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BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR NEGOTIATION

Guided by Thought and Responsibility for the Future

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This paper builds on the perspective that chronic conflicts—where political and cultural dimensions are inseparable, appear intractable, and produce deep divisions not only in opinion and stance but also in the very identities of opposing communities—cannot have their intensity reduced through superficial measures alone. Efforts limited to security-focused or purely economic negotiations are insufficient. From a conflict transformation standpoint, political negotiation must be embedded within a broader framework that considers the intellectual, cultural, and historical contexts of the conflict. Moreover, it requires the generation of new narratives and conceptualizations that are simultaneously comprehensive, critical, bold, and grounded in reality, offering pathways not merely for immediate containment but for sustainable transformation across generations.

This approach is particularly relevant for Lebanon today, after decades marked by wars, repeated Israeli occupations, and persistent political fragmentation. Lebanese society bears deep scars where identity, memory, and political affiliation are profoundly intertwined with experiences of conflict. In this context, negotiation limited to technical security arrangements or economic incentives risks reproducing the status quo, perpetuating divisions rather than addressing their root causes. A transformative framework, attentive to history, culture, and the social fabric, is therefore essential to envisioning durable reconciliation and laying the groundwork for a more cohesive, resilient society capable of navigating both internal and external pressures.

Efforts to engage systematically with the history, societal structures, and state institutions of the “other” have historically been overshadowed in Lebanon by inherited narratives, collective memory, and political rhetoric. This deficit of rigorous, methodical inquiry has constrained the capacity to imagine alternative trajectories for successive generations—paths that move beyond recurring cycles of war and occupation or that disentangle the regionalized dimensions of the conflict from Lebanon’s internal socio-political fissures. In the absence of a framework that fosters critical, historically grounded, and culturally attuned analysis of both the Lebanese and Israeli contexts, the prospects for substantive conflict transformation—and for cultivating intergenerational avenues that transcend entrenched patterns of violence—remain profoundly circumscribed.

For this reason, this paper is organized around several analytical axes. The first examines the concept of enmity—whether between states or societies—and considers

how it should be approached in light of our obligations to future generations, as well as the imperative for the Lebanese national narrative to be anchored in principles of justice, freedom, and political accountability, rather than perpetuating inherited divisions and conflictual rhetoric.

Rethinking the Concept of Enmity in a Postcolonial Context

The concept of enmity between states is not a fixed or permanent category in the history of international relations. Rather, it is a historically contingent and politically constructed relationship that evolves according to changing interests, power structures, and ideological contexts. Enmity is partly shaped by political narratives and identities..

The phenomenon becomes more complex in postcolonial states, which inherited borders, institutions, and geopolitical alignments largely produced during the colonial period, and where the memory of colonial domination deeply shapes national narratives. In such contexts, enmity in the postcolonies tends to be more historically saturated and politically complex than in classical interstate rivalries.

These countries evolve within an international order in which asymmetries of power persist despite formal sovereignty. This produces a persistent perception that certain external actors represent not merely competitors but continuations of imperial influence. Consequently, enmity may acquire a moral or historical dimension rather than being framed solely in strategic terms.

Political identities in many postcolonies emerged through anti-colonial struggles, which produced powerful symbolic oppositions—colonizer versus colonized, domination versus liberation. Even after independence, these historical narratives often remain active in political discourse and can frame contemporary international conflicts.

Moreover, postcolonial societies frequently experience overlapping layers of identity formation—national, religious, ethnic, and civilizational. Because these identities were themselves reshaped by colonial rule, enmity between states often intersects with internal struggles over identity and legitimacy.

Building on this framework, the Arab–Israeli conflict offers a particularly revealing case of how enmity in postcolonial contexts becomes historically layered and symbolically charged. Yet this context requires a more attentive analysis of the intersection between three historical dynamics: the legacy of the Jewish Question in Europe, the colonial condition in the Arab world, and the long-standing ethno-religious diversity of the Near East.

The hostility that emerged cannot be reduced to a conventional interstate rivalry over territory or security. Rather, it developed at the point where different historical experiences converged. On the one hand, the Zionist project was partly shaped by the European Jewish experience—the so-called Jewish Question—which sought a political solution to the persistent insecurity and marginalization of Jewish communities in Europe. On the other hand, Arab societies encountered the emergence of Israel within a regional context marked by colonial domination, mandates, and the struggle for national independence.

This convergence produced a situation in which two historical trajectories—the search for Jewish national self-determination and the anti-colonial consciousness of Arab societies—came to be interpreted through incompatible narratives. What appeared to many Zionists as a project of national liberation was perceived in the Arab world through the lens of colonial intrusion, especially given the broader geopolitical environment of the late imperial period.

A further layer of complexity arises from the ethno-religious pluralism that historically characterized the Near East. Jewish communities had long existed throughout the region alongside Muslims, Christians, and other groups within a variety of political frameworks, including the Ottoman imperial order. The transformation of these plural social landscapes into modern nation-states, often under colonial influence, profoundly altered the conditions of coexistence and political belonging.

The ethno-religious diversity of the Near East, particularly within the former Ottoman space, was historically organized according to principles very different from those that later governed the nation-state system that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Under the Ottoman imperial order, diversity was structured primarily through confessional communities rather than national identities, allowing multiple religious groups to coexist within a shared political framework.

The gradual dissolution of this imperial arrangement and the rise of the nation-state profoundly transformed these patterns of coexistence. As religious communities were increasingly reinterpreted as national or political collectivities, older forms of pluralism were destabilized. Understanding this transition—from an imperial system of confessional pluralism to modern national and sectarian political orders—helps illuminate many of the tensions that later emerged in both the Balkans and the modern Middle East..

Under the Ottoman millet system, social diversity was organized primarily along religious lines rather than ethnic or national ones. Communities such as Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Armenians, and Jews were recognized as distinct corporate bodies (millets) with their own religious authorities, courts, and internal regulations.

This system did not eliminate hierarchy—Muslims held political primacy—but it allowed a plural imperial order in which multiple confessional communities coexisted within the same political framework. Identity was therefore often confessional and communal rather than national. A Greek-speaking Orthodox Christian in Anatolia and one in the Balkans could belong to the same millet even if they lived far apart and spoke different languages.

In the nineteenth century, however, the spread of European nationalism profoundly altered this structure. In the Balkans, religious communities gradually became national communities. The Orthodox millet, for example, fragmented into Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Romanian national movements. Thus, what had once been a religious administrative category became the basis for modern national identities. This transformation often produced intense conflicts, culminating in population exchanges, ethnic cleansing, and the creation of nation-states seeking greater demographic homogeneity. The Balkan experience therefore represents a shift from imperial pluralism to national homogenization.

In the Arab provinces of the former empire, the transformation followed different trajectories. In Lebanon, diversity was not converted into competing national identities in the same way as in the Balkans. Instead, the various religious communities—Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shiʿa Muslims, Druze, and others—became institutionalized within the structure of the state itself.

The modern Lebanese political system thus transformed the earlier confessional diversity into a sectarian political order, where representation and power are distributed among communities. Rather than dissolving communal identities in a unified nation, the state formally incorporated them into its constitutional architecture.

In contrast, states such as Syria and Iraq largely attempted to construct centralized national identities that downplayed or denied internal ethnic and sectarian diversity. Arab nationalism, particularly

during the twentieth century, promoted the idea of a unified Arab nation that transcended communal distinctions.

However, these societies contained significant religious and ethnic pluralism: Sunnis, Shiʿa, Alawites, Christians, Kurds, and others. While the official ideology often suppressed recognition of these divisions, they persisted beneath the surface. In periods of political crisis—especially during state collapse or civil war—these latent divisions sometimes re-emerged in violent forms of sectarianization.

Across the former Ottoman world, the transition from empire to nation-state therefore generated different political outcomes. In the Balkans, the transformation of millets into nations produced ethnically defined states. In Lebanon, confessional diversity became institutionalized in a sectarian political system. In Syria and Iraq, the state attempted to suppress diversity under a unified national ideology, though this sometimes masked deep internal fractures.

These divergent trajectories illustrate how the collapse of the Ottoman imperial framework did not eliminate pluralism but rather reconfigured it, often in ways that continue to shape political tensions throughout the region.

Israel can be most clearly understood not as the product of a single historical cause, but as the intersection of three major historical processes: the European Jewish question, the disintegration of the Ottoman imperial order, and the era of Western colonial dominance in the Middle East.

First, the Jewish question in Europe forms the sociological and political background of Zionism. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European Jews confronted a paradoxical situation: formal emancipation within modern nation-states accompanied by persistent anti-Semitism, periodic persecution, and ultimately catastrophic violence culminating in the genocide of European Jewry during the Holocaust. Zionism emerged within this context as one among several proposed solutions to the Jewish condition—others including assimilation, socialism, or diaspora nationalism. The project of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine therefore cannot be detached from the European crisis of minority integration and the search for political security by Jewish communities.

Second, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire created the geopolitical vacuum within which the Zionist project could take territorial form. For centuries, Palestine had been integrated into the imperial administrative and social structures of the Ottoman Empire. Its collapse during and after the World War I dismantled this imperial framework and opened the region to new forms of political reorganization. The replacement of Ottoman rule by the British Mandate—formalized through the Balfour Declaration and the subsequent mandate system—created institutional conditions that facilitated large-scale Jewish immigration and the gradual consolidation of Zionist political structures.

Third, these developments unfolded within the broader age of colonial expansion and European dominance in the Middle East. The post-Ottoman order was largely shaped by imperial powers such as United Kingdom and France, whose strategic and political calculations deeply influenced the fate of the region. Within this context, the Zionist project appeared—particularly from the perspective of Arab populations—as a form of settler implantation supported, directly or indirectly, by Western geopolitical power. This perception contributed decisively to the emergence of Arab resistance and to the framing of the conflict as part of the broader anti-colonial struggles that marked the twentieth-century Middle East.

Understanding Israel as the intersection of these three dynamics allows for a more historically grounded interpretation of the conflict. The work of Maxime Rodinson remains one of the most intellectually rigorous attempts to situate the Arab-Israeli conflict within a broader historical and sociological framework rather than within purely ideological narratives. In his influential book Israel

et le refus arabe (1968), Rodinson proposed an interpretation that still provides an indispensable analytical lens for understanding both Israel and the enduring conflict surrounding it. Rodinson's central contribution was to detach the debate from moralistic or theological claims and instead place it within the dynamics of modern nationalism and colonial expansion. In his view, the creation of Israel could be understood as a form of settler colonialism—not in the sense of classical imperial administration, but as the transplantation of a European society into a territory already inhabited by another population. Zionism, in this interpretation, was a modern nationalist movement emerging from European Jewish history that sought territorial realization in Palestine. Its success was made possible by the geopolitical context of European imperial power and by the collapse of Ottoman sovereignty in the region.

This framework allowed Rodinson to reinterpret what he called the Arab refusal." Rather than attributing the rejection of Israel to irrational hostility or inherent anti-Semitism, he treated it as a historically intelligible reaction. For the Arab populations of Palestine and the surrounding region, the establishment of a Jewish state appeared as the settlement of foreigners on land inhabited and culturally Arabized for centuries. The resistance that followed was therefore comparable to other cases of indigenous opposition to settler projects. Rodinson's argument was not a moral condemnation but an attempt at sociological intelligibility.

Equally important was his characterization of the conflict as a clash between two modern national movements. On the one hand stood Zionism, a nationalism forged in the crucible of European persecution and political modernity; on the other stood Arab nationalism, which emerged in response to the decline of the Ottoman order and the expansion of European imperial influence in the Middle East. For Rodinson, the tragedy of the conflict lay precisely in the legitimacy that each side could claim within the logic of modern nationalism. Two projects of self-determination had come to occupy the same territory.

Rodinson also insisted on a process of de-mythologization. He rejected the argument that biblical or ancient historical ties could serve as a sufficient political foundation for modern territorial sovereignty. In doing so, he attempted to separate religious symbolism from modern political legitimacy. For him, the question of Israel could only be understood through the historical conditions of the twentieth century rather than through claims rooted in antiquity.

More than half a century later, Rodinson's analysis retains remarkable relevance. The concept of settler colonialism, once controversial, has become a major interpretive paradigm in contemporary scholarship on Israel-Palestine. Many historians and political theorists now employ frameworks strikingly similar to Rodinson's to analyze land, demography, and state formation in the region.

At the same time, political developments have complicated the notion of "Arab refusal." The peace treaties between Israel and Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), followed by the Abraham Accords, demonstrate that several Arab governments have moved toward pragmatic accommodation with Israel. Yet at the level of public opinion and political discourse across much of the region, the conflict is still frequently interpreted through a lens close to Rodinson's colonial diagnosis.

Another aspect of Rodinson's thought that appears prescient today concerns the internal dynamics of Israeli society. He suggested that a state born under conditions of permanent insecurity could develop a "besieged fortress" mentality, fostering strong militarization and the political ascendancy of security-oriented and nationalist currents. Contemporary debates about Israeli politics, the centrality of the military, and the expansion of right-wing movements often echo these early observations.

Finally, Rodinson envisioned the possibility—however distant—of a binational political framework in which Jews and Arabs might coexist within a shared political structure in the Levant. While the two-state solution has long dominated diplomatic discourse, the growing fragmentation of territory and

sovereignty has revived discussions about various forms of a one-state or binational arrangement. In this sense, Rodinson's reflections continue to inform current debates about the long-term political future of the region.

Rodinson's enduring relevance lies less in any single conclusion than in his method. By combining historical sociology, Marxist analysis, and intellectual independence, he sought to understand the conflict without submitting to the myths or moral simplifications of either side. For scholars and observers trying to grasp the deeper structures of the Arab-Israeli conflict, his work remains not merely a historical artifact but a continuing point of departure.

In contrast to the approach taken by Rodinson, one finds, on the one hand, a narrative that seeks to deny any settler-colonial characteristic in the State of Israel, and on the other hand, a narrative that seeks to entirely absolve the Arabs of any reason to approach the conflict with Israel through the lens of the Jewish question and the trajectory this question followed—from the rise of modern antisemitism to radical, genocidal antisemitism culminating in the Nazi Holocaust.

Maxime Rodinson approaches the Arab-Israeli conflict primarily through the lens of settler-colonialism. He situates the creation of Israel within a historical trajectory that links the Jewish question, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, and European colonial intervention.

Post-Zionist historians, emerging in Israel in the 1980s and 1990s, adopt a different methodological and epistemological stance. Scholars such as Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, and Avi Shlaim re-examine archival sources and Israeli state records to challenge dominant nationalist narratives. Unlike Rodinson, whose perspective is shaped by anti-colonial critique from outside the Israeli historiographical tradition, post-Zionist historians operate within the Israeli historical corpus to question the moral and political legitimacy of the Zionist project, its treatment of Palestinian populations, and the representation of historical events such as the 1948 Nakbah.Their focus is less on long-term colonial structures and more on specific historical events, state policies, and the ethical implications of nationalist decision-making.

While Rodinson emphasizes the macro-structural causes of conflict, highlighting Israel as a product of settler-colonial dynamics and European imperialism, post-Zionist historians often interrogate the micro-political choices of leaders and military authorities, revealing how actions taken during wars of independence and state formation produced dispossession, forced migration, and systemic inequality. Rodinson's lens is internationalist and structural, whereas post-Zionists adopt a critical historiographical lens that questions the official national narrative, emphasizing moral accountability, archival evidence, and ethical evaluation of decisions on the ground.

Furthermore, Rodinson maintains a strong focus on Arab responses and the broader regional context, framing the conflict within inter-Arab political and social structures. In contrast, post-Zionist historians often center the analysis on Israeli agency and internal decision-making, scrutinizing the ethical and political dimensions of the Zionist state while still recognizing Palestinian experiences.

In sum, Rodinson's work offers a structural, anti-colonial interpretation of Israel as a settler-colonial state, while post-Zionist historians provide a critical, archival-based account that emphasizes ethical accountability and the contingency of historical events. Together, these perspectives illuminate the conflict both as a product of broader colonial dynamics and as a series of morally charged political choices, highlighting the interplay between structure, agency, and historiographical framing.

For Rodinson, Israel is fundamentally a colonial project: a settler state whose existence reshapes regional demographics, power structures, and social relations. The conflict, therefore, is analyzed structurally, emphasizing territorial domination, dispossession, and the imposition of an external order on indigenous populations. Rodinson's framework foregrounds historical causality and material

conditions: the Arab response, in his view, is partially determined by Israel's colonial character and the broader legacies of European imperialism.

Michael Walzer, in contrast, approaches liberation and conflict from a moral and ethical perspective, particularly in "The Paradox of Liberation" (2015). While he does not focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict specifically, his framework illuminates dimensions that Rodinson largely leaves implicit. Walzer identifies a central tension inherent in liberation movements: the very act of pursuing freedom often generates moral and political dilemmas, producing outcomes that may contradict the ideals of the struggle itself. For Walzer, liberation is paradoxical: a movement aiming to free a people from oppression can inadvertently perpetuate injustice, either against its enemies, its own population, or future generations. The paradox highlights the ethical constraints and dilemmas intrinsic to political action, suggesting that the moral evaluation of conflicts cannot rely solely on structural or historical accounts.

Applied to the Arab-Israeli context, Walzer's lens shifts the analytical focus from structural domination to the ethical and political choices of actors on both sides. While Rodinson emphasizes Israel as a settler-colonial entity and frames Arab resistance as a reaction to dispossession, Walzer would stress that even liberation movements—whether Arab nationalist, socialist, or Islamist—face profound dilemmas regarding the use of violence, the treatment of civilians, and the reconciliation of political goals with moral obligations. The paradox emerges in the recognition that strategies for liberation can produce unintended consequences, ethical compromises, or cycles of new oppression, complicating simplistic binaries of oppressor and oppressed.

In sum, Rodinson and Walzer offer complementary but distinct analytical lenses. Rodinson's framework privileges structural and historical causality, interpreting the conflict as a product of settler-colonial dynamics. Walzer, by contrast, foregrounds the moral paradoxes of liberation, emphasizing that struggles for freedom are never ethically neutral and are inevitably entangled with dilemmas of justice and responsibility. Together, the two perspectives illuminate the Arab-Israeli conflict as both a historically grounded colonial encounter and a morally complex struggle for liberation.

Despite the significance of the comparisons he advances—between the transformation within Israel from the hegemony of Labor Zionism to the ascendancy of the far-right Zionist camp, accompanied by the resurgence of religious motifs rooted in biblical references, and parallel developments such as the decline of the Indian National Congress and the rise of Hindutva in India, as well as related ideological shifts in several Muslim-majority societies—Michael Walzer's analysis remains limited. Its principal weakness lies in its relative silence regarding the settler-colonial character of Israel's formation. By largely accepting the narrative of Israel's national emancipation from British Empire rule as a straightforward story of anti-colonial independence, his argument risks reproducing a framework that passes over the colonial dimension of Zionist settlement without sustained critical scrutiny. Scholars working within the field of settler colonial studies—most notably Patrick Wolfe—have emphasized that settler colonialism constitutes not merely an episode but a structural form of domination, "a structure rather than an event," which calls for a different analytical vocabulary than that typically applied to classical decolonization.

For this reason, the present paper argues that any attempt to understand how the history of Zionism and of the Jewish community in Palestine prior to the establishment of the state—and subsequently the history of Israel itself—is interpreted, without engaging with the broader historical transformations of the

Jewish question in Europe, remains analytically incomplete. As emphasized by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin, the Jewish question cannot be detached from the intellectual and political crises of modern Europe, including nationalism, statelessness, and the collapse of imperial orders. At the same time, the historical experiences of Jewish communities in Arab and Islamic societies—often examined by historians such as Albert Hourani—must also be incorporated into the analysis. Without situating Zionism at the intersection of these multiple historical trajectories, interpretations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict risk remaining partial and conceptually constrained.

Yet acknowledging these historical complexities does not eliminate the structural distinction between historically rooted civic societies and societies whose formation has been linked to the model of settler colonialism, a distinction widely discussed in the work of scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Rogers Brubaker. Recognizing this difference is analytically necessary; however, it does not entail that every settler society must be approached on the presumption of its inevitable disappearance. Rather, the challenge lies in understanding how such societies evolve historically, how they transform their institutional and ideological foundations, and under what conditions they may move beyond the original logics of settler domination toward new political arrangements.

It is worth pausing, however, to consider a particularly intriguing and visionary manifesto, *Transient Peace: Towards an Arab Solution to the Jewish Question*, byJoseph Samaha —one of the most significant intellectual interventions to emerge within Arab thought during a century marked by conflict. Published in the early 1990s, the work appeared just prior to the announcement of the Oslo Accords, yet within a political atmosphere already shaped by the diplomatic openings initiated at the Madrid Conference of 1991. Revisiting this book today proves valuable for several reasons.

First, Joseph Samaha, who expected the Madrid peace process to be only a transient phase, challenges the common Arab refrain that “Palestine is the central Arab cause.” This is not an attempt to marginalize or exclude the Palestinian question from the “Arab core,” or to assume that the Arab core can simply turn away from it to focus on other matters. On the contrary: for Samaha, there can be no democracy or development without confronting the ongoing aggression imposed on the region and its peoples.

For him, the Palestinian question is not “central” because “the primary and central cause for the Arabs is the gradual march toward Arab unity.” This comes after integrating the unification process with a persistent insistence on resuming a project of civilizational renaissance, and after attempting—though with no clear practical means— to balance a positive appraisal of the Nasser era with the need to reproduce the nationalist-unification idea imbued with genuine democratic content.

While it is difficult to consider Samaha’s proposals entirely contemporary, the question of their relevance continually arises at each juncture in this text, which combines intellectual sharpness and clarity with boldness in foresight and imagination. It is also preferable to consider Transient Peace relatively independently of the evolution of Samaha’s later consciousness and positions.

For Samaha, Israel represents “the striking arm of Western colonialism,” and this characterization remains unchanged regardless of any settlement process. While the Western powers supporting it may

have shifted, its overall nature as a striking arm of the West has not. Consequently, “the contradiction between the Arab nation and Israel is irreconcilable except by the victory of one side.” Therefore, “the conflict will continue, its forms evolving, adapting, and transforming.” Ceasefires may occur, but “there is no space for coexistence between two competing visions of the region.”

The relationship is zero-sum: one side gains strength as the other weakens. It is either Arab nationalist renaissance or the dual colonial-Zionist project to resolve the Jewish question. Yet one might question here the supposed common ground among nationalist projects. On this point, Samaha invokes Martin Buber’s notion of achieving the nationalist cause alongside universal human concerns.

According to Buber, as summarized by Samaha, “the human objective of the Zionist movement cannot be realized without establishing a national solution for the Palestinian people.” This, in Samaha’s view, separates the Palestinian question from its Arab and colonial context. Remarkably, Samaha adapts Buber’s idea, arguing that achieving the human objective of Arab nationalism cannot occur without providing a “citizenship-based” solution to the Jewish question. The late journalist framed it thus: “This is the great historical and civilizational task facing the Arab nation: is there a possibility to rise, and acquire the political, economic, military, and cultural power necessary to offer a solution—not to the Palestinian question, nor to the Israeli question, but to the Jewish question?”

This requires Arabs to recognize that the primary center of contemporary Jewish life is now Israel, without assuming that Israel’s existence resolves the diaspora’s problems. Samaha acknowledges that hostility to Zionism has sharply decreased among Jews, as a result of the failure of non-Zionist solutions to the Jewish question.

The bourgeois democratic solution (granting all rights to Jews as individual citizens, not as a collective) faltered as early as the Dreyfus Affair, while the socialist solution was destroyed by Stalinism, which “recycled the heritage of the communist debate against Zionism only to sometimes imbue it with repulsive antisemitic content,” as Samaha writes. These two failures—the Western bourgeois and the Soviet—combined with the Nazi genocidal “final solution,” fueled strong momentum in favor of the Zionist solution, embraced by the West, enabling it to impose a hegemonic reality over both Jews and Judaism.

The endorsement of the Zionist solution involved considerable Western cunning: “Every Israeli persecution of Palestinians and Arabs, in favor of the West, contributes to exonerating this West from persecuting Jews,” and “the behavior of some Jews, motivated by bitter memory and assuming Arabs have no memory, alleviates the burden on Western memory,” Samaha notes, while also theorizing on the Israeli right and left. He observes: “The Israeli right may be more dangerous for Palestinians, but the left is, certainly, more dangerous for Arabs.”

The right, justifying the idea of living in a besieged fortress, presupposes the continuation of an Arab siege, whereas the Zionist left bets on the siege’s collapse. Hence, Samaha does not hesitate to claim that the right’s mirror reflects “a far more accurate image of the Arab than the left’s.” According to the Israeli right, the Arab is a patriotic figure, aware and determined to build his independent destiny, while according to the Israeli left, the Arab is merely labor and capital.

Can Israel be seen as a product of the Holocaust? Samaha tends to agree, though this contrasts with the post-Zionist historian Tom Segev, who argues that the Zionist project fundamentally changed as a result of the Holocaust, which claimed the lives of most Jews whom the movement had previously urged to migrate to Palestine. A consequence was that Zionism now required what it had formerly disdained, including the migration of Jews from Arab and Islamic countries, Sephardim and Mizrahim, toward the land.

Segev's exceptional contribution, in The Seventh Million (2000), shows how Israel for over a decade and a half largely ignored the Holocaust, prioritizing the Zionist success narrative of 1948, even treating survivors with contempt, either for resisting Zionist calls or as burdens on the young state. In both cases, Segev challenges Arab perceptions, including Samaha's, which remained bound to an Arab nationalist framework.

At the same time, Samaha recognizes the price paid by Ashkenazi Zionism in integrating regional Jews. He notes: "Most current Israeli residents are Arab Jews, and the nation that lost them should strive to recover them." He continues: "The prodigal son has gone far, yet tolerance, from a position of strength, can bring him back." Thus, the Arab solution to the Jewish question, based on integrating Jews as individuals living within a unified Arab region rather than as a state, is part of a broader long-term vision: Arab nationalism can only renew itself through democratic treatment of religious and ethnic minorities. This, of course, is a long-term project, also touching the very concept of minorities.

Today, it is difficult to engage with a text so focused on Arab nationalism and the renewal of the unification project in the way that was possible when Samaha wrote. At the time, Arab nationalism had suffered multiple defeats and disasters, the Iranian influence had not yet reached its current regional scope post-U.S. occupation of Iraq, and Samaha's eventual alignment with Iran had strengthened after the 2006 July War. At the same time, Samaha's insistence on restoring Arab nationalist ideas intertwined with a civilizational renaissance reflects his deeply negative stance toward Islamic movements, noting that "the counter-forces produced by the Arab body, at its current level of awareness, are Islamic. These cannot offer a serious program of salvation beyond speaking of the 'military annihilation' of the enemy. They prepare the psyche for a decisive confrontation where one side achieves final victory. This is impossible." He stresses that "Israel's nuclear power preempts the Islamic path as a means to resolve the conflict."

"Peace leads to the abyss. Party-based Islam drives resistance into a collision with a wall." This was Samaha's conclusion, linking it to the need to restore Arab nationalism against both surrenderists and Islamists.

For decades, Lebanese political discourse has been shaped by slogans and narratives about the country's stance toward Israel. Yet these narratives have largely functioned to reinforce and multiply local "political myths," often circulated politely across sectarian boundaries: you indulge my myth, I indulge yours.

Demythologizing Lebanese Narratives of Conflict and Peace

The history of the Lebanese–Israeli conflict has been accompanied by the proliferation of powerful narratives that have shaped public perception, political mobilization, and collective memory in Lebanon. Over decades of wars, occupations, resistance movements, and diplomatic deadlocks, these narratives have often crystallized into what may be described as political myths—frameworks of interpretation that organize historical experience but also simplify, moralize, and occasionally obscure the complexity of events. As scholars of nationalism and collective memory such as Benedict Anderson and Jan Assmann have emphasized, national communities are sustained not only by institutions but also by narratives that shape how societies remember conflict and imagine their political future.

In Lebanon, narratives surrounding both war and peace have developed within a context marked by repeated armed confrontations with Israel, prolonged Israeli occupations of Lebanese territory, and the entanglement of the Arab–Israeli conflict with Lebanon's own internal divisions. These circumstances have fostered competing interpretive frameworks that often function less as analytical tools than as identity-forming discourses. As a result, debates over war, resistance, negotiation, and peace have frequently been conducted within symbolic registers that privilege moral affirmation over critical inquiry. This paper proposes to examine these narratives through a process of demythologization, drawing inspiration from approaches in intellectual history and critical theory that seek to distinguish historical analysis from ideological myth-making. The concept of demythologization—famously associated with Rudolf Bultmann—is here employed in a broader political and sociological sense: not to dismiss collective narratives altogether, but to interrogate the assumptions, silences, and simplifications through which they operate. In the field of conflict studies, similar efforts have been pursued by scholars such as John Paul Lederach, who stress that sustainable peace requires critical engagement with the narratives that structure antagonistic identities.

Applying this perspective to the Lebanese case is particularly urgent today. After decades of conflict, Lebanese society remains deeply divided over the meaning of war, the legitimacy of armed resistance, and the conditions under which peace could become conceivable. These disagreements are not merely strategic or political; they are embedded in competing historical narratives that structure collective memory and national identity. As long as these narratives remain insulated from critical examination, they risk perpetuating a cycle in which the past continues to dictate the limits of the imaginable future.

A central myth frames the Lebanese model of Islamic-Christian coexistence as fundamentally opposed to the Israeli model, which transforms religion into a foundation for nationalism. This is not a product of principled resistance; rather, it reflects the influence of the Lebanese mercantilist ideologue Michel Chiha, who historicized the contrast between Lebanese and Israeli models as a mythical economic rivalry stretching back millennia—from Phoenician to Jewish merchants. Meanwhile, proponents of Lebanese nationalism sought to mythologize a "friendly duality" between the cedar-exporting homeland and the kingdom that imported the wood for the Temple.

This mythical construction necessitated restricting Lebanese identity to a rigid Islamic-Christian binary, erasing the Jewish component from collective memory—beginning with the Jewish quarter of Beirut. Conversely, other perspectives, often marginalized, recognize that what historically differentiated Lebanon and Israel from the rest of the region is their "non-Islamic" characteristics. Yet rather than analyzing this through historical or structural realities—where both Christians and Jews were subject to dhimmi regulations under successive Islamic regimes, and where intra-Book disputes often trumped tensions with Muslim communities, occasionally mediated through Muslim rulers—a symbolic narrative was created: "Ahiram and Solomon," evoking royal convergence in a distant past, rather than a historically grounded comparative lens examining Lebanese and Israeli societal models.

Since the Taif Agreement, Lebanon's parliamentary system has institutionalized sectarian parity between Muslims and Christians. But what would happen if Lebanese Jews had the right to political representation? Theoretically, they should at least be eligible for the "minorities" seat in Beirut, representing smaller communities in a country without a clear majority. Were this possible, the current parity model, based on an even division between Muslims and Christians, would require reevaluation.

The so-called "Islamic-Christian dialogue" in Lebanon operates largely as rhetorical pleasantries among clerics, politicians, intellectuals, and activists. It presupposes that Islam and Christianity share a common ground, often defining Judaism only in relation to these two. Some attention has recently emerged regarding the preservation of Jewish urban heritage, yet Lebanon remains one of the Arab states most eager to erase its Jewish past, despite a history in which Beirut accommodated Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike.

Although much has been said about the contrast between Lebanon's coexistence model and Israel's exclusionary-nationalist model, a methodical, comparative historical study of the two similarly sized polities remains largely taboo. Instead, a crude narrative dominates: Lebanon as a "brilliantly" sectarian, pluralist state versus Israel as a religious-nationalist state. This simplification omits the Jewish component from Lebanon's pluralism, preventing a nuanced comparative analysis.

Another persistent myth holds that "Lebanon will be the last to sign" peace with Israel. While not an outright rejection, it reassures Lebanese audiences that their country will not be first. Yet most Arab states have either signed or approached agreements; the "last to sign" narrative no longer functions as a deferral mechanism. It also presumes a limited Israeli penetration into Lebanon's societal contradictions, ignoring evidence to the contrary.

In reality, Lebanese society is deeply divided over Israel and potential peace with it. Denial of this division achieves nothing. Assertions of a unified Lebanese stance on Israel are as hollow as claims about the aesthetics of coexistence. A society so divided—not only over conflict management but over fundamental perceptions of Israel—cannot negotiate coherently. Particularly after defeat, compounded by political obstinacy, as exemplified by the ceasefire that halted systematic destruction a year ago: the agreement required the defeated state to dismantle militias while limiting any immediate Israeli response. In such a context, Lebanese diplomacy risks oscillating between direct and indirect engagement, while political narratives cling to clichés like "last to sign" and idealized coexistence models. Rather than situating Lebanon and Israel within a comparative, colonial, and structural framework, discourse often resorts to epic, mythical narratives that obscure real socio-political dynamics.

The Ontological Foundations of Peace

The current Lebanese-Israeli relationship exemplifies a situation of chronic securitization, where political and military interactions are predominantly shaped by a logic of risk management rather than conflict resolution. Across decades, both states have developed mechanisms aimed at preventing escalation, including military-technical arrangements, tacit understandings along borders, and limited intelligence exchanges. These arrangements, while functional in containing immediate outbreaks of violence, produce what social scientists classify as a Negative Peace: a temporary suspension of hostilities that leaves the underlying causes of conflict unaddressed. In Lebanon's case, the persistence of unresolved territorial disputes, demographic pressures, and the presence of non-state actors such as Hezbollah reinforces the fragility of this peace, rendering it highly contingent and prone to sudden destabilization.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Lebanese-Israeli context demonstrates the limitations of securitization when applied as a long-term conflict-management strategy. Securitization prioritizes the technical mitigation of risk over the transformation of the social and political structures that generate hostility. While deterrence mechanisms may reduce short-term violence, they do not alter ontological dimensions of the conflict: the existential questions that underpin identity, sovereignty, and legitimacy. Lebanon's strategic environment is thus marked by an ongoing tension between the maintenance of survival-oriented stability and the unresolved nature of its existential contest with Israel.

To move beyond this cyclical impasse, Lebanon must reconceptualize its approach, shifting from a paradigm of negotiation as deterrence" to one that addresses the conflict's ontological foundations. This requires acknowledging that the dispute is not solely a matter of territorial demarcation or military capability, but of collective existential recognition, mutual legitimacy, and long-term social-political integration of competing national narratives. Approaches drawn from conflict transformation theory suggest that durable peace cannot be secured through deterrence alone; it must involve structural, cultural, and psychological engagement with the sources of hostility.

Operationally, this could entail multilayered strategies, including grassroots reconciliation initiatives, the redefinition of sovereignty frameworks along mutually acceptable lines, and the integration of international norms that facilitate coexistence. By addressing the ontological core of the Lebanese-Israeli conflict, Lebanon could potentially shift from a fragile Negative Peace to a Positive Peace, one characterized by structural justice, mutual recognition, and resilience against recurrence of hostilities. Without such a foundational transformation, the relationship will remain trapped within cycles of deterrence and securitization, producing stability that is always provisional and susceptible to sudden collapse.

In conclusion, the Lebanese-Israeli dynamic illustrates that securitization alone cannot resolve deeply rooted conflicts. Only by engaging with the ontological dimensions of the dispute can Lebanon hope to cultivate a durable, positive, and self-sustaining peace.

Israel, Foreignness, and Resemblance: A Philosophical and Political Inquiry

Understanding Israel's place within the historical and political landscape of the Middle East requires distinguishing between two analytical levels. On the one hand, Israel often appears historically "foreign" to the region's trajectory; on the other hand, it paradoxically shares, and increasingly reproduces, many of the structural fractures that have long characterized the political and social fabric of the region. Exploring this tension between foreignness and resemblance allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the Israeli–Arab conflict and its place within the broader history of the Near East.

At the first level, Israel's perceived foreignness stems from the historical conditions of its emergence. The formation of the Israeli state in the twentieth century cannot be fully understood without reference to the European "Jewish question," the rise of modern nationalism, and the collapse of imperial orders in Europe. Political thinkers such as Hannah Arendt emphasized that modern Zionism developed within the intellectual and political crises of Europe, particularly in response to the failure of European nation-states to integrate Jewish minorities and the catastrophic

culmination of antisemitism in the Holocaust. In this sense, the establishment of Israel represented not only a regional political event but also the transplantation of a European historical problem into the Middle Eastern landscape.

This dimension contributes to the perception of Israel as external to the longue durée of Near Eastern history. The region's political order had historically been shaped by imperial formations—Ottoman, Persian, and earlier Islamic empires—within which religious communities coexisted through complex but relatively stable arrangements. The modern nation-state system that emerged in the twentieth century introduced new forms of territorial sovereignty and exclusive national identity. Within this transformation, Israel appeared as a political project whose ideological origins were deeply rooted in European debates about nationhood, sovereignty, and minority protection. Scholars such as Maxime Rodinson have therefore described Zionism as a movement that combined elements of national liberation with characteristics associated with settler colonialism, a duality that has shaped both its legitimacy claims and the controversies surrounding it.

Yet this perception of foreignness captures only part of the historical reality. At a second analytical level, Israel increasingly resembles the broader political dynamics of the region. The Middle East has long been marked by intense struggles over identity, legitimacy, and political sovereignty. The fragmentation of empires, the emergence of competing nationalisms, and the persistence of sectarian and communal tensions have produced a political environment characterized by recurring cycles of conflict and internal polarization. In this respect, Israel's internal political evolution has gradually begun to mirror patterns found elsewhere in the region.

The transformation of Israeli politics over the past decades illustrates this convergence. The decline of the secular, socialist-oriented Zionist left and the rise of nationalist and religious movements have brought Israel closer to the ideological transformations experienced in other societies where religion has become a central marker of political identity. Political theorists of antagonism, such as Carl Schmitt, argued that political communities often consolidate themselves through the construction of existential distinctions between friend and enemy. In Israel, as in many states shaped by protracted conflict, this dynamic has reinforced securitized identities and hardened political boundaries.

Moreover, the sociological structure of Israeli society itself reflects a complex mosaic of communities—Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, religious, secular, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and others—whose relations are marked by tensions that echo the plural and often contested character of societies throughout the region. Rather than remaining an isolated or purely external phenomenon, Israel has become increasingly embedded in the same patterns of identity politics, ideological polarization, and institutional contestation that characterize many Middle Eastern states.

Recognizing this dual reality—foreignness and resemblance—has important implications for political analysis and conflict resolution. If Israel is interpreted exclusively as an external colonial implant, its historical trajectory risks being

reduced to a temporary anomaly destined to disappear. Conversely, if it is viewed solely as a typical Middle Eastern state, the unique historical conditions of its emergence and the transregional dimensions of the Jewish question risk being overlooked. A more productive approach lies in acknowledging the intersection of these two dimensions.

From the perspective of conflict transformation theory, this distinction also helps clarify why the Israeli–Arab conflict has proven so resistant to resolution. Durable peace cannot be achieved solely through military deterrence or technical negotiations over borders and security arrangements. As scholars of peacebuilding such as John Paul Lederach have argued, long-term conflict resolution requires engaging with the deeper narratives and identities that sustain antagonism. In the case of Israel and its neighbors, this involves confronting both the historical roots of Zionism in the Jewish experience of persecution and statelessness, and the equally powerful historical memories of displacement, occupation, and resistance that shape Arab perspectives.

Ultimately, the paradox of Israel's position—simultaneously foreign to the historical trajectory of the region and increasingly reflective of its political patterns—reveals the complexity of modern state formation in the post-imperial Middle East. Understanding this paradox does not by itself resolve the conflict. However, it provides a conceptual framework capable of moving beyond simplistic narratives and toward a more historically grounded analysis of one of the most enduring and contentious political questions of the contemporary world.

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