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Hannah Arendt's 'Councils System' And Israel as a 'state of all its citizens'

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1. Abstract

What is the benefit that the contemporary debate over Israel's national identity might gain from the 20th century's most original political thinker and from her insights about nationalism? In this paper I shall read some of Hannah Arendt's critical thoughts about the nation-state in general, and about the Jewish nation-state, namely the Zionist state of Israel, in particular, and will claim that the debate between a 'Jewish nation-state' and a 'state of all its citizens' in contemporary Israeli politics, is based on some of the paradoxes that Arendt phrased concerning nationalism. Given this background I will suggest that in her seemingly utopian 'council system' the Israeli debate can find a constructive way of political thinking that is neither a 'nation-state' nor a 'state of all its citizens', but a third solution that in contrast with the first two, holds in it a non-utopian, promising future.

2. Arendt, The Nation-State, and Zionism

Hannah Arendt says that in the modern nation-state there lays an inherent paradox: on one hand the state wishes to expand its borders and enlarge its resources, and on the other hand, any attempt to do so, necessarily includes the annexation of people from other nations and therefore threatens the definition of the state as a one-nation-state:

'Of all forms of government and organizations of people, the nation-state is least suited for unlimited growth because the genuine consent at its base cannot be stretched indefinitely, and is only rarely, and with difficulty, won from conquered people. No nation-state could with clear conscience ever try to conquer foreign people.'¹

This so called paradox is actually very simple: every government is based on consent². If consent is erected on a national basis, conquered people from other nations will not let the foreign nation govern them. But this paradox is not relevant only to nation-states that conquer other nations, because in almost every place you try to build up a fence, you will find people from more than one nation on both sides. The classic model of one state with one nation exists only in 12% of the states in the world³ and even in these states one can find small minorities that are not part of the nation.

Another paradox in the expanding nation-state is that its conquests always promote national consciousness in the minds of the occupied people. This awareness of their national identity drives them to rebel against the nation-state and Arendt thought that these people always eventually win and gain national sovereignty⁴. The sovereignty of the nation-state is supposed to preserve the nation but in fact does the opposite - it threatens the survival of the nation⁵. Arendt thought that nationalism is responsible for some of the great tragedies of the modern era because in nation-state the nation takes over the state and gives rights only to those people who belong to the nation⁶. This right-giving would not have been problematic if the state had not have been the only right-giver in modern times. Arendt emphasized that rights are not natural but always political – they are set by the leading forces in society, and these forces in the 20th century are always national. Any giving of rights on a national basis would necessarily create injustice – it leaves stateless people without rights. This is why Arendt thought that: 'Nationalism is essentially the perversion of the state into an instrument of the nation'⁷.

As a few of Arendt's leading researchers claim⁸, she constructed her political ideas in the face of 'the Jewish problem'. She claimed that in the modern era the Jews are the paradigm of stateless people and this is why nationalistic ideas are always problematic for Jews. Arendt thought there ought to be a solution to the political situation of the Jews after the emancipation but in contrast with Hertzl's political Zionism, Jews were in her mind the main victims of the nation-state and therefore it would be absurd if the Jews were to build their own nation-state. She thought that Nationalism is a sickness of modern times but it is not something one can ignore in our time. Therefore, a people can not stay stateless and nationless today. The stateless Jews became a threat to the European idea that on every piece of land there lays a nation that deserves sovereignty.

Arendt was classified several times as a 'self hating Jew'⁹ (the letter Gerschom Sholem sent her after reading 'Eichman in Jerusalem' where he says that she hasn't got any 'Ahavat Israel' [love of Israel], is one example¹⁰) and the reason for this classification is that many understood her objection to the nation-state as an objection to Jewish nationality in general. But Arendt was not an anti-Zionist. Even before the establishment of the state of Israel she said that Zionism has earned such a strong support in the Jewish population that only a small minority which should not be considered seriously remains anti-Zionist¹¹. Arendt realized that Zionism is the way most Jews relate to their Jewish identity and this is exactly why in her mind Zionism is a threat to the future of the Jewish people. In many ways, Zionism was the only serious attempt in modern history to do what Arendt considered to be the most important task of Jewish thought after the emancipation - drawing the Jews back into political history. Arendt's Zionism is in many ways similar to Ahad Ha'am's cultural Zionism¹². The political solution she had in mind was the establishment of a Jewish homeland - not a Jewish nation-state¹³. She thought that the Yishuv in mandatory Palestine was a kind of Jewish homeland – a territory where Jews can flourish culturally and politically without the need for national sovereignty. But political Zionism wanted more than that - The Zionists claimed that anti-Semitism is eternal, and that all non-Jews are potentiality anti-Semites. History, in their minds is therefore the story of pogroms against the Jews. According to Arendt, their nationalistic assumptions, led the political Zionists to what she calls: 'Pan-Semitism [as] the best answer to anti-Semitism'¹⁴. Political Zionism absorbed the expansionist tendencies of the Pan-Slavic and Pan-Germanic movements and this is why Zionism now faces the paradox of the expanding nation state.

3. 'Nation-State' and a 'state of all its citizens' in contemporary Israel

The paradox of the expanding nation state, exactly as Arendt described it, stands at the center of Israel's political debate in the last couple of decades. Almost all of Israel's political parties define Israel as a 'democratic-Jewish-state', and the awareness of what we can call 'Arendt's paradox' and of the way Israel threatens its own existence as a nation-state when it controls other nations, is not the perspective of only the Israeli so called 'left'. The awareness of the threats that Israel is taking upon itself in its conquests led a substantial majority of Israelis to agree on paying a meaningful territorial price in order to maintain Israel as a 'democratic Jewish state'. When I say 'a substantial majority' I don't mean only the 70% that agreed during the last decade on different withdrawal plans. It seems that even the extreme right parties would agree today that a Jewish Nation-State is more important than Jewish rule over 'the entire land of Israel' ('Eretz Israel hashlema' – by the way this expression, of which the right-wing parties were very fond, has disappeared almost totally from Israel's political debate. It seems that the aspiration for 'Eretz Israel hashlema' doesn't seem legitimate nowadays). The debate between right and left in Israeli politics is not on the definition of Israel as a Jewish-nation-state. If there is any political debate, it deals with the price that the parties are willing to pay in order to keep it this way.

Only a small minority objects to the nation-state and suggests that Israel should be 'a state of all its citizens'. Whereas the term nation-state was discussed widely in political science of the 20th century, the term 'a state of all its citizens' does not appear in theoretical discourse and to my knowledge, it is a product of the Israeli debate. In the theoretical discourse there appears the differentiation between 'ethnic nation-state' and 'civil nation state'¹⁵. The civil nation state resembles in some aspects 'a state of all its citizens' but it is not identical to it. In the civil nation state the nation is a sum of its citizen's identity; in the 'state of all its citizens' the state should not influence the identity of the citizens. In order to present the Idea of 'a state of all its citizens' simply, I use the words of Yeshayahu Leibowitz:

"The state has only a practical use, for it is a mechanism (tool, instrument) for action and the essence of its action – compulsion. The state does not 'clarify relations' [...] but rather compels relations [...] it is with this meaning that I said that **the state (any state) is the enemy of mankind.** [...] but as a result of the historical developments (ever since the generation of the tower of Babel) the state has become a necessary evil for the human race and today man has no escape from it"¹⁶

For Leibowitz, a Jewish nation-state is not only a 'necessary evil' like all other states, it is also an absurd term. There is no Jewish state and there can not be any. Judaism is one thing and a state is an essentially different thing. His thoughts about this are somewhat more complex¹⁷, but for the purpose of this paper it is enough to see that in his views a state is not meant to influence the individual's identity, culture or religion in any way. A state is a technical tool that forces its rule on its citizens. Even if most of the supporters of 'Israel as a state of all its citizens' have not actually read Leibowitz, I think they will agree that behind this political idea stands the agreement that the state is a practical tool that should not influence the citizens' identity.

Because of her objection to the nation-state, one might expect to find in Arendt's writing support for the 'state of all its citizens' solution, but the importance Arendt

gives to the Jews' entrance into the political sphere, her appreciation of the Zionist project that accompanies her objection to it, and the great force that she sees in the nation-state, tell a different story. Arendt's writing about Nationalism shows a third way that is not Nationalist but does emphasize the importance of a common state identity, and avoids much of the compulsion that is the basis for any state as we saw in the words of Leibowitz. Arendt calls this third way 'The Councils system' and I would like to claim that this model can benefit the Israeli debate that stretches between a nation-state and a 'state of all its citizens'.

4. The Council System

In a paper written on May 1948 called 'To Save the Jewish Homeland'¹⁸ Arendt suggests along with Judah L. Magnes to establish in Palestine a federative state. A few researchers have already pointed to the connection between Arendt's views on the Jewish nation-state and the bi-national approach of the 'Brith-Shalom' and 'Ihud' Groups¹⁹, but a closer look on other places where she mentions a federative state shows that what she had in mind was much more radical than the idea of the two nations living together in one state. I would like to claim, along with Richard Bernstein²⁰, that this idea of a federative state can be fully understood only when it is read against the background of a longer discussion over a federation of councils, a discussion Arendt makes at the end of the second edition of her book on the origins of totalitarianism²¹ and with more historical analysis in her later book 'On Revolution'²². In the 1948 paper she did not describe in detail what it means to live in a federative state and in the 'Origins' and 'On Revolution' she does not mention the Israeli-Palestinian case, but if we read the one text as background to the other, it will come clear that the utopian ideas that she uses in her later writings can be read as a solution for the Jewish problem and for the political situation in the State of Israel.

The 'council system' is a structure of **voluntary political affiliation** with decreasing levels of social commitment. In this system a man is highly committed to a local community (for example a neighborhood, workers' committee, apartment building, parents in a school, etc.) and this small community is committed to a wider community (for example: a town) which is committed to a even wider community (a district or a state). The level of obligation an individual has towards the wide community will be small but not insignificant. This idea is maybe best illustrated with the kibbutz movement²³. Every kibbutz is a voluntary organization of individuals that unite in order to advance their private interests and to live together. The kibbutz movement is a voluntary organization of different local councils (kibbutzim) that has united in order to advance wider interests. The obligation of each kibbutz member to his kibbutz is very strong and his obligation to the whole movement is much weaker, but still a member of the kibbutz movement is usually immediately recognized as such (you can "see" that he is a "Kibbutznik") but not necessarily as a member of any specific kibbutz, and this clearly means that he does have a kibbutz-movement identity.

Arendt finds an historical precedent to her councils system in the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and she claims that in every uprising since the 19th century this kind of councils were established but they were all oppressed by the totalitarian regime that followed them²⁴. She thought that these revolutionary movements 'failed to understand to what an extent the council system confronted them with an entirely new form of government, with a new public space for freedom'²⁵. Arendt sees the councils as an ideal political reality in which compulsion and sovereignty are kept at a minimal level

that is needed for social order. These councils are 'spaces of freedom'²⁶, meant to institutionalize the revolutionary spirit and save it from the destructive forces of the republic after the revolution ends. The councils are the most natural form of organization and they are formed 'whenever the people have been permitted for a few days, or a few weeks or months, to follow their own political devices without a government (or party program) imposed from above'²⁷. The failure of revolutionaries to see the new possibilities in the council system is what led them to take over their states with traditional forms of power and compulsion, and to build some of the darkest totalitarian regimes.

Arendt talked about the council system explicitly in revolutionary context because she thought that a revolution by definition is a free public space in which citizens take their own fate into their hands and design a form of government **from below**. But what if we take this revolutionary Idea and put it into non-revolutionary context? What kind of national state and national identity will appear if we try to establish a council system without a revolution? The answer to this question is clearly not 'a state of all its citizens'.

The voluntary council system Arendt describes contradicts the idea of 'a state of all its citizens' as I previously described it with the words of Leibowitz. Leibowitz said that the essence of the state is compulsion. Arendt asks if we can imagine a political situation with no compulsion or where the compulsion is minimized to the smallest level. From this perspective 'A state of all its citizens' that is nothing but a formal tool is not possible and not desirable. It is not possible because even if the state 'wanted' to be nothing but a formal tool, it will generate some kind of collective identity, and it is not desirable because in every state there is a need for some kind of trust and social bonding that will enable common institutions. By its own definition as **voluntary**, Arendt's councils system obliges a significant level of identification of the citizens with the bigger framework (state) and therefore the state has to influence the identity of the individual. It can not be just a formal governmental tool. This is why I claim that the Arab-Jewish councils system that Arendt imagined as a basis for a Jewish homeland in Palestine is very different from what the supporters of 'a state of all its citizens' have in mind. This third solution can open new directions to advance the long dead-end feeling in Israel's debate over its national identity.

The Councils system seems completely utopian²⁸. It is hard to imagine a state that will be established this way, and even if this idea can be possible, the councils system will be always at threat from the nation-states around it, and who knows if it can survive with its voluntary nature. But Arendt is far from being a utopian thinker. As a historian and a political thinker ('not a philosopher') it was important to her to establish her criticism of nationality on historical events and that is why she mentions the federative concept when she talks about the Hungarian revolution. She did not do so because she thought that only in the limited time after a revolution, citizens can make 'spaces of freedom' for themselves but because a revolution is the most significant example of political criticism from below. This criticism usually does not offer a full new description of what society should look like, but **revolutionary criticism must show the right horizon toward which reality should be directed**.

Arendt was never too optimistic about the chances of the councils-based state to be realized: 'But if you ask me now what prospect it [the councils system] has of being realized, then I must tell you: Very slight if at all. And yet perhaps, after all – in the wake of the next revolution'²⁹. But what I want to learn from Arendt is that even if the

councils system is not the model of any state in the near future, a society with low compulsion and low sovereignty is a proper direction, and that the advancement towards it is not some utopian non-relevant dream, but an on-going tendency in the present. It might just be that Israel's political solutions will not be realized, neither in a one time revolution, nor in a one time peace treaty. They should be realized step by step, by building trust between Jews and Arabs and by depending on common local interest, on voluntary bridges that can form local communities which might join into bigger communities, which will join into a state-like mega community and even bigger ones in the whole of the Mediterranean. Or as Arendt phrased it: 'the Jewish-Arab conflict would be resolved on the lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighborliness'³⁰.

5. Conclusion

Was Arendt right when she proposed a short time before the establishment of the State of Israel, that a federation of councils is the only way to save the Jewish homeland from the threatening claws of the Jewish nation-state? In the perspective of the 50 years that has passed it is clear that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is saturated with national feelings, Israeli (Zionist) and Palestinian alike, and these feelings make it hard to imagine a federation of the two people. But one can also see the blood-soaked conflict as a kind of historical opportunity. In the State of Israel, in the time after the second Intifad'a, both the Palestinian and the Israeli public are well aware that a single nation-state in its classical model will never exist on this territory. Or in Arendt's words: 'Jews and Arabs could be forced by circumstances to show the world that there are no differences between two people that cannot be bridged'³¹. It might just be that because of the long dead-end feeling in our peace talks, the Israelis and Palestinians will understand that the solutions that were raised so far just won't do.

What I would like to learn from Arendt's councils-system is that the fight against nationalism and the evils that the nation-state is causing in Israel, doesn't have to take the form of building a Palestinian state with a wall between it and Israel, nor the form of reestablishment Israel as a 'state if all its citizens'. The fight against the nation-state can be realized by voluntary communion from below, by free bonding between individuals in order to advance local shared interests.

Notes:

* A previous Hebrew version of this paper was presented in a seminar of the Goldstein-Goren Department of Jewish Thought at Ben-Gurion University, May 2006, and in English in the conference: 'Critical Assessment of the Writings of Hannah Arendt', Dresden, July 2006. The author would like to thank Ellie Dinur for what Arendt used to call "Englishizing my English" and Prof. Daniel J. Lasker for his helpful remarks. © All rights reserved to Avner Dinur. Please respond to: avner@migvan.co.il.

¹ Hannah Arendt, The Origins Of Totalitarianism, New-York, 1966, 126. Hereafter cited as: Arendt, OT 3rd ed.

² For a detailed discussion of consent to the government in Arendt's writings, see: Adi Ophir, 'Power and the Question of Government: On the Political Thought of Hannah Arendt', in: M. Zukerman and I. Zartal, Hannah Arendt: Half a century of controversy, Tel Aviv, 2004, 171 – 198. (Hebrew)

³ Azmi Bshara, 'Between Nation and Nationality: Thoughts about Nationalism', Theory & Critique 6 (1995), 41 (Hebrew).

⁴ Arendt, OT 3rd ed., 134.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, 'Peace or Armistice in the Near East', in: The Jew As Pariah: Jewish Identity And Politics In The Modern Age, New York, 1978, 222. Hereafter cited as: .Arendt, Peace or Armistice.

⁶ Arendt, OT 3rd ed., 230. See: Ronald Beiner, 'Arendt and Nationalism', in: Dana R. Villa (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt, Cambridge, 2000, 51. Hereafter cited as: Beiner, Arendt Nationalism.

⁷ Arendt, OT 3rd ed., 231.

⁸ See: Seyla Benhabib, The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt, Albany, 1996. Hereafter cited as: Benhabib, Reluctant Modernism. And see: Richard J. Bernstein, Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question, Cambridge, 1996. Hereafter cited as: Bernstein, Jewish Question.

⁹ See: Joan Cocks, 'On Nationalism: Frantz Fanon, 1925-1961; Rosa Luxemburg, 1871-1919; and Hannah Arendt, 1906-1975', in: Bonnie Honig (ed.), Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt, Pennsylvania, 1995, 225. Hereafter cited as: Cocks, Nationalism.

¹⁰ Gershom Sholem, Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance (Hebrew: 'Dvarim Bego'), Tel-Aviv, 1975, 92. The whole letter in English, except for the term 'Ahavat Israel' - Hebrew in English letters.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, 'To save the Jewish Homeland', The Jew As Pariah: Jewish Identity And Politics In The Modern Age, New York, 1978, 180. Hereafter cited as: Arendt, Jewish Homeland.

¹² Ron H. Feldman, 'The Jew as Pariah: The Case of Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)', Introduction to: Hannah Arendt, The Jew As Pariah: Jewish Identity And Politics In The Modern Age, New York, 1978, 35. It might be ironic that her emphasis on the need for political Jewish thinking is what drove her away from 'political Zionism' towards cultural Zionism.

¹³ Beiner, Arendt Nationalism, 49.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, 'Zionism Reconsidered', The Jew As Pariah: Jewish Identity And Politics In The Modern Age, New York, 1978, 151.

¹⁵ Beiner, Arendt Nationalism, 50.

¹⁶ Yesha'yahu Leibowitz, Just Wanted to Ask You, Prof. Leibowitz: Letters to Yesha'yahu Leibowitz and from him, Jerusalem, 1999. (Hebrew), 371-2.

¹⁷ Leibowitz's Ideas seems problematic, if not contradictory, because he is clearly against what is usually referred to as Zionism's main goal, namely the establishment of a Jewish nation-state, but he does say that he was Zionist from a very young age, and that although he objects to the policy of the state of Israel, he does see its establishment as a positive development. From this perspective his approach to Zionism is somewhat similar to Arendt's rejection/attraction relations with the Zionist idea.

¹⁸ Arendt, Jewish Homeland, 191.

¹⁹ Raluca Munteanu Eddon, 'Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt and the Paradox of 'Non-Nationalist' Nationalism', Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 12:1 (2003), 55-68.

Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, 'Bi-Nationalism and Jewish Identity: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Palestine', in: Aschheim, Steven E. (ed.), Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem, Berkeley & London, 2001, pp. 165 – 180. Bernstein even mentions a short correspondence between Arendt and

20 Magnes, in which Magnes was convincing her to participate actively in politics in favor of the
21 'Ihud' (Bernstein, Jewish Question, 119 – 121).
Bernstein, Jewish Question, Ch. 6.

21 This epilogue first appeared as an article in the *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Feb., 1958) ,
pp. 5-43. Arendt didn't include the epilogue in the third addition of OT because 'it has become
obsolete in many details' (Arendt, OT 3rd ed., Viii). However this should not be seen as a retreat
form the council system idea because she used it again in her 'On Revolution'.

22 Hannah Arendt, On Revolution, New York, 1965. see especially: pp. 252 – 285. Hereafter cited
as: Arendt, On Revolution,

23 Arendt does not mention the Kibbutz movement in her discussion of the council system but in
other places she shows appreciation for the idea and the practice of the Kibbutz (one example:
Arendt, Jewish Homeland, 185.) and it is reasonable to think that her utopian vision was partly
shaped by what she knew about the Kibbutzim.

24 Arendt, OT 2nd ed., 500, Arendt, On Revolution, 252.

25 Arendt, On Revolution, 253.

26 Arendt, On Revolution, 268.

27 Arendt, OT 2nd ed., 497. Also see: Bernstein, Jewish Question, 127.

28 Sitton mentions a few critics who attacked her claiming that the council system is the weakest
point in her political thinking. See: John F. Sitton, 'Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council
Democracy',
Polity 20: 1 (1987), 80. Arendt herself didn't regard her thinking to be very practical in general:
'There are other people who are primarily interested in doing something. I am not. I can very
well live without doing anything. But I cannot live without trying at least to understand
whatever happens'. (Recovery of the Public world, 303, sited in: Bernstein, Jewish Question,
122).

29 Arendt, Crisis of the Republic, 233. Sited in: Bernstein, Jewish Question, 132.

30 Arendt, Jewish Homeland, 191.

31 Arendt, Jewish Homeland, 186.