

Integrating Israel into the Middle East

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The Jewish state is not an intruder in the Middle East. It is the extension and the representative of one of the most ancient civilizations of this part of the world.

When the political Zionist movement appeared, the Jewish world was divided between those who considered it appropriate to support and join it and those who decided to oppose and combat it. For the former, creating a country that would allow Jews to live without being considered as a barely tolerated minority (in the best cases) was an enormous step toward a much hoped-for national liberation.

For the others, who represent an insignificant minority today, the Jewish state of antiquity was destroyed by divine will, and only the Messiah could restore it. Any human attempt to recreate a Jewish state prior to the Messiah's coming would thus be to defy divine will. It is however important to emphasize that this group does not call into question Jewish legitimacy but believes that the much-awaited Jewish state must be the work of the Messiah. It is therefore a matter of "timing", not of principle.

Whatever the case may be, Israel is now home to the most numerous Jewish population on earth and, according to all the experts, the majority of the Jewish people will be living on their ancestral land by 2030. That is the most outstanding victory of the Zionist project.

A new challenge for Zionism:

If the latter's mission was to integrate into Israel Jews dispersed all over the world, Zionism today must face a challenge of a completely different nature: the integration of the Jewish state, this time into its regional environment. The peace process alone will not lead to this integration. We have seen that some Arab countries were obliged, at one time in their history, to recognize the Jewish state. They did so, accepting it as an accomplished fact and not as a natural and legitimate regional component. Real global and lasting peace will come the day Israel's neighbors recognize that the Jewish people are on this land *de jure*, they are not just there *de facto*. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the fact that the geopolitical stakes of the Jewish state are also those of a region that trying to find its way. The Middle East is seeking its identity.

Pan-Arabism — an ideology that is in ruins since the disappearance of Saddam Hussein's regime and with the weakening of Baathist Syria — did not lead to a project of construction because it did not take into account the diversity of the region, the specificities of its various identities and the communitarian preoccupations of its minorities. The complexity of national construction cannot be limited to the simple use of a single tongue, but also and necessarily reposes on the convergence of a number of political preoccupations and common interests. Its arbitrary conception of the nation —requiring one to be Arab whether one wishes or not, for the simple reason that one uses Arabic — has ignored legitimate national demands in the midst of a Middle East that, in its majority but not exclusively, speaks Arabic.

Like Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism is an exclusivist ideology. By rejecting the modern conception of citizenship, it rejects the idea of non-Muslim civilian participation. Its constitution is immutable (divine right), its program cannot be contested since it originates in the Creator of the world. Absolutist by nature, its discourse excludes non-believers and, consequently, non-Muslims, which explains why the flame of Pan-Arabism was often borne by Christian Arabs, uneasy about the hegemonic designs of political Islam. Finally, the transnational and militant nature of its action rapidly made it clandestine, in relation to existing governments.

In spite of the diplomatic blackmail that some authoritarian Arab regimes use by brandishing the Islamic threat ("It's me or the deluge"), this ideology has no future because it is devoid of a realistic or coherent project. A third and final regional framework is progressively taking shape, with the slow decline of the former two. It is "Middle Easternism". Israel, that represents the region's only non-Arab and non-Muslim minority, must orient its diplomacy in this direction today. Non-Muslim Arabs (Christian Arabs, Druses, etc.) excluded from the pan Islamic club, still have an honorable place within Pan-Arabism. And non-Arab Muslims (Turks, Iranians, Kurds), excluded from the Pan-Arab club can still join pan Islamism. But the Israelis, being neither Arabs nor Muslims, are doubly a minority.

Joining the "club":

The Jewish state is not an intruder in the Middle East. It is the extension and the representative of one of the most ancient civilizations of this part of the world. Everything links Israel to this region: geography, history, culture but also religion and language. The Jewish religion is the primary theological reference and the very foundation of Islam and Oriental Christianity. Hebrew and Arabic are as close to each other as two languages of Latin origin. The contribution of Hebrew civilization to the peoples of this region is undeniable.

To claim that this country is Western is synonymous with denying the legitimacy of its existence: Israel's salvation can only come from its uprooting. The Middle East is the only regional "club" the Jewish state can belong to. To support this membership is tantamount to moving closer to the more moderate elements in its Arab neighborhood and, in the first place, the minorities. To reject this option is to accept isolation and disappear. Israel has no choice.