

Israel/Palestine/Middle-East
An ethno-historical perspective



For a long time the unresolved issue of the ultimate status of the area between the Mediterranean sea and the Jordan river has created imbalances, crises and ideological monsters – last but not least, the religious fanaticism that slips in and hijacks popular struggles and rebellions.

The collection of essays, *Arab Jews: The Odd Man Out in the Israeli-Palestinian Equation*¹, stresses two aspects: 1) the urge to reanalyse and reconstruct key aspects of the historical-political events that have distorted relations among populations and social groups in Israel/Palestine; 2) the need to shed light on clues that have been neglected until now. Therefore, the present project will further develop the same themes in the above mentioned collection.

First of all, we believe that it is crucial to adopt a wider-ranging, historical, political and cultural outlook, reading some of the works that focus on:

- 1) The relationship between Ashkenazi Judaism, Sephardi Judaism and the Arab world (*After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*, by Ammiel Alcalay²).
- 2) The pre-1948 politics of Zionism in the neighbouring countries of Palestine, and the resulting regionalization of the Arab-Jewish conflict (*One-State, Two-States, Bi-National State: Mandated Imaginations in a Regional Void*, by Moshe Behar³).
- 3) The effects of this policy on the Israeli establishment of an ethnocratic-apartheid regime and on current institutional bodies (*Land Regime and Social Relations in Israel*, by Alexander Kedar and Oren Yiftachel⁴; *Beyond the Two-State Solution*, by Yehouda

¹ Edited by Susanna Sinigaglia, Presentation by Wasim Dahmash, translated from Italian into English by Dina Stryke. Italian title: *Ebrei arabi: terzo incomodo?* Zambon Publisher, 2012. The Arab-Jews, who don't live anymore in the Arab countries, are now called Mizrahi Jews, a Hebrew term meaning "eastern".

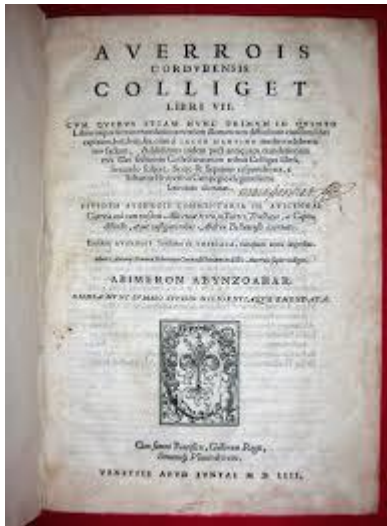
² A. Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Ammiel Alcalay teaches Classical, Middle Eastern & Asian Languages & Cultures, Comparative Literature at Queens College; Program in Medieval Studies at CUNY Graduate Center.

³ M. Behar, *One-State, Two-States, Bi-national State Mandated Imaginations in a Regional Void*. "Middle East Studies Online Journal" n. 5, vol. 2, 2011. Moshe Behar is Pears Senior Lecturer in Israeli and Middle-Eastern studies at School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures, The University of Manchester.

⁴ A. Kedar, O. Yiftachel, *Land Regime and Social Relations in Israel*. "Swiss Human Rights Book", vol. 1, Hernando de Soto & Francis Cheneval (ed.), Ruffer & Rub, 2006. For a more deepen analyze of the ethnocratic regime, see O. Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: The Politics of Judaizing Israel/Palestine*. "Constellations", 1999, vol. 6: 364-391. Alexandre (Sandy) Kedar teaches at the Law School at the University of Haifa; Oren Yiftachel teaches political geography, urban planning and public policy, at the Negev Ben-Gurion University.

Shenhav⁵; *The Dream and Its Construction: Mizrahi-Arab Cooperation to Combat Discrimination*, by Yifat Bitton⁶).

A little remark. Sadly, a new chapter has lately been opened in the long history of colonial domination of the Near and Middle East. As its populations have been fleeing from enemies and dangers of different origin and nature, we can foresee that those areas formerly inhabited by them will be preyed upon by the great Powers.



1) With regard to events in Israel and the Palestinian territories, reference is often made to past and present responsibilities of the European countries where anti-Semitism was nourished, ultimately leading to the Jewish genocide, and to the subsequent creation of the State of Israel and its endless conflict with the Palestinian people. Moreover, due to their strategic colonial interests in the Middle-East, the European countries are accountable for their support to the Zionist project also in its more aggressive form. Consequently, one of the intrinsic goals of Zionism is to denigrate, demonize and delegitimize the Arab world. The cultural aspect of this policy – which greatly contributes to strengthen today's powers – aims at the obliteration of the historical interpenetration between the Sephardi Jewish and the Arab-Islamic civilizations in el Andalus prior to 1492, an interpenetration that survived and thrived all throughout several centuries in many Arab countries. So that currently, the terms "Arab and Jew" always implies opposition. The occupation-colonization of Palestinian lands and populations has always been and continues to be accompanied by a political-cultural colonization of Sephardi-Mizrahi Judaism⁷ by the Ashkenazi-Zionist Judaism⁸ that holds sway over the Israeli society and world Judaism. Even if the rivalry between

⁵ Y. Shenhav, *Beyond the Two-State Solution: a Jewish Political Essay*. Polity Press, London 2012. Yehouda Shenhav is a Professor of Sociology at Tel-Aviv University.

⁶ Y. Bitton, *The Dream and Its Construction: Mizrahi-Arab Cooperation to Combat Discrimination*. "Journal of Levantine Studies", vol. 4, n. 1, Summer 2014. Yifat Bitton is Associate Professor of Law at Sha'arei Mishpatim Law College in Israel. and co-founder of Tmura, The Israeli Anti-Discrimination Legal Center.

⁷ Arab-Hispanic, now said inaccurately "eastern".

⁸ Central-eastern European, now said inaccurately "western".

Ashkenazi and Sephardi Judaism is an old legacy, it has resulted in the obvious subjection of the latter by the former.

David Shasha, an American Jewish writer of Syrian origin who is committed to spreading the Sephardi heritage, in one of his newsletters gives us a broad overview of Arab Jewish culture, quoting some fundamental works and authors. First we encounter Maimonides, who wrote and spoke only Arabic and whose writings caused a cruel contention with the Ashkenazis; a controversy that is going on even in our times. Then Shasha mentions some great Middle Age authors and poets, who belonged to an Arab world rich with a wonderful literary and scientific culture compared to the countries of Europe, where darkness and persecution against Jews and "heretics" raged. He recalls how Muslim and Jewish people successfully fought together the Christian Crusaders. And he recalls also how at the time, Spanish-Sephardi Jews spoke a Judeo-Arabic language⁹. Following the discovery of Geniza¹⁰ at Cairo, in his *A Mediterranean Society* S. D. Goiten – a Jewish scholar– reviews the relationship between the cultural and professional daily life of Arab-Islamic and Jewish communities. This study was an essential reference in Ammiel Alcalay's *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*. In this work, he maps out a "Levant" Arabian space where Muslims, Christians and Jews lived together, even after 1948, in a continuum which is unfamiliar to the West. Another book by Michelle Campos – *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth Century Palestine* – more specifically points out to the relationship between people of different religions. All these works show how such connections have been shattered since colonialism, but in particular Zionism and nationalism broke in onto the scene.

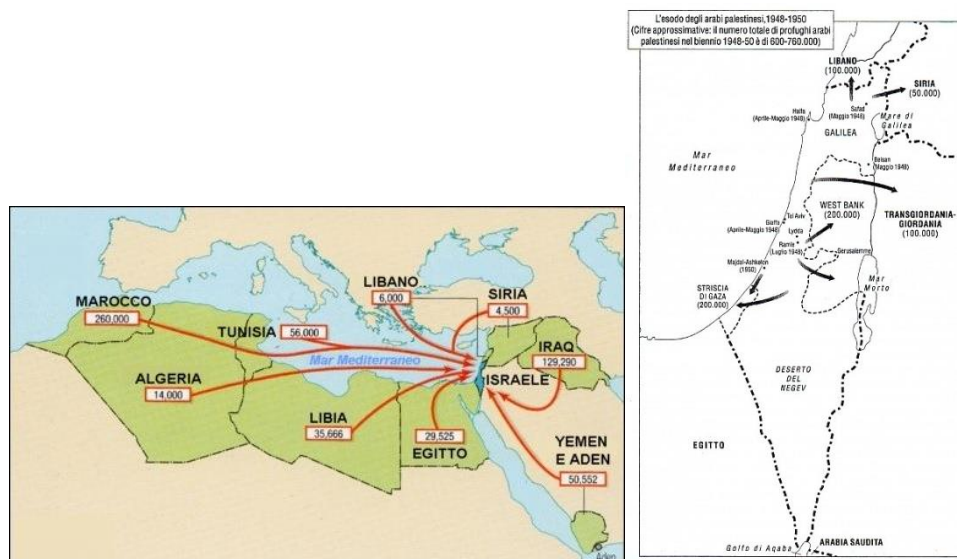


2) In recent years, the uprisings that took place in many Arab countries opened new perspectives in the blocked political situation, showing how strong – for better or for worse – are the ties among the populations living in the area. In his essay *One-State, Two-States, Bi-National State: Mandated Imaginations in a Regional Void*, Moshe

⁹ Ladino was adopted by the post-1492 exiled people from the Hispanic Peninsula, even if it had an older origin. This is why, in this way, they recalled their Hispanic home.

¹⁰ In 1864. We call "Geniza" the synagogue area where people collect useless works written in Hebrew, or with Hebrew words, they can't cast away: actually, Hebrew is considered a sacred language.

Behar stresses how mainstream literature on the Palestine-Israel question insulates it from its historical and political background. The unsubstantial discussion on one state, two states, bi-national state (with its increasingly obvious disconnection from events on the ground and dominant political willpower), fails to take into account the process of regionalization that dates back at least to 1936, after the royal Peel Commission advocated the partition of Palestine, and the subsequent bloody revolt¹¹. Under these woeful circumstances, the Arab populations in the neighbouring countries became aware that the Palestinians' fate implicated also their own. Thus, Palestine became a land to safeguard against Western colonization represented not only and not so much by Great Britain, as by the Zionists, with their claim to make it their historical homeland. With the regionalization of the struggle for Palestine, however, Jewish citizens in Arab countries became increasingly a target of hostile Arab nationalism. The latter began to identify these Jews with Zionists, suspecting them of "intelligence with the enemy" even if they had often rejected Zionism or openly voiced their disapproval of the Zionist project. That period coincided with the beginning of what Behar calls "butterfly effect", that ultimately brought on the 1948 cataclysmic changes in Palestine (the Nakba) and in the neighbouring countries whence, between 1948 and 1967, some 800.000 Jews left, most of whom poured into the new State of Israel.



3) This huge wave of immigrants had an enormous impact on the newborn Israeli society, and it is crucial to emphasize that this was the beginning of the processes which established the social and state structure of Israel still in place today. We often hear that Israel is "the only democracy in the Middle East", but this is an erroneous commonplace, well highlighted in the writings by Oren Yiftachel and other scholars: among them, the above mentioned Alexander Kedar, Yehouda Shenav and, in a slightly different way, Yifat Bitton. Essentially, they suggest, Israel has an ethnocratic regime

¹¹ Anyway, in 1922 Churchill had already decided to give Jordan/Transjordan, that had been part of the Ottoman Palestine, to the Hashemite dynasty. Therefore, Mandated Palestine was reduced – in Behar's words – to a "Lilliputian" territory between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean sea.

which, since the occupation of Palestinian lands after the Six-Day War, has been turning into an apartheid regime. Besides the fact that populations are distributed over the territory according to their economic-social status and geographical-cultural background, the Israeli ethnocracy imposes specific rules in both the lands attributed by the UN in 1947, and those confiscated by the Israeli governments from the Palestinian people in subsequent years. This is very carefully described in *Land Regime and Social Relations in Israel* by Kedar-Yiftachel. To maintain control of the lands by the prevailing (Ashkenazi) ethnoclass, the establishment elaborated a complicate set of laws about property. It differentiates one area from another promoting the purchase of fertile lands and good housing by wealthy Ashkenazis, marginalizing the Mizrahi population in poor towns and agricultural areas – and preventing the Palestinians not only from purchasing any public lands, but also from renting it. Besides, areas of good housing and land are strictly regulated by cooperatives of residents and Jewish Agency members (representing the “Jewish people”)¹², who have veto power over candidates without the “desirable” prerequisites. We must point out that the institutional-territorial solutions proposed until now, generally have neither taken into account nor mentioned this particular regime of land ownership and administration.

Yehouda Shenhav too carries out research into the same subject. In his *Beyond the Two-State Solution*, he argues against the Israeli “Left” that considers rightful the 1948 dispossession of Palestinian lands but not so the post-1967 occupation of lands¹³. Shenhav underlines that more and more the colonies have become a means for controlling social discontent due to lack of welfare and public housing, which adds to the complexity of the question already highlighted by Kedar and Yiftachel in their essay. Shenhav suggests that the parameters that have until now defined the Israeli “Right” and “Left” need to be completely reconsidered, as well as the institutional-territorial division in Israel/Palestine. He believes this division would take into account the Palestinian right of return, hopefully avoiding any retaliation against the West Bank settlers. However complicated this solution may be, as we have seen, it does not tolerate shortcuts.

¹² The Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Fund own a major property in Israel agricultural lands. This role is particularly alarming for its political implications and hopefully, it would become a subject of further insights and studies.

¹³ In this respect, see “The Occupation Doesn’t Stop at the Check-point”, by the same author, at this link: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2006/shenhav160606.html>.



In this disheartening context, the essay by Yifat Bitton, *The Dream and Its Construction: Mizrahi-Arab Cooperation to Combat Discrimination*, analyzes similarities and differences between the discriminations in Israel against Palestinian citizens (on a national basis, therefore recognized by the legal system) and Mizrahi citizens (on an "ethnic" basis, therefore not recognized by the legal system). However, Yifat Bitton's conclusion is that there is only one reason for the two apparently different kinds of discrimination: "Arabness". Even if it isn't openly acknowledged, there are some good examples of struggles for common goals, in which the disadvantaged populations in Israel may join forces to build new perspectives, the Mizrahis being the bridge that some people have long been wishing for to link the Western Jews, the Palestinian people and the Arab world, rediscovering the values of Arab-Sephardi humanistic culture.