspension of security cooperation with Israel- from actual decisions taken by the leadership. Indeed, whether the subject is Israel or Palestine, being afraid to rock the boat –but this time with one's constituency– thereby risking to lose the position of leadership has surely been a factor in the historic hesitation to make those painful concessions needed for a negotiated compromise, or for an all-out confrontation. In sum, then, particular interests may

well have been and will continue to be a factor in preventing us from reaching that point which would in one fell-sweep eradicate the assimilation conditions leading to the cumulative production of a new reality and the crystallization of a new paradigm for a solution.

Let us now look at the matter from the filled end of the cup. Arguably, an assimilation scenario may turn out anyway to be a best outcome in the circumstances. While still far-fetched and seeming highly improbable for now, the day may come when Israel itself becomes Arabized, thus becoming a natural part of the regional landscape. Two phases may be envisioned according to this scenario. To appreciate the logic behind them one has to take in the larger picture. Let us take Israel's place in the region first: by any account Israel is a mixed foreign implant in the Arab world. Its culturally Arab Jewish population, now constituting some twenty percent of its total Jewish population, seeks its identity fulfilment for now in becoming assimilated in the identity of this implant, rather than in its Arabic heritage. The cultural identity of this implant is predominantly non-Arab, however one breaks this down. In terms of size Israel occupies around 5% of the geographic area of the Arab world, and its (Jewish) population (6 million) constitutes 5% of the total Arab population (220 million). While formal peace agreements with its Arab neighbors have been and will presumably continue to be reached, real peace between the peoples themselves will most probably require or imply the shedding off of an implant culture in favor of one that resonates with that of its neighborhood. In the most favorable scenario –which is the exact opposite of current trends in the Arab world- its neighborhood is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual cultural mosaic, the Arabic language being its overarching denominator. This neighborhood's culture is not altogether a

necessarily foreign or despised phenomenon from an Israeli/Jewish point of view: after all, an important narrative of Zionism is its rootedness, not only politically in the Holy Land, but also religiously, historically and ethnically in the Arab world itself. At the end of the day, Jews have their seeds in what evolved into what has come to be known as the Arab world, alongside tribes of different ethnic and religious origins. Paradoxically, therefore, the foreign implant's holy grail cannot but lie precisely in a repossession of its natural past –finally proving it is a natural rather than a foreign inhabitant in the region.

Secondly, we must remind ourselves Israel is not only surrounded by a sea of Arabs: there are currently about 6 million Arabs living in the area it controls –almost the same number as that of its Jewish population. Around 5 million of those live in territory Israel occupied in 1967, and are neither Israeli citizens nor citizens of a state of their own. These live in the area identified by a growing international consensus to be the natural habitat of an Arab Palestinian state, but which we saw has become organically linked as an appendix to the Israelis state. The rest are Israeli citizens –Arabs and their descendants who remained in the country during and after the military conflicts leading up to Israel's establishment. These constitute some twenty percent of Israel's population, mostly living in their historic villages, towns and cities within the so-called green line delineating pre-67 Israel, but some in traditional encampments which have recently caught media attention due to Israeli settlement designs on their territory. Israel's Arab population already worries right-wing Jewish elements, somewhat similarly to the way left-wing Jewish elements worry about the Arab population under Israel's occupation. These populations are viewed as constituting a tangible threat to the politicized Jewish project. Whatever the

political accommodation that will be ultimately reached with it, especially assuming continued overall Israeli hegemony over the PA areas, this population is bound to constitute an 'internal' Arabizing force that will reinforce, and be reinforced by Israel's embedded-ness in the Arab world.

As already said, such a natural outcome of the conflicting forces at play, those of interests and those of ideologies, might at the end of the day turn out to be the best of possible worlds to all concerned. Paradoxically, its achievement might have been easier had the UN back in '48 opted for what was then called the 'Minority Report', instead of the partition resolution which helped bring Israel into existence. Let me close my remarks by introducing India –the main party behind that report- into the picture: it is easier now, and retrospectively speaking, to see why the minority report (proposed by India, Iran and Yugoslavia) for a federation instead of partition would have made more sense. Indeed, the partition resolution called for an economic union between the two states –historical as well as geographic factors called for that. However, partition carried with it an ideological flavor –a Jewish sovereignty apart from an Arab one. Therefore, while hoping for a cohabitation between two sovereignties, the partition plan in effect underwrote the primacy of national sovereignty in the relationship between the two parties. But as it happened, it is this primacy that has stood behind the continuing conflict between them. A federation, on the other hand, would have trumped sovereignty in favor of a political arrangement for the management of quotidian life, without however undermining the cultural, ethnic and religious pluralism defining that life. As already indicated, even while ideologies and interests continue to conflict, the unfolding trajectory of history seems in any

case to be transcribing a reality of ideas for peace that were discussed or made into UN resolutions almost 7 decades ago, and that might well at the end of the day define the inevitable negotiation between the two conflicting parties.