Bi-Nationalist Visions for the Construction and Dissolution of the State of Israel

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the bi-nationalistic framework devised by early Zionists and its immediate and long-term implications. Various constituencies including Zionist theoreticians; Arab leaders; and Israeli, Arab, Jewish, and non-Jewish academicians have employed the term “bi-nationalism”. The manner in which bi-nationalism is discussed varies according to individuals’ political goals and their ultimate vision for the state of Israel. The concept of bi-nationalism has acquired new meaning in its application by contemporary proponents that diverges dramatically from its original conception, use, and aims. It is not a fixed and rigidly defined concept, but rather has been interpreted and employed over time by various advocates for either the construction or the dissolution of Zionist society and the Jewish state. This paper highlights key examples of individuals and movements that have espoused bi-nationalist goals, from members of Brit Shalom and Ihud beginning in the 1920s to contemporary Palestinian Arab intellectuals residing in Israel.

Despite its accomplishment of establishing a state and a national homeland for the Jews, Zionism—the national movement of the Jewish people—remains a debated and contested ideology. It is against the backdrop of this debate that this study is located, exploring the evolution of diverse visions of bi-nationalism advanced at different periods during the past century, as an alternative to the Jewish state by public intellectuals, both Jewish and Palestinian. Yet while the term’s existence remains a constant, the understanding of bi-nationalism has been radically transformed
over the past century by the various social, political, and institutional contexts in which it has emerged. My documentation and analysis of these transformations reveal both continuities in the debate over bi-nationalism since its beginnings in the 1920s as well as significant shifts in its meaning that have substantively changed the critique of the Zionist project.

What is this construct that Martin Buber and Judah Magnes proposed as an option within Zionism in the 1920s and that Arab public intellectuals invoke in the twenty-first century in calling for a state of all its citizens?

The idea of a bi-national state is not unique to Palestine/Israel. It has been considered and even adopted in other nation-states that confront contested claims to land, questions regarding the identity of the polity, and tensions between two or more ethnic or religious populations. Although this study is limited to the way bi-nationalism has been used in debates about Zionism, some of the thinkers studied here refer to Belgium and some of the Slavic states that have considered bi-nationalism as an alternative to the existing structure of the state.

In its most neutral meaning, bi-nationalism designates a nation-state framework wherein two national groups coexist and where each can express its national identity and has some autonomy in matters of culture, politics, education, and religion. But in the discourse of the critique of Zionism, the term bi-nationalism is not neutral. The individuals who first advanced the idea of bi-nationalism as an alternative to Herzlian Zionism, or political Zionism, comprised a small group that rejected the nationalism that dominated European thought and the Yishuv.¹ They imagined a new form of nation-state, and envisioned Israel as both democratic and pluralistic, founded on and exemplifying universal moral principles.

More recent proponents of bi-nationalism use the term with different meanings. Some, like Meron Benvenisti, argue that Israel is already de facto a bi-national polity simply as a result of demography. Others contend that Israel must be restructured as a bi-national state, emphasizing equal recognition of the national aspirations of both Jews and Arabs. In marked contradistinction to those who call for a bi-national state in which group identity remains intact, the most extreme proponents of bi-nationalism advocate a de-ethnicized Israel that would be devoid of particular national markers or identities. The bi-national idea as a theoretical construct is appealing to some Jews and Arabs alike as it attempts to deemphasize differences between peoples and create a united society, but in practice the establishment of a bi-nationalist state faces many challenges.

The difficulty of its actual implementation helps explain why “bi-nationalism” has been able to take on such different meanings over time;
since no bi-national polity for the state of Israel was created, it has been possible for the term to be employed by those with a variety of perspectives and goals. From the 1920s through the present, Zionist theoreticians, Palestinian intellectuals, political activists and academics—Israeli, Arab, Jewish, and non-Jewish—have used the term to advocate very different political goals and visions for the state of Israel. This study consists of intellectual portraits of leading critics who advocated bi-nationalism as a practical alternative to Zionism at five periods from 1920 to the present. It attempts to illuminate, and examine critically, alternative models that emerge and reemerge at different periods of Zionist history, piecing together the activities and writings of some of the most articulate promoters of bi-nationalism. It traces changes in the meanings associated with bi-nationalism, from early Zionist proposals for a bi-national state to the way it is used in twenty-first century non-Zionist and anti-Zionist calls for the dissolution of Zionist society and the Jewish state. The implications of these changes are both immediate and long-term, for they impact public discourse, relations between Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Arab minority, and the persistent debate on how Israel can maintain its identity as both a Jewish and a democratic state.

This article traces not only the history and evolution of the idea of bi-nationalism but the factors that account for its transformation over time. Liah Greenfeld’s book *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* is a particularly useful model for this kind of history. Greenfeld coins the phrase “zigzag pattern of semantic change” to describe the process by which words take on new meanings. This process of ongoing semantic transformation is governed by situational constraints that lead to the formation of new concepts for the same word. But the process works in two directions, she explains, since the evolving new meaning then acts on the environment, so that “at the same time, the structural constraints are conceptualized, interpreted, or defined in terms of the [new meaning of the] concepts (the definition of the situation changes as the concepts evolve), which thereby orient action.” The diagram below provides an image of Greenfeld’s “zigzag pattern of semantic change”. It shows that the original meaning or intention of a concept can be altered in response to a particular situation or experience, and that this change simultaneously affects the interpretation of the very situation or experience that produced it. This pattern repeats itself in such a way that both language and reality undergo a continuous and mutual process of transformation.
It should be stated from the outset that this zigzag pattern may be asymmetrical but the general logic is one of a zigzag. Not all “zigs” are of the same length and intensity as all “zags”. In looking at an example of this model unfolding, among the questions that arise are: What part of the original term or discourse remains and to what degree? Does a wholly new idea emerge or are there remnants of the previous concept? New elements may be introduced or emphasized in significantly more substantial ways, altering the course of the term and transforming it from its original intent and purpose.

Greenfeld’s model can be useful in explaining how the concept of bi-nationalism has been transformed in the Palestine/Israel context, demonstrating how the circumstances associated with changes in the meaning of “bi-nationalism” evolve as the meaning itself is transformed over time. The “zigzag” model adapted from Greenfeld’s scholarship will be explained in detail throughout the article. Each historical context alters the form in which bi-nationalism is imagined and articulated by its proponents.

Prior to the creation of the state of Israel, there were many competing visions and paradigms within the Zionist movement. Bi-nationalism emerged during the period of the Yishuv in the early decades of the twentieth century in competition with Herzlian Zionism. The idea of a bi-national state was advocated by members of Brit Shalom and certain faculty from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem during the 1920s and first years of the 1930s. During this period of the Zionist movement contending perspectives engaged with one another, each vying for their proposed vision of a Jewish state. The individuals who advanced the multiplicities of Zionist ideology (cultural, political, religious) were in active dialogue with one another.

During this period, the political leadership of the Yishuv was criticized and questioned openly by its members with regard to its relationships to the Arab community of Palestine. The leadership of the Yishuv was not oblivious to the challenge posed by the Arab population. Proponents of the various streams of Zionism advocated various approaches to the question of how best to develop those relationships. Adherents of cultural or spiritual Zionism within the Zionist camp championed the Arab question as the litmus test for Zionism. Cultural Zionists understood the Arab revolts
of 1929 and 1936–1939 as critical turning points that were not heeded or recognized properly by the leadership of the Yishuv. The small circle of Jewish intellectuals who advocated for a bi-national polity contended that the Zionist leadership was ignoring or marginalizing the nationalist elements within the Arab population and missing an opportunity for serious engagement with the Arabs of Palestine. They envisioned one state based on a type of federation system that would accommodate two peoples. The needs of each community within the sovereignty would be acknowledged and addressed, whether by organizing cantons or institutionalizing governmental autonomy in matters related to personal and national identity, culture, and language.

The Jewish proponents of bi-nationalism genuinely believed they could develop a type of nationalism that would avoid the pitfalls of the other nationalistic movements sweeping Europe. Repudiating particularism and chauvinism, they envisioned a form of nationalism instead based on universal values and ideals. Those Zionists clamoring for a bi-national state in Palestine had recourse to liberal notions of justice that originated in the teachings of the biblical prophets, archetypal models of universal values of compassion, and equality rooted in the particular past of the Jewish people—but this connection to Jewish identity was not to be imposed upon other peoples or national groups. Rather, Jewish values and ideals were a moral guide for appropriate behavior towards others. Jewish bi-nationalists in the 1920s were attempting to transplant the bi-national framework, borrowed from Western European multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, and
multi-religious societies (such as the Hapsburg Empire), onto the Middle Eastern landscape. In this way, the context and essence of a bi-nationalist approach was already transformed across space and time.

The Zionists who espoused such positions rarely found serious Arab counterparts with whom they could partner. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Arabs in the region were not inclined to build bridges with the Jews in Palestine or pursue mutual cooperation. Among the Arabs both inside and outside of Palestine, the prevailing opinion was that the Zionists were merely temporary residents, and there would be dire consequences if they became permanent. Only a small handful of Arabs were willing to consider a bi-national framework, and they were viewed as traitors to the Arab nationalist cause and, in several instances, were murdered. 7 Those Arabs who did entertain a bi-national proposal for the territory of Mandatory Palestine were primarily members of the community of Christian Arabs originating from Syria; “for it was they who were seeking to find their place as a religious minority in a predominantly Moslem world.” 8 The majority of Christian Arabs in Palestine did not overtly support a bi-national state in the territory and united with Muslim Arabs in a staunchly anti-Zionist position. A notable exception to this general rejection was the Arab newspaper Marat el-Shark, which printed Arabic translations of articles written by members of Brit Shalom. 9 However, the overwhelming attitude toward bi-nationalism was rejection of it. Albert Hourani, a British-Lebanese Middle Eastern historian, in his testimony before the Anglo-American Committee on 25 March 1946, argued that bi-nationalism was not feasible and would result in a complete deadlock, intervention of foreign powers in the state, or the domination of the state over all aspects of life due to competing communal needs ethnically and religiously. 10

In addition to the lack of any meaningful parallel Arab bi-nationalist group, Zionist bi-nationalism faced internal weaknesses and intra-Jewish challenges. During the period of Mandatory Palestine, bi-nationalism was an abstraction based on ideals and moral principles but with no concrete political content. Furthermore, those Zionists who positioned themselves as political realists argued that the ideal was unattainable as it went against basic human nature—it was unreasonable to expect one group of people to secure the rights of another group at the expense of their own.

Following Greenfeld’s model, the first “zigzag” in this bi-national discourse was between 1937 and 1947, when the international community proposed a partition plan for Mandatory Palestine as a reasonable solution to the Jewish question. It was the 1947 call for partition by the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, in conjunction with the aftermath
of the Holocaust, that gave priority to Jewish statehood. Political Zionism was finally able to achieve its goal of a sovereign nation-state when Jews accepted and Arabs rejected partition and the state of Israel was officially declared; once that state existed, advocates of a bi-national polity became even more marginal to the mainstream Zionist discourse.

Nevertheless, support for bi-nationalism continued to be voiced in intellectual circles to the left of center. Asserting that the 1948 War had permanently damaged Arab-Zionist (and thus Arab-Jewish) relations, proponents of bi-nationalism exhorted the Jewish leadership of the state to tackle the problem of Palestinian Arab refugees and address the wrongs inherent in Jewish settlement of Eretz Yisrael. They were convinced that coexistence and cooperation could be assured by addressing the grievances of Arabs in the new polity. A new bi-nationalist group emerged which envisioned a Hebrew identity to be assumed by Jews and Arabs alike, with the two Semitic peoples constructing a shared narrative based on geography, language, and culture rather than religious or nationalist connections. The proponents of this idea were affiliated with the Council for the Coalition of Hebrew Youths (ḥavad ʿgivush haʿnoar haʿivri), but the term “Canaanites” (though it was initially employed by others pejoratively) ultimately was adopted for themselves.

The Canaanite movement was founded in 1939 by Yonatan Ratosh and continued through the 1940s. Although its membership was small, the intellectuals associated with the movement were prominent in the realms of literature and culture. They argued that the Land of Israel was that of ancient Canaan, and the emergence of a Hebrew people would reconstitute the ancient peoples and cultures that had once lived and developed a meaningful connection to this particular area. Judaism was not the primary anchor for the Canaanites; indeed, it was important to them to dissociate both Judaism and Zionism from this proposed Hebrew-Israeli identity.

Intended to supersede any primal tribal identity, Canaanism added to the initial formulation of bi-nationalism the expectation that the two populations would be united along cultural, linguistic, and geographical lines rather than ethnic, religious, or nationalist connections. The supporters of this newer version of bi-nationalism aspired to a federated Hebrew state within the context of a larger regional Semitic federation in the Middle East. Yet they found no serious counterparts, for neither Arab nor other Jewish movements for self-determination shared their enthusiasm for the idea of a federated state or cantonization. The bi-national community imagined by the Canaanites was idealized in literary works by poets and
writers, but was never conceptualized in practical terms that Arabs (or most other Zionists) could find acceptable. 

Disappointed by a Jewish leadership that failed to offer olive branches to their Arab brethren and committed to equality in the relations between the two peoples, advocates of bi-nationalism continued to imagine a type of nationalism that would unite Jews and Arabs. The Hebrew republic would stand alongside the Arab nation-states, and together they would form a Semitic union. Zionism, they contended, had served as a tool to create a sovereign entity for the Jews, but its mission was fulfilled; it no longer needed to exist after the establishment of the state of Israel. Instead, a national approach that appealed to all inhabitants of the land ought to replace the narrowly defined Zionism, which was in their perception an offshoot of Judaism that had previously supported the creation of the state of Israel.

The Canaanite concept of a Hebrew nation projected a strong historical and cultural identity onto the state of Israel, but inherently posed challenges that were not directly addressed by its proponents. Their vision assumed that the state of Israel would separate religion and religious symbols from its foundational principles, but it is questionable how secular, liberal ideals would be able to take precedence in a nation with such deep associations with Jewish peoplehood and affiliations with Judaism’s particular religious heritage and culture. Nor did their approach take into account whether the Arabs of Israel were likely to want to identify as citizens of a Hebrew nation. In sum, this alternative vision seems to have ignored the reality of tribal affiliations of both the Jewish and Arab populations.

There seems to be a contradiction within the thinking and commitments of Canaanite enthusiasts: They were modern day Hebrews, who drew on Jewish sources to understand the past in a particular way (consistent with liberal social values), and viewed Judaism as a civilization, in similar terms to those of Mordecai Kaplan, in a global manner. However they were not especially Jewish, nor did they like Jews. They drew on the heritage and historical legacy of the ancient Near East to imagine a shared cultural context with other peoples of the region. In addition, their fantasy of returning to a unity between the Semitic peoples depended on an ahistorical fiction. When had there ever been such a thing? What evidence was there when looking at the Arabs that they would have reason to respond favorably to such an idea? In the bi-nationalists’ particular attempt to enact their universal values, there seems to be a kind of solipsism or even narcissism at play. Their platform comes from a type of early twentieth century “new man” syndrome that is—in its selection of symbols and terms
of reference—at once revolutionary and reactionary. Zionism, like other nationalisms, attempted to create a new identity for the Jewish nation, and bi-nationalism was one variant within the Zionist movement vying for acceptance.

The impact of communists in Israel from 1949 to 1967 was a factor of relevance to the bi-national discourse. Arab communists became the principle spokespeople for the grievances of the Arab minority in Israel. Those communists who remained in the newly formed state of Israel were united along the principle of “the need to treat members of both national groups equally, whether as citizens in a joint state or as members of national collectives enjoying the same rights within a federal state, or as groups entitled to the right of national self-determination.”13 Before 1948, the Palestine Communist Party had attempted to integrate within the Yishuv, and articulated their positions as opposing partition of Palestine; “calling for an independent democratic state, [the PCP] increasingly upheld a bi-national vision, based on ‘the principle of equal rights of Jews and Arabs for free national, economic and cultural development, without artificial interruptions and in mutual cooperation and brotherhood of nations’.”14 After 1948, the demand for equal rights continued to be a central axiom of the Arab minority and resonated throughout the international arena.

The second “zigzag” in the bi-national discourse occurred after the 1967 War when Israel gained control over areas of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, Golan Heights, and Sinai Peninsula. These territorial gains reinvigorated religious Zionists, who saw settling the newly acquired territories as part of a divine mission. Followers of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the son of Rabbi Abraham Kook, actively campaigned for the right to settle and demonstrated against territorial concessions or compromise; they regarded building numerous settlements as both a political and theological act. These religious Zionists believed that the act of settling all of Eretz Yisrael was bringing about the messianic age. Some advocated a one-state solution—meaning that Jews would have control over all of Greater Israel, including the territories acquired during the 1967 War, and would live in the conquered territories alongside the Palestinian inhabitants.

It is important to note that in the late 1960s and 1970s, this very different one-state idea—that Jews and Palestinians would live in a single (Jewish) state—would have been entirely unacceptable to both Palestinians and other Arabs and to earlier proponents of bi-nationalism like members of Brit Shalom, Canaanites, and supporters of Matzpen, the radical socialist and anti-Zionist organization founded in 1962. Those influenced by the language of Marxism and communism that was gaining currency at the
time recast the results of the 1967 War, which were subjected to the critique of colonialism and post-modernism in the international arena as well as in Israel itself. Supporters of Zionism and avowed anti-Zionist detractors alike sharply criticized Israeli policy post-1967.

Those affiliated with Matzpen, such as Michel Warschawski, saw the territorial conquests of 1967 as a direct assault against the principles of bi-nationalism in that they exemplified and exacerbated the problems of colonialism. Non- and anti-Zionist supporters of bi-nationalism—as well as many Zionists—argued that controlling another people was unjust and would eventually erode and corrupt the values of Israeli society. This criticism was of serious concern, and not only among the proponents of bi-nationalism. Recalibrating the perceived victims and the victimizers—the David and the Goliath in this equation—resulted in a new paradigm. Unease over how Jews, particularly Israelis, held power and used power became an accepted trope in the debate over Israel’s territorial conquests and ultimate relationship with the Palestinian Arab communities.

These concerns shifted the discourse surrounding bi-nationalism so that it was no longer focused on notions of coexistence and cooperation and accommodating diversity. Rather, it emphasized deconstructing the Jewish character of the state as the way to ensure equality for all citizens irrespective of national identity, ethnicity, or religion. The era of the 1960s and this period of unrelenting dissent influenced advocates of bi-nationalism, many of whom were now associated with Matzpen. Its members argued in editorials in their monthly publication that universalism was the essential value for cultivating a just society. Warschawski and his cohorts vehemently opposed privileging the Jewish character of the state, arguing that it was detrimental to the minority population.

Matzpen, at its core, was anti-Zionist and anti-capitalist, and encouraged an international revolutionary style of socialism without strong ties to the Soviet Union. The intellectual grounding of its leaders was a Marxist socialist approach specifically geared for the Middle Eastern context. Matzpen’s mission emphasized internationalism in an attempt to transform the foundations of Israeli society from a narrow nationalism and provincialism to a global perspective focused on the anti-colonial struggle. This metamorphosis demanded the resistance to Jews residing in the territories, and the right of subjugated people to struggle for their freedom. Matzpen aimed to build a broad coalition of peoples opposed to Zionist policies (in particular, oppression of the Palestinian people and territorial acquisition by Zionist Israelis). It encouraged political mobilization of Arabs, Jews, and other national minorities throughout the Middle East in order
to struggle against Zionism and to form a socialist federation throughout the Middle East.  

The renewal of a national existence by and for the Jewish nation in the historic land of Palestine with complete autonomy and independence was, for Matzpen, an invalid dream. Warschawski conceded that a certain group of people may have the right or even a need to control their own lives as a collective within some type of sovereign framework, but never at the expense of another group. “My rights as an individual stop when they hurt someone else, this is the same with a collectivity.” This was precisely Matzpen’s problem with Zionism; it failed to confront the rights of the Arabs of Palestine. It is this confrontation that forced supporters of Matzpen to focus on the sins of the Jewish state (and thus, of the Jews), and minimize all other aspects of the state and of the historical context for its existence.

Holding a utopian vision in the context of the practical realities of Jewish statehood, it appeared to these bi-nationalists that moral corruption was inevitable if the Zionist dream was to come to fruition. Ehud Luz notes, “The greater the distance between vision and reality and the more tenuous the link between national aspirations and humane ideals, the deeper the dilemma facing the Zionist movement: how could force be used without falling into the moral corruption it entailed?” For Warschawski, it was anathema for Jews to have true political power; for him, Jews should retain a state of weakness or at most power in a symbolic sense, being for everyone else before themselves, thereby demonstrating their absolute powerless existence. Therefore, Jews should be, according to Warschawski’s approach, at the forefront of dismantling the nation-state of Israel. The model of a homogenous ethnic nation-state is abhorrent and should be rejected in favor of a multi-national, multi-ethnic community where each ethnic or national group has its own political structure and framework. The caricature of an ethnic state, in Warschawski’s view, is that everyone is the same and this sameness ultimately leads to degeneration and doom.

The third “zigzag” in the bi-national discourse can be traced to the 1980s–1990s when the Arab citizens of Israel expressed their increasing sense of alienation and frustration by forming their own political parties articulating the needs and aspirations of the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. Palestinian Arabs’ mounting discontent was exacerbated when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 in what was considered a “war of choice”, a milchemet breira. Israel’s political and military decision to enter Lebanon was highly controversial and Israeli society was deeply fragmented in terms of the military response. Furthermore, the Palestinian Arab population in
Israel was affected by the violent confrontation between Palestinians in the territories and Israelis during the First Intifada.

These events changed the Israeli political landscape for Arab and Jewish citizens alike. Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel called for deconstructing the Jewish state and replacing it with “a state of all it citizens”. Employing the language of democracy and multiculturalism, the Palestinian Arabs of Israel, particularly the elite and intelligentsia, condemned Israel—a Jewish state—for representing and thereby ultimately privileging one people’s identity, religion, language, and culture over another. Claiming that the nation-state cannot allow a specific identity to be institutionalized by governmental authorities, some Palestinian Arabs of Israel advocated a bi-nationalism they referred to as the “One State” solution and demanded the status of a recognized minority. Specific political parties, such as Balad, sought to guarantee equality for the Palestinian Arab sector by erasing the Jewish identity of the state and ensure that the voice of the Palestinian Arab citizen of Israel was not heard through a “Jewish” or “Zionist” political mouthpiece. Though there were significant ideological similarities between Matzpen and Balad, the latter's orientation emerged from its identification with Arabs rather than Jews.

While integration of the Palestinian Arab population into Israeli society was at this time championed by some Arab elite and intelligentsia, bi-nationalist thinkers, most significantly Azmi Bishara, argue that the goal itself was deceptive, because Arabs in Israel could not be integrated, either as individuals or as a community, into the nation-state or its policies. “[Israeli] Palestinians now wanted to emphasize their Israeliness, yet they still were not really being let into the dominant Israeli society. . . . [They] wanted to share in the shaping of their own lives, not simply to respond to what others had planned for them.” Bishara likens this asymmetrical relationship between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel to being “tolerated guests” in a context devoid of the possibility for equality between all citizens, and sees the impact of the First Intifada on the Arab citizens of Israel as the collapse of the possibility and goal of full integration into the state of Israel defined as a Jewish state. “It’s either a state of its citizens,” he wrote, “with two nationalities inside, or there is no equality.”

There are two components Bishara emphasizes for his vision of a bi-national state: cultural autonomy for the Arabs of Israel and complete individual civic equality in the state. Bishara’s own desire to re-engage with political life was built on his addressing the “cultural marginalization of Israeli Arabs from their own identity and their civil marginalization from full citizenship.” Recognizing Palestinian national identity as a
component of Israeli society that is unique to a particular sector of the population is seen as mandatory prerequisite, and Bishara and other political supporters of Balad do not believe Israeli leadership can move towards enhanced equality between the Jewish and Arab peoples unless this step is taken. Additionally, they do not view Palestinian Arab culture and identity as separate from the larger Arab people and national identity, but understand the Arab citizens of Israel as an inseparable piece of the Palestinian Arab nation and the greater Arab identity of the Middle East.

The two components of cultural autonomy and civic equality in this view are not entirely distinct; achieving cultural autonomy ultimately would result in civic equality as articulated by Bishara and Balad, thereby forming a bi-national polity, or in Bishara’s terms “a state of all its citizens”. Through the combination of autonomy, self-rule, and civic equality, Bishara imagined that a comfortable balance between the existence of Arabs in Israel as members of the Arab nation and their lives as citizens in Israel could be achieved.29 It is noteworthy that at no point does he discuss the impact of these developments on the Jewish majority (and especially their likely resistance to the plan to minimize the state’s Jewish character) other than to note that the Jewish identity of the state would be de-emphasized. Bishara sees elevating the status of the Arab community while downplaying the Jewish identity and nature of the state as a workable solution to the problem of disparity between the two populations.

Regularly citing values of liberalism, equality, and tolerance, in vague terms, in support of the imagined polity of “a state of its citizens”, Bishara attempts to bridge Palestinian nationalism and bi-nationalism while rejecting the options of Palestinian Arabs of Israel either integrating or separating from the nation-state in which they live. Balad would rally Arab support under the motto, “A state for all its citizens and a self-governance for the national minority.”30 Promoting recognition of the Palestinian Arabs as a national minority within Israel, deserving of autonomy, was their aim.

The belief among Palestinian Arab intellectuals inside Israel (including Bishara) that the national identity of the Arab minority needed to be preserved was the impetus for the establishment of Balad. The Arabs had to regain consciousness of their Arab and Palestinian origins while rejecting both the Israelization of their population and their marginalization by Israeli society. Simultaneously, they must seek collective cultural autonomy and equal citizenship in accordance with democratic values. Balad’s platform is preservation of the historical memory of the Arab minority, Palestinian identity and national consciousness, ties to the greater Arab nation and people, and democratic rights for all citizens of the state of Israel.
The fourth and final “zigzag” in the meaning of bi-nationalism is occasioned by the *Future Vision* documents. In this detailed exposition written during the first decade of the twenty-first century, Palestinian Arab intellectuals, most of whom were either academicians, lawyers, or working with Palestinian Arab non-governmental organizations, advocated completely dismantling Israel as a Jewish state. The emergence of post-Zionist ideology and critical rethinking of the founding narratives and myths upon which Israel was established also affected the bi-national discourse. Supported by a number of post-Zionist Israeli academicians, they want to replace Israel with a bi-national state, a single state shared by Arab and Jewish citizens, and one that had no identifying Jewish characteristics marking the public sphere. Since those who take this position tend to be well entrenched in Israeli society, their Israeli identity is difficult to disentangle from their Palestinian Arab identity. They continue to regard Israel as their home and have no intention to resettle in the territories of the West Bank or Gaza. However, in contrast to the bi-national state imagined by the members of Brit Shalom, with a universal Jewish character, the one imagined by the Canaanites, where Jews and Arabs would share a joint Hebrew culture; and the one envisioned by Balad, with cultural autonomy for the Arabs in Israel and Jewish populations; this bi-nationalist vision prioritizes the desires of the Palestinian Arab community. It emphasizes and gives expression to Palestinian identity and de-emphasizes the role and concerns of the Israeli Jewish population.

In the language of *Future Vision*, Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel equate themselves with American minority groups. Across differences in context, they apply the language of civil rights and human rights to demand justice and equal opportunity in the Israeli setting. Palestinian Arabs of Israel saw the state as failing to view them as citizens worthy of inclusion in matters impacting public discourse. Watershed moments affecting the Palestinian Arab community in Israel include: the events of the *Naqba*, the 1967 War, the First *Intifada*, the failure of the Oslo Accords, the Second *Intifada*, and the influence of post-Zionist ideology throughout intellectual circles in Israel. Each of these historical moments impacted relations and the perception of relations between Israel’s Jewish population and Palestinian population. Palestinian Arab public intellectuals increasingly felt after the events of Oslo that they had a responsibility to engage with the Jewish majority and articulate ideas promoting their particular agenda for the state of Israel. Through the expression of their own political perspectives they sought to overcome a sense of marginalization and create a more equitable polity. All of this served as the backdrop against which Palestinian
intellectual elites and activists convened to develop their vision and ideal for the state of Israel, as expressed in *Future Vision*. Their collective thinking was based not only in the particular realities of the Palestinian community in Israel, but in the wider context of minority concerns in the international arena. In approaching the matter with language and foundational documents formulated in the international community, Israeli Palestinian leaders sought to use international theories, developed in reference to other minorities in the world, to apply to the Israeli Palestinian experience.

Ultimately, the *Future Vision* documents and other written works by the intellectual Israeli Palestinian activists associated with them—despite some minor differences in their formulations—call for the deconstruction of the Jewish state as it currently exists (i.e., Jewish and democratic), and its replacement with a polity founded on principles of equality and justice (i.e., a model of a bi-national or consociational structure that encourages a power-sharing arrangement between the two populations).

The *Future Vision* strategy does not include any vision of reciprocity or recalibration of Palestinian Israelis’ own stance towards Israeli Jews and their claims and needs. The onus of responsibility for change is placed on the shoulders of Israel and Jewish Israelis. They do not take into account the historical context of the Zionist movement, the plight of Jews in world affairs, and the asserted right of the Jewish nation to constitute a polity embracing a Jewish character. Instead, they focus on the dismantling of the Zionist and Jewish nation-state as it exists and seek to replace it with a bi-national arrangement (for which, it should be noted, there are no currently successful long-term working models) that goes beyond the territory of Israel proper to incorporate the West Bank and Gaza Strip. While within this imagined polity, Palestinian Arab public intellectuals imagine a framework of two national groups—Jews and Arabs, their bi-nationalist vision does not provide a solution to the fundamental challenges and needs of the Jewish people and nation that the Jewish state was intended to address (i.e., security concerns and self-determination).

The authors of the *Future Vision* documents seek to legitimize their claims to the territory of Israel as the indigenous people, native to the land, and pursue recognition as the national minority of Israel. Going beyond a demand for cultural and linguistic autonomy, they argue for dismantling the Jewish character of the state in order to create what they view as a democratic polity rooted not in equality and justice for all its citizens but collective political recognition and governance of its Palestinian inhabitants.

The *Future Vision* authors’ approach inevitably calls for Jewish Israelis to relinquish their aspirations of establishing a sovereign state in the
terrestrial setting of ancient Palestine. Additionally, it goes further than any previous bi-national visions in its embrace of an envisioned polity devoid of Jewish content and collective identity. Their approach serves as an articulation of Arab nationalism expressed through the discourse of human rights and liberal ideals.

The transformation of the meaning of bi-nationalism in the context of Zionism and the state of Israel has been profound. While the term has remained the same, it refers to approaches that promulgate very different agendas. In contrast to earlier meanings of bi-nationalism, the most recent bi-nationalist visions of the future do not emphasize the values of coexistence and cooperation between Arabs and Jews nor use the language of universalism. The early Zionist advocates of a bi-national state sought to balance the particular and universal aspects of the Jewish people in a state that would equally accommodate Arabs. They believed that it was incumbent on them as Zionists to uphold the values of Jewish culture, heritage, tradition, and religion, while simultaneously accommodating the needs of all human beings and providing equality for all citizens while respecting their national, religious, and ethnic identity. The authors of the Future Vision documents use the language of democracy, human rights, and social justice to promote Arab national concerns, yet fail to address the particular national concerns unique to the Jewish people and the historical conditions and needs that led to the creation of a sovereign Jewish state. In sum, it privileges the minority Arab population in Israel (and, frequently, in the West Bank and Gaza) and delegitimizes the Jewish people as a nation.

A tectonic shift in the bi-national discourse occurred in the late 1960s when both Jewish and Arab advocates of bi-nationalism disassociated themselves from Zionism and the aspirations of a Jewish state. This changed both the discourse and agenda of bi-nationalism and shifted its focus from coexistence and cooperation to asserting the claims of Israel’s Arab citizens. As a result, bi-nationalism has come to be glossed as a euphemism for a one-state or a “state of all its citizens” and effectively a call for the end of a state with any Jewish character or commitment to the development of Jewish culture. The contemporary discussion of bi-nationalism has thus devolved into a continuation by other means of the conflict between Arabs and Israeli Jews.
Notes

1. The term *Yishuv* literally means settlement. The *Yishuv* refers to the period in history in which Jewish residents settled within the land of Palestine prior to the creation of the state of Israel. From the 1880s until the creation of the state in 1948, the term *Yishuv* denoted pre-state Jewish residents in *Eretz Yisrael*.


4. *Ibid*.

5. The term bi-nationalism is used in reference to the concept of creating one nation-state in the territory of Mandatory Palestine for two peoples, Jews and Arabs. Advocates of constructing a bi-nationalist polity were opposed to partition, which would form two separate nation-states—one for the Jews and one for Palestinian Arabs. The term bi-nationalism is also employed within contemporary discourse, but its meaning differs from its usage during the *Yishuv*. The transformation over time of the idea of bi-nationalism is explored in this article. The term itself will be employed here only when it was invoked by the particular advocates of bi-nationalism being discussed; the text will specify if any individuals furthering a bi-nationalist platform use other terms for forging one state for two peoples.

6. Brit Shalom was a political organization founded in 1925 predominantly by Jewish German intellectuals. It sought to create a bi-national state for Palestine and foster coexistence between the Jewish and Arab populations.

7. Throughout the period of Mandatory Palestine, one of the weakest aspects of those advocating bi-nationalism was the inability to find, until 1946, a serious Arab leader willing to accept the bi-national blueprint. The most notable Arab to engage in serious discussion of constructing a bi-national framework in the land of Palestine was Fauzi Darwish el-Husseini (1896–1946), organizer of *Falastin al-Jedida*, “A New Palestine”. Darwish el-Husseini, along with four other members of his organization, in partnership with the League for Arab-Jewish Rapprochement, signed a document on 11 November 1946 endorsing the concept of a bi-national Palestine. “The agreement spoke of Arab-Jewish ‘cooperation,’ political equality, Jewish immigration limited only by the country’s economic absorptive capacity, and the inclusion of Palestine in a league of neighboring Arab states.” Benny Morris, *One State, Two States: Resolving the Israel/Palestine Conflict* (New Haven, 2010), 95. An unknown Arab nationalist murdered Fauzi on 23 November 1946. It is worth mentioning that Fauzi was a cousin of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini. Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Gloucester, MA, 1994), 252. Another Arab who was willing to cooperate with members of Brit Shalom was Sami Taha (1916–1947), though he held no serious clout politically or intellectually within his own community. Taha was involved with the Palestine Arab Workers Society, and was ultimately appointed as the labor representative of the Arab Higher Committee.
Tensions between Taha and members of the al-Husseini family increased. Taha was believed to be insufficiently anti-Zionist and anti-British in his outlook and policies, resulting in his murder 12 September 1947. The murderer was not apprehended and was believed to be following the orders of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Tamar Hermann, “The Bi-national Idea in Israel/Palestine: Past and Present,” Nations and Nationalism 11.3 (2005): 385.


9. The English edition of Falastin, a Christian Arab paper published in Jaffa, and controlled by the Nashashibi family, was also willing to publish articles written by members of Brit Shalom. Ibid., 63 and Falastin 7 December 1929 [English].

10. Ibid., 292 and Hourani’s evidence to the Anglo-American Committee.

11. Ratosh was the pseudonym for Uriel Heilperin, born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1908 to a Zionist family. Ratosh embraced Revisionist Zionism and tried to synthesize the political views of Revisionist Zionism while embracing the Semitic character of Hebrew identity.

12. In David Ben-Gurion’s book My Talks with Arab Leaders, he enumerates his various encounters with Arabs both inside of Palestine (and later Israel) and throughout the Arab world. He discusses potential frameworks for the future state of the Jewish people, bi-nationalism among them. However, for Ben-Gurion, a bi-national state was merely a tactical means to gain political autonomy for the Jews and political parity with the Arabs while Jewish immigration continued. He reported that despite his engagement with various Arabs, he was unable to locate an Arab leader who was genuinely interested in political parity with the Jews. Ben-Gurion was unable to locate Arab partners who would agree to the idea of a bi-national arrangement in Palestine, Ben-Gurion, My Talks with Arab Leaders (Jerusalem, 1972).


15. Michel Warschawski (b. 1949) was a member of Matzpen, and has committed his life to engaging with the “other” within Israeli society, i.e., the Palestinian Arabs. His background is as a traditionally observant Jew and he studied at Merkaz Ha’Rav Kook. The formative moment in his life was witnessing the actions taken by the Israeli army after the 1967 War, during evacuations of Arabs from their villages. He subsequently initiated the Alternative Information Center, which emphasized joint cooperation and solidarity to promote and facilitate Israeli-Palestinian relations, rather than merely dialogue or having two separate groups of Israelis and Palestinians working together on different initiatives.

16. Internationalism, Warschawski notes, “was a response to the need to break
the barriers of clan and to escape the stifling and fetid atmosphere of an inward-looking tribe whose conscience remained untroubled by its misdeeds.” Michel Warschawski, On the Border (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 34.

17. “It is both the right and duty of every conquered and subjugated people to resist and to struggle for its freedom. The ways, means and methods necessary and appropriate for such struggle must be determined by the people itself and it would be hypocritical for strangers—especially if they belong to the oppressing nation—to preach to it.” General Declaration by the Israeli Socialist Organization, 22 March 1968. Matzpen documents at the Israeli Left Archive, accessed 17 October 2011, http://www.matzpen.org/index.asp?u=120&p=doc3.


21. Interview with Michel Warschawski, 24 October 2010.

22. The Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel prefer to identify themselves as Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. They do not want to be referred to as Israeli Arabs as this suggests they belong to Israel. Moreover, the Palestinian citizens of Israel want to emphasize their Palestinian identity and prioritize this aspect rather than their association with Israel.

23. Up until the 1982 War, the majority of Israelis believed that Israel engaged in conflict as a matter of “no choice”, milchemet ain breira. However, that war and the events at Sabra and Shatila were understood by many within Israel to be a war of “choice”, milchemet breira, an attempt by Israel to demonstrate its military strength and might. Until 1982 there was a sense that Israel’s wars were of self-defense and/or of necessity, a sense that changed after the events of the 1982 War.

24. Azmi Bishara (b. 1956) was a Palestinian Arab citizen of Israel; he no longer resides in the state of Israel. Bishara is an academic and politician. He ran for prime minister in Israel in 1999. His political platform demanded full equal rights for all citizens, and he called for Israel to become “a state of all its citizens” devoid of any particular Jewish content and identity.


26. Ibid.


32. The particular Palestinian Arab intellectuals examined as part of the *Future Vision* documents include Nadim Rouhana, Yousef Jabareen, and As’ad Ghanem. Each of these men is a citizen of the state of Israel. They hold academic positions and are engaged in political discussions regarding the nature of the state and its future. Rouhana, Jabareen, and Ghanem work with non-governmental organizations that advocate on behalf of the Palestinian Arabs of Israel.