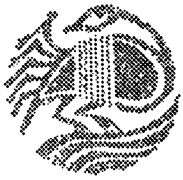

Interview

Trends in Arab Thought

An Interview with Sadek Jalal al-Azm

Abu Fakhr: You have stated that one of the errors of the Left was that it neglected the importance of civil society, democracy, human rights, secularism, and so on. At present, many are giving up the mantle of Marxism and enlisting in the ranks of the secularists as though they believed secularism could serve as a shield against religious fundamentalism [salafiyya]*. Where do you believe we are headed in the near future?*

Azm: I would add that secularism, as an issue, was always part and parcel of leftist thought, even though it was not announced or talked about for tactical reasons. The justification was that it drove away the masses, seeing as the masses are religious. Of course, I did not agree with that approach, but the leftist parties made their own calculations and developed their tactics accordingly.

Secularism is a very important issue. Communism and capitalism have been at odds on almost everything, from music to dance and literature, even mathematics at times, but the one thing they agreed on is secularism. Following the collapse of the Communist regime in Poland, the church, at its moment of victory, tried to curtail secularism, but this produced an immediate popular backlash in support of a secular society, institutions, and state; the public did not want a retreat from this minimal achievement, seeing as there can be no citizenship, no equality before the law, no democracy unless there is a secular civic society. In Poland, they realized that despite everything, Communism had performed a valuable service by secularizing society and the state, and they were not about to give up that tremendous historic achievement.

In the Arab world today, critics of secularism deal with the issue in the most superficial way, saying that we do not need secularism because it is a European phenomenon that arose in a confrontation with the church,

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whereas there is no church in Islam, and so on. But look at India. The chief defender of a secular state is the Muslim minority there, because Hindu fundamentalists want to transform Muslims from citizens into *dhimmi*s [protected minorities] by doing away with secularism and making India officially a Hindu state. The issue of secularism in India is not just a point of view, it is a matter of life or death. There is a measure of demagoguery among prominent Arab critics of secularism (who are secularists in everything that touches their personal, public, or professional daily lives). I find their attacks on secularism loathsome and hypocritical.

I said that secularism is a precondition for democracy, by which I mean democracy for citizens, not sects, clans, or tribes. If they find the word "secularism" distasteful, fine, they can call it civil government [*hukuma madaniyya*], as Lebanon's Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din does. He has realized that there is no salvation for Lebanon in going back to sectarian "democracy." I don't want to get into a quarrel over words, but I do not think that democracy is possible in the absence of a minimal level of secular civil society that transcends sectarian, denominational, regional, or tribal affiliations, subordinating these to the values of citizenship. That is not to say that secularism is the magic solution for all problems—I feel I have to say this because we live in an age of putative cure-alls: Islam is the solution, democracy is the solution, revolution is the solution, secularism is the solution, and so on.

I have proposed a definition for secularism, a sort of minimum common denominator: Secularism is the compulsory neutrality of the state and its institutions and agencies with regard to religions, sects, denominations, and ethnic categories, which are constituents of the society in question. I propose this definition because secularism in the maximal sense is not a viable option at this time, and there is no point in making it part of the current discourse in the Arab world. The maximal or most extreme forms of secularism can become viable only at times of major revolutions, such as the French or the Bolshevik revolutions. The secularism of the Kemalist movement in Turkey lies somewhere in between, a bit less than midway between them. Needless to say, Nasirist secularism is weaker than Kemalist secularism.

Abu Fakhr: Contemporary fundamentalist [salafiyya] *movements see secularism as their true enemy. Do you feel the same way about neofundamentalism* [al-salafiyya al-jadida]*?*

Azm: It is a serious enemy, yes. My broad assessment of neotraditionalism [*neosalafiyya*] or Islamic fundamentalism is that it is a reaction more than a new creation. For example, take the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928. The 1919 revolution in Egypt brought about a new level of maturity and assertiveness both in the Egyptian bourgeoisie and Egyptian Islam, enabling them both to actualize their modernizing or reformist inclinations. Although the revolution failed, a widespread process of modernization did occur in Egypt between 1920 and 1930—Tal'at Harb and Bank Misr

and all that. I see the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood as part of the reaction to this kind of initiative or new trend in Arab life. Another way of understanding the phenomenon is to see the rise of the Brotherhood as a counterreformation, given that reformations engender counterreformations, and a certain degree of religious reform had taken place—many researchers compare Muhammad Abdu to Martin Luther.

One aspect of the retreat of religion from public life can be seen in the decolonization process. If we look at modern history starting from the turn of the century, we can detect a broad anticolonialist trend. Religious forms of resistance to colonialism are to be found in the classic examples of Libya and Algeria. Traditional forces fought against colonialism, they fought well, and heroes and role models were created. All the battles were fought in the steppes and deserts and untamed countryside. Yet the resistance failed in the end. In the next phase, the resistance moved to the cities and succeeded in the fight for independence. That is in itself an indication of the retreat of the role of religion in the confrontation with colonialism. Not a lessening of the power of religion as a mobilizing force—that is always there—but as an organizing force, as a movement, a leadership, as a source of ideas, goals, ideology, awareness. The new phase gave us Mustafa Kemal and Sa'd Zaghloul in place of Sulayman al-Halabi and the shaykhs of al-Azhar. It gave us political parties and the notion of citizenship and nationalism and the slogan: "Leave religion to God; let us all share one nation." The phenomena of demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, and the well-known forms of civil disobedience replaced the populist urban movements, rebellions, and riots.

For another example of the diminishing role of religion, look at the educational system, which has been taken out of the hands of the men of religion and religious institutions and entrusted to a modern civil system. Look also at legislation and the judiciary, where the same process has been at work. On the subject of the judiciary, a real turning point in the development of these societies can be seen in the incident described by the historian al-Jabarti, who was astonished at the way the French authorities treated Sulayman al-Halabi, the young Syrian who assassinated General Kleber, Bonaparte's successor in Egypt. The French soldiers did not cut the assassin into little bits in traditional Mamluk fashion, but gave him a genuine trial where he had every chance to defend himself in accordance with the conventions and procedures of modern French law. Al-Jabarti's description far transcends the mere recording of his personal experiences, for the incident points to an entirely new historical direction in the life of Egypt and other Arab societies.

The broad trend in the Arab world to make religion a private matter represents a retreat for the hegemony of religion over public life: The issue of faith and the observance of religious rites is now up to the individual, then the family. It has become common to find within the same family one religious daughter, an atheist son, and another daughter in between, as in Naguib Mahfouz's novels.

If we study the fundamentalist [*usuli*] movement very carefully, I believe we will discover it to be a reaction to these deep and fundamental changes. What does it mean when they demand a return to the application of the Islamic *shari'a*? It means that the *shari'a* is not being applied, which is true. In other words, Islamism is an attempt to recapture a situation which prevailed in the past, when Islamic societies were Islamic. What does this mean? It is a form of acknowledgement, a confession that the hegemony and control previously exercised by religion have retreated from public life in these societies in favor of something else. Islamism is trying to regain a position it has lost. In this sense, it is a reactionary and restoration movement in the true sense of both terms. The entire question of *hisbah* in Egypt,* for example, was an attempt to strip the individual of his recently acquired right to decide freely in matters relating to religious faith and religious observance, or the lack thereof.

This is the source of the Islamists' hostility to secularism and democracy. Democracy assumes freedom of conscience and belief, which they reject. In the wake of the failure of the populist and leftist nationalist movement, they saw an opportunity to regain the position they think is theirs by right and belongs to their leaders and shaykhs. This is why they reject the greatest slogan of modern Arab history: "Leave religion to God; let us all share one nation"; hence their frank demand that the Copts be expelled from the Egyptian army.

There is one last point to be made concerning secularism. Turkey had fought a victorious war against its enemies. After the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] was in a position to proclaim that the new state would be secular and that there would be a separation between state and religion. He could do this from the apex of victorious power, and do it officially, from the center of the former empire. However, in the peripheries of the old empire, i.e., in the Arab provinces, such a transformation was impossible because these provinces were extremely weak and divided. This is why Arab public life was secularized de facto, that is, through a string of successive and cumulative events, measures, developments, and transformations, without a public proclamation of secularism or a developed and clear and frank secular discourse to give expression to it. Arab secularism was a practical affair that occurred slowly and hesitantly, cautiously and timidly, compromising to the end. My personal conviction is that had Nasir officially announced the separation of state from religion at the time of the nationali-

Had Nasir officially announced the separation of state from religion at the time of the nationalization of the Suez Canal, it would have worked.

* *Hisbah* is an old, little used Islamic concept whereby any Muslim can take a fellow Muslim to religious court on the charge of conduct in violation of the *shari'a*, even if he himself is not personally affected by the behavior. The principle was used against Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid in Egypt in 1995 (see Editor's note below).

zation of the Suez Canal, it would have worked. Many things may have turned out differently, because that moment, in the Arab context, was similar to the moment of Atatürk's victory over the invading armies of occupation that were trying to divide up his country. The fundamentalists believe this de facto secularization to be far more dangerous than Atatürk's secularization because the latter had been frankly and clearly proclaimed, whereas Arab secularism came about through the infiltration of societies in a covert manner while the religious cover, in one form or the other, was maintained.

Abu Fakhr: For some thirty years, through your writings, including A Critique of Religious Thought *and* The Taboo Mentality, *you have always stirred up controversy, challenging what you saw as worn-out and antiquated barriers to progress and constraints on justice and freedom. How would you evaluate your intellectual odyssey at this point in time? Have you mellowed? Have you and other enlightened thinkers succeeded in digging channels for rationality and critical thought in the rigid Arab mentality?*

Azm: The most sweeping expectations have not been realized, but that is not to say there has been no cumulative progress—this is not purely a personal response, for I see myself as part of a trend that originated in the renaissance period (*al-Nahda*) through the birth of the literary, intellectual, and social critique that it unleashed. There has been some movement. The tendency has been in the direction of greater clarity, rationality, and objectivity and the scientific method. There is less oratory in prose, culture, and intellectual discourse; there is less concern with verbal embellishment and writing rhymed but empty prose, and so on.

In all fairness to modern Arab thought, there has been a long series of books similar to *A Critique of Religious Thought* and other of my works that have created local and at times pan-Arab controversies with echoes, on occasion, in the larger Islamic world or in Europe. As an Arab, I feel proud that the authors of those pioneering books were not forced to pay an exorbitant price for their positions and analyses. It is true that they were harassed and treated roughly, perhaps persecuted to some extent, yet—since Qasim Amin and for the duration of this century, except for Faraj Foda*—they did not pay with their lives for their courageous stands. In this sense their experiment bore fruit in the Arab world, and something new and important developed in contemporary Arab life. Each one of these books, and the uproar it caused, made it a bit easier for the book and the ideas that were to come after it. Each of these experiments further undermined the traditional high level of intolerance regarding sacred or taboo issues, so that the capacity for tolerance of

* Qasim Amin, whose pioneering *The Liberation of Women* was written in 1899, suffered abuse and attacks for advocating women's education and integration into society and for calling for the removal of the veil. Faraj Foda was an Egyptian university professor assassinated by al-Jihad al-Islami in June 1992 for his relentless critiques of fundamentalism.

opposed viewpoints increased, as did the ability to formulate critical and independent opinions. All these are significant gains.

For example, none of the death threats or assassination attempts in the Salman Rushdie affair came from inside the Arab world, where the reaction was limited to more civilized methods such as condemnation, critical responses, and verbal or written attacks. As an Arab, I am proud of this point. I believe that the positive cumulative and long-term influence of the series of works I mentioned earlier on Arab intellectual and cultural, even political, life was responsible for the difference between the Arab and non-Arab Islamic responses to Salman Rushdie. I hope that the assassination of Faraj Foda and the assault on Naguib Mahfouz will remain the exceptions that prove the moral rule which has governed our lives since Qasim Amin.

When I revisited the controversy which engulfed *A Critique of Religious Thought* after a long absence from those texts, I felt a sort of satisfaction at the high level of the debate. There was no incitement on the part of my antagonists and critics. The religious leaders and the *ulama* engaged in a truly serious and rational discussion of the book even as they attacked it. The diligent Shaykh Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya wrote something to the effect that even though he did not agree with a single opinion in the book, it was appropriate for Islamic thought to be concerned with the issues it raised and to come to terms with them, because otherwise Islam will be the biggest loser. The learned Shaykh Nadim al-Jisr, the mufti of Tripoli, adopted a similar position and invited me in an open telegram published in the press to a public debate of the book in Tripoli itself. Imam Musa al-Sadr's response was of the same caliber. I have to admit that at no time during the embroiled and complex controversy surrounding *A Critique of Religious Thought* did I feel my life to be in danger even though the book and myself served as grist for the mill of Friday sermons whose tone was frequently quite extremist. It should also be noted that despite the rise of Islamic fundamentalism [*usuliyya*] and despite the sectarian dimensions of the Lebanese civil war, *A Critique of Religious Thought* has been continuously available on the market for over twenty-five years, the last printing being in 1997. Similarly, *The Taboo Mentality* was met in the Arab world with debate, attempts at refutation, and even curses, but no violence in any shape or form despite the extreme sensitivity of the Rushdie case. These are achievements which we must defend and incorporate permanently into our lives. That is why, in one of my lectures, I called on the Arab intelligentsia, reading public, and cinema- and theater-goers to adopt—in place of the "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" of our forefathers—the code of "a book for a book, a poem for a poem, a novel for a novel, a research work for a research work." And that in place of their observance of the holy months, all our months should be holy.

Abu Fakhr: When A Critique of Religious Thought *came out in 1969 and* The Taboo Mentality *in 1992, they both stirred up hornet's nests. You seem to have grown accustomed, since* A Self-Critique in the Wake of the Defeat *and* A Critique of the Ideas of the Resistance, *to the use of the intellect and*

reason as shields against the arrows and slings of this group or that. Are you preparing to poke another hornet's nest?

Azm: I don't go out of my way to stir up hornet's nests, nor do I knowingly bait my intellectual adversaries (some of whom are personal friends) with critiques. I deal with and become engaged in thorny issues that are taboo or prohibited at times. Occasionally I take topics that come up in private discussions into the public domain when no one else dares to do so. I believe that to keep such issues out of the public realm is very costly to us now and in the future, as it involves a form of self-deception, a way of being false to oneself. As for me, my patience with self-deception and hypocrisy was exhausted long ago, so I shall continue to poke my finger into sore spots when I think it necessary and when I see that ignoring the issue will involve a certain loss. That is precisely what I did when I went on record—ahead of everyone else, I might add—to describe what was going on within the Palestine Liberation Organization as "Palestinian Zionism." At the time, the cost of saying what I did could have been extremely high. Yet who objects to such a description today? Even the PLO does not object, they may even take pride in it. Should the hornets fly into a rage, so be it. I see in the idea of stirring up hornet's nests something positive, I see it as stirring up the vitality of cultural life, the exchange of ideas, critiques, and intellectual life.

Abu Fakhr: But you were almost alone in your defense of Iblis,* *as you were in your defense of Salman Rushdie. Then you took to defending materialism when most of the Left was abandoning the idea. Are you committed to defending lost causes?*

Azm: I don't pick losing causes to defend. In the legal sense, "defense" is of the accused, the weak, the losers, sometimes the guilty, who need someone to defend them. I believe this is an important concept we should get used to. Even the enemies of Salman Rushdie should accept the principle that he has a right to defend himself, to be heard, and to have someone defend him, even if they are certain that he is going to end up on the gallows. This right should become a permanent principle in our lives. In this sense I don't mind defending losing causes and believe that the causes I have championed are of great importance to our lives. The defense of Iblis, for instance, was in fact an affirmation of the idea and significance of *ijtihad*† and an early defense of our right, as intellectuals in today's world, to go back to our tradition and reexamine it and explain it in a way that is meaningful to us. I believe this issue is now being debated much more vigorously and with greater insistence than was the case in the 1960s when I took up the tale and character of Iblis. Consider the issues that have come up upon the release of Muhammad

* Satan in Islam, who refused to bow down to Adam as commanded by God.

† The use of reason to decide certain types of issues not governed by an explicit religious doctrine.

Shahrur's books* in Syria and Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid's writings† in Egypt. The central question here is this: Do we as Arabs living in today's world have the right to reclaim our tradition, to understand it in a new way, to use our reason (*ijtihad*) to explain it, to benefit from it, and adopt it in a manner that is suitable to our situation? This heated battle is going on at the present time, and I don't think it is a losing battle.

Concerning Salman Rushdie, I may have been alone in defending him at the beginning, but I am not alone now. When I was preparing to write *The Taboo Mentality*, Arab reaction was invariably hostile. But the long debate that my book occasioned demonstrated that an important change had taken place in the position of intellectual and critical Arab opinion of Rushdie. Salma al-Khadra' Jayyusi was the first to bring this to my attention, although she had been against Rushdie and his novel from the start. In the debate following *The Taboo Mentality*, there were some who undertook an indirect defense of Rushdie by way of the defense of reason, *ijtihad*, and freedom of opinion in relation to criticism, excellence, and art. This amounts to a defense of Rushdie without necessarily embracing him or his ideas. Others softened their hostility to Rushdie, and still others rethought the justifications and causes of that hostility from a more objective perspective, more or less. This is similar to what had happened to many other writings in the past, including Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*, as well as the books of Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, Taha Husayn, Abdullah al-Qusaimi, and many others. I do not believe that the defense of Salman Rushdie is a hopeless cause, because I believe that within twenty years, his novels, particularly the *Satanic Verses*, will find their rightful niche in world literature of the second half of the twentieth century, just as Pasternak's novel did despite the wild storm it stirred up when it was first published in 1958.

Abu Fakhr: In an interview with the Turkish newspaper Milliyet *in 1996, you expressed the surprising view that Islam could become secular. Can you explain how you arrived at that conclusion?*

Azm: That interview was actually an abbreviated version of a lecture I gave on "Islam and Secularism" at Damascus University and at several other places in Syria, including al-Suwaida', Homs, and Dayr al-Zur. What I was trying to say is that if Western Orientalists and Islamists agree on one point, it is that there is something in the Islamic religion that differentiates it from other religions. This is its essential hostility to secularism, which Islam finds impossible to accept in any shape or form. I wanted to cut through that knot

* Muhammad Shahrur is the author of *al-Kitab wal-Qur'an* [The book and the Qur'an], a modernist exegesis that departed from traditional interpretations and thus created considerable controversy.

† Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, whose writings seek to reinterpret Islam in a positivist and historical mode rather than as a divine phenomenon, was taken to religious court in 1995 on the basis of the *hisbah* concept (see Editor's note above). Found guilty of apostasy, he left Egypt for fear of his life and now resides in Holland.

because I do not think that Islam is that different from the other major religions on this issue. Secularism is a historic choice—it may or may not come about, but I do not see that there is a barrier to it in Islam in principle that differentiates Islam from other religions and that makes secularism impossible. This was my goal: to respond to the assertion of Western Orientalists—not all of them, to be fair—and the corresponding assertion on the part of the Islamists. I wanted to demonstrate that correspondence. To that end, I drew a distinction in Islamic history between the "doctrinaire no" [*al-la al-suratiyya*] and the "historic yes" [*al-na'am al-tarikhiyya*] and the struggle between them. The idea can be put in a nutshell with the question: Was the original, simple, and egalitarian Qur'anic-prophetic Islam compatible with hereditary monarchic rule prevalent in the empires that the Arabs conquered and controlled? Historically, the answer is certainly yes, despite the "doctrinaire no" whose adherents have always maintained that imperial Islam resulted in righteous Islam being replaced by a vicious monarchy, and they have fought to restore Qur'anic-prophetic Islam. The Kharijites embodied the "doctrinaire no" in its purest form, i.e., the original, simple, quasi-nomadic egalitarian Islam. The Umayyad Mu'awiyya represented the other side of the coin; he knew how to establish an Arab Islamic state in the process of turning into an empire. In other words, imperial Islam embodied the "historic yes" despite the continuation of the "doctrinaire no," which rejected and fought against it. Of course, the "historic yes" changes and adapts to the circumstances of the times, but on the whole, I think one can say that victory always went to the "historic yes" in the course of Islamic history. Victory was the ally of the Islam that adapted itself to changing historic reality, of the Islam that knew that if it did not keep up with the times, it would be marginalized, petrified, and defeated.

I do not see that there is a barrier to secularism in Islam in principle that differentiates it from other religions.

I also believe that secularism is the "historic yes" of modern times. Islam is capable in theory and in practice of accommodating itself to secularism as it has accommodated itself to many things before, and it is capable of reinterpreting and redefining itself in order to achieve that objective. Of course, there are no prior guarantees; whether such a development can reach fruition depends on what the Arabs and Muslims do, which choices and decisions they make. Let me add that Islam as a paradigm of a set of sempiternal doctrines is compatible only with itself, but Islam viewed as a historically developing human faith has accepted all the various forms of social, political, and economic organization known to man—tribal, agrarian, urban, imperial, slave, mercantilist, modern industrial, nation-state, etc.—and, to an extent, adapted to them. Given this logic, I see nothing to prevent Islam, in principle, from accepting secularism as part and parcel of the "historic yes" of the contemporary age. Look at the accommodation of the Iranian Shi'ite clergy to the republican form of government, although they had been against it to begin with—elections, a constitution, a parliament, and other

things that have nothing at all to do with the traditions of either Shi'ite or Sunni Islam. They are all imported from modern Europe.

Abu Fakhr: While the awaited peace is supposed to bring democracy and prosperity for the Arabs, exhausted by wars and martial law, many fear that the opposite will occur, and that the Arab governments that sign the peace agreements will have to resort to brute force, in the name of living up to their agreements, to quell the anger of people whose expectations will not be met and to put down the resulting opposition. How do you see the situation?

Azm: I am afraid this description is accurate. The promise of democracy and prosperity is pure propaganda, because if democracy comes about, it will result from and be secured by domestic factors. Arab regimes have taken advantage of the Palestine problem to suppress liberties and to undermine any aspirations to democracy. Unfortunately, it does not work the other way round: Taking the Palestine problem off the agenda will not bring about democracy and public liberties. The regimes can find a hundred other pretexts and a hundred enemies, real or imagined, to justify the continuation of their policies. For that reason, I believe that even the argument that they have to live up to the agreements they signed is a pretext for the continuation of existing policies.

Netanyahu has settled the issue of Jerusalem in principle and has decided the issue of peace by the same token. The Israelis and the Americans are starting from the working assumption that the Arabs will protest and rally around in opposition to what is being done, and this may go on for ten or fifteen years, but in the end they will bow down to the status quo. They are probably right about that. There are rumors of a conspiracy and a "done deal" with Arafat, according to which Israel will get Jerusalem in return for something or the other for Arafat. Whether there is a deal or not, I believe that Netanyahu has settled the issue; he will not give up Jerusalem. He is an ideologue, and we need to take him and what he says seriously. In the West Bank there are now Bantustans like there were in South Africa, supported by a network of highways and ring roads that make it possible for a visitor to tour the West Bank without seeing a single Palestinian—except from afar, working at construction sites. It is what a Scandinavian ambassador in Damascus called "autostrada apartheid," an entirely new phenomenon. As American Whites used to say of the Blacks: you only see them in the kitchen. Still, I believe that this plan will, in the long run, lead to two peoples living in a united Palestine. Perhaps Netanyahu is working unwittingly to bring this about. This will be a totally unintended result of his policy decisions and his actions.

Abu Fakhr: You are referring to a binational state?

Azm: I don't think it is farfetched, in the long run, that Judah Magnes's old idea will reemerge, but through the guile of history, à la Hegel. That is to say, this idea may reappear and impose itself despite the wishes of Netanyahu or

Arafat. What happened to the areas under apartheid and occupation in South Africa may yet happen to the Palestinians. They may find that the only way to secure the bare minimum of political, civil, and human rights and to achieve some progress in their daily lives is to impose themselves as citizens on the occupying state.

On examining the history of settler colonialism, I have detected two outcomes. When settler colonialism is able to eradicate the native population, it triumphs, and there the matter ends. When it is unable to do so, there is a reaction on the part of the native population giving rise to an uncertain amalgam. Algeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe are three different models for this process. A united Palestine may develop into a fourth model. I don't think it is out of the question to expect to see a Palestinian social movement demanding political and civil rights and citizenship in an entity called Israel-Palestine (or Palestine-Israel) along the lines of the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King in the United States or a struggle like that of the African National Congress led by Nelson Mandela, which never demanded secession or partition. Only the racist extremists demanded an independent state separate from Black society in South Africa. Bear in mind that a peaceful social movement of this sort will receive widespread support from governments and peoples throughout the world. Of course, Israelis who are more far-sighted than Netanyahu and the Likud—people like Abba Eban and the late Yehoshofat Harkabi—fear such a future. They fear the day when Israel will be confronted with a social movement demanding civil rights, like the Blacks in the United States, which will arouse a great deal of sympathy in European and American public opinion. 'Azmi Bishara is proposing such an idea now,* as Sari Nusseibeh did before him. I see the march of history seriously headed in that direction, regardless of what individuals may want.

Abu Fakhr: Such an outcome would favor the Palestinians in the long run.

Azm: Yes. This may be where their true interests lie in the absence of other alternatives. It would be better if the Palestinians could have their own state. However, I believe that an independent state is no longer a viable historic option for them, particularly since Netanyahu has decided the issue of Jerusalem. Ever since the idea of an independent Palestinian state was proposed, I argued that under the prevailing conditions the chances of bringing it about were slim indeed. From the beginning, that objective, which became a slogan, was an expression of weakness rather than of strength, vitality, and renewal. I remember an analogy recounted by Abba Eban at a public lecture my wife and I attended at a university in California. That veteran politician, who is a fascinat-

I believe that an independent state is no longer a viable historic option, particularly since Netanyahu has decided the issue of Jerusalem.

* See the interview with 'Azmi Bishara, "Bridging the Green Line: The PA, Israeli Arabs, and Final Status," in *JPS* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1997), pp. 67–80.

ing orator in several languages, was trying to explain to American Jews the dangers represented by a greater Israel, i.e., one that includes the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He said that in the nineteenth century there was a place called Mount Lebanon, which had a Christian minority and could have evolved into an enlightened and advanced Christian polity in the Middle East. But the French created greater Lebanon in 1920 by annexing Shi'ite and Sunni regions and their populations to Mount Lebanon. He explained that what had happened there since was that the more backward population has swallowed up Lebanon at the expense of the more advanced and civilized Christians. The lesson was that if Israel would absorb the "barbaric" Palestinians—though he did not use the term—its fate will be like that of Lebanon. Eban's solution was to allow the Palestinians to set up their own demilitarized state with limited sovereignty, because for him, Israel's cultural identity and its special calling is more important than territorial expansion. Yehoshofat Harkabi presents similar ideas in *Israel's Fateful Hour*. Harkabi, who had served as chief of military intelligence during the 1967 war, shifted, as did Ezer Weizman, from hawk to dove, not out of love for Arabs and Palestinians but out of concern for Israel. Of course, the Likud, particularly Netanyahu, is proceeding in the opposite direction. Recently I read a long article by Amos Elon, who is close to Shimon Peres, in the *New York Review of Books* entitled "Israel and the End of Zionism." He says that the Zionist movement has achieved its most important declared aims quite efficiently and brilliantly and that it is finished in the sense that it has finished what it set out to do, especially in view of the Oslo accords and the end of the hundred year's war with the Arabs, as he puts it. Elon therefore attacks Netanyahu and the ruling Likud bloc because they are about to spoil this tremendous achievement by insisting on further settlement and land, the annexation of the Golan Heights, and the repression and subjugation of the Palestinians. Elon frankly accuses those in power of trying to cram the Palestinians into "Bantustans" and townships isolated from each other and surrounded by Israeli settlements on all sides, a situation he believes will lead to the collapse of Israeli democracy into apartheid for the Palestinians and democracy for the Israelis on the model of pre-Mandela South Africa. (In this regard, it is interesting to note that from what Elon says, Moshe Dayan himself was apparently the first to use, in the early years of the occupation, the South African term "townships" to describe Palestinian communities in the occupied territories.

Abu Fakhr: Yet the Likud intellectuals are trying to avoid that outcome.

Azm: Of course. They think that through repression and control they can prevent less desirable alternatives. Yael Dayan gave a talk near Princeton in which she tried to convince American Jews of her point of view by making a comparison with the Soviet Union. She said that the Soviet state, with all its might and authority, was unable to control its ethnic and national minorities or to institute a lasting order along the lines it desired. Her point was that if

there were limits to what the Soviet Union at the height of its power could do in this respect, there are surely limits to what Israel can do to control and subjugate the Palestinians. Of course, the senior security people within the Likud appear confident that they can continue to seize Palestinian land and govern the population without such effects.

Abu Fakhr: Do you believe that peace will lead to fundamental changes in the makeup of Israel and Zionism, which some people see as a false political ideology that claims to liberate Jews?

Azm: First, I object to the description of Zionism as a false political ideology. It is true that it is a settler colonialist political ideology, but it is not false in the least. Among the movements that arose at the end of the last century, Zionism was particularly successful. It achieved all that it set out to do, and one cannot describe its ideas as false: A movement that succeeds in achieving a state of this sort cannot be based on myths, along the lines of Roger Garaudy's theses about Israel's "founding myths." It is we Arabs who have harbored the most dangerous myths about ourselves, about the Jews and Zionism and Palestine. Like all human beings, Zionists have myths too, but at the same time they had a highly developed sense of reality and politics and the world balance of power, to the extent that they were able to mobilize myths in the service of their objectives, which they achieved. To say that their ideas are false or mythical is a form of self-consolation on our part.

As to what impact peace will have on the composition of Israeli society if it ever comes about (which now seems farfetched), I have nothing significant to say. I do detect a continuing general tendency, despite everything, for Israel increasingly to undergo a transformation into a quasi-local Middle Eastern society and for its European character to recede to some extent. There are factions and trends in Israel that welcome this development and that would like the country to become more Mediterranean, more Middle Eastern, to feel itself part of the region. Other factions and trends resent and resist this tendency. I do not know which trend would be reinforced if there were to be peace in the future. A lot would depend on the kind of peace that would come about—whether it would be a peace of graveyards, a peace of slaves, a peace of masters, or a peace of the brave. I have heard discussions between Israelis and Americans in which the Americans tell the Israelis: "Stop pretending that you are Europeans. Look at yourselves, how you act, what you eat and drink, the songs you sing—you have become like others in the region." Some Israelis, especially the young, respond: "Who wants to be European? We want to be part of the region in which we live." Others refuse to acknowledge, even tacitly, that the first trend may be the one that represents the destiny of Israel, a destiny that is inescapable for a thousand and one reasons. Such people may be able to do no more than to hinder the process and delay it for a little while.