Jean-Paul Sartre and Palestine in Contemporary Arab Thought

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Before delving into the various stances Sartre adopted regarding the Palestinian cause—stances that led to a profound shift in how Arab intellectuals engaged with him due to his hesitations, neutrality, sympathies, and eventual alignment with the Zionist usurpation of Palestine—it is essential to first examine the prior enthusiasm Arab intellectuals harbored toward the philosopher of "commitment." Their writings about him intertwined their hopes and aspirations with his works and ideas, creating an image that might be termed "the Arab Sartre." Within the Arab intellectual sphere, Sartre was portrayed as the embodiment of the "human conscience" and a "storm upon the age." Articles were dedicated to him, dialogues conducted, letters addressed to him, and extensive studies compiled—not only concerning his philosophy but also reflecting our ardent admiration for it and the great hopes we invested in it.

For nearly a quarter of a century, we lived through the "Sartre era," which commenced in our cultural landscape after World War II and held an overwhelming influence on our writings until the June 1967 War. The closing chapter of this engagement can be discerned in an article by Ibrahim Amer, published in al-Hilal in January 1968, titled After Sartre. Given its subject and timing, this study signified a dual ending: the decline of Sartre's philosophy with the rise of structuralism, which transcended existentialism and engaged in numerous intellectual disputes with Sartre on the one hand, and the waning enthusiasm of Arab intellectuals on the other—particularly after the June 1967 War, during which Sartre aligned himself with Israel following his well-known visit to Egypt in March of that year[1]. As a result, translations of his works diminished or ceased altogether, except for a few literary and artistic pieces. Consequently, interest in him transitioned into purely academic studies, treating him as a historical figure in philosophy rather than a living part of Arab intellectual culture, which had once played a role in shaping modern Arab thought and sentiment.

This delineates two distinct phases in the Arab intellectual engagement with Sartre. The first was characterized by the rise of ideas centered on freedom,

1 - Refer to Sartre's visit to Egypt in Aida al-Sherif's Sartre in Cairo, Philosophical Papers, Issue 14, pp. 108–87, as well as Hoda Wasfi's Sartre in Egypt (in French).

independence, progress, and social justice—concepts that had not yet been theoretically established in our consciousness. Sartre was seen as a beacon who could solidify and articulate this vision, paving the way for liberty and progress. The second phase, following the defeat of 1967, was marked by introspection, self-criticism, and a reassessment of the West—of which Sartre was a part. Just as he had taken supportive stances, he could also be swayed or fall under Zionist influence. This ambivalence is evident in our writings about him, which often reflect our own perspectives as much as they interpret his philosophy.

To explore this transformation, we shall first examine a selection of testimonies from Arab writers about Sartre, shedding light on the image he occupied in the Arab intellectual and emotional landscape. We shall then analyze the diverse Arab responses to his writings and positions on the Palestinian cause and the Jewish question within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Sartre in the Arab Imagination

I. "Whenever Sartre wrote, we wrote about him. The more we tried to grasp him, the more he eluded us, soaring like an intoxicated bird condemned to fly through the skies, just as others were doomed to burrow into the earth."—So wrote the Moroccan intellectual Abdelkebir Khatibi in French, capturing the resonance of Sartre's positions within us. He continues: "During the 1960s, some veterans in the heart of the Champs-Élysées cried out, 'Execute Sartre!'—a reaction to his stance on the Algerian struggle[2]. Who among us did not feel an innate solidarity with Sartre? We soared when he soared, wandered when he wandered. Oh, what bliss! Those were the sublime moments when we felt the pulse of history vibrating within us, compelling us to exceed our limits. The revolutionary fervor he instilled in us was immense. Meanwhile, the West, complacent in its conscience, trembled in fear. He was with us, one of us—he shook us, thrilled us, intoxicated us. Our passion for his stances only grew, intensifying our delight.[3]"

2 - See Abdelmajid Omrani's Jean-Paul Sartre and the Algerian Revolution, Madbouly Library, Cairo (n.d.), as well as our study Sartre and the Algerian Resistance, presented at the symposium Fifty Years Since the Outbreak of the Algerian Revolution, Historical and Philosophical Studies Laboratory, Constantine, Algeria, 2004, and later published in the special Sartre dossier of Akhbar al-Adab, Cairo.

3 - Abdelkebir Khatibi, Sartre's Tears, Philosophical Papers, Issue 13, p. 45.

Under the title We and Sartre, the Lebanese literary journal al-Aadaab—which, along with Dar al-Aadaab, played a pivotal role in introducing Sartre's philosophy and translating his works—published an editorial by Suhail Idris. In a Letter to Sartre, featured in the fifth issue of al-Aadaab (1965), Idris enclosed a previous edition of the journal that had devoted its opening pages to Sartre, celebrating his refusal of the Nobel Prize. He wrote: "Dar al-Aadaab has taken it upon itself to introduce Arab readers to your works—works of the deepest freedom."

But why this particular moment of fervent interest? The explanation lies in the fact that Arabs found in Sartre's writings a mirror for their own suffering and dilemmas. After the catastrophe of Palestine, one might have expected the emergence of an Arabic literary movement reflecting the crisis, but in its absence, new generations turned to foreign literatures that could articulate their anxieties, fragmentation, and aspirations. They found precisely that in existentialist literature in general and in Sartre's works in particular[4].

The same sentiment expressed by the Lebanese existentialist was echoed by the Egyptian Marxist Ahmad Abbas Saleh, who, in a 1967 issue of al-Katib magazine, wrote to Sartre, stating: "You are undoubtedly aware of the profound impact you have had on contemporary culture. But what you may find hard to believe is that you have touched the very heartstrings of Arab intellectuals… Your influence in this region surpasses that of any other writer.[5]" Saleh's words reveal a collective feeling that Sartre was the thinker awaited by the Arabs—the one who would fulfill all their aspirations.

It was Sartre's ability to encapsulate suffering, along with his support for revolutionary struggles, that underpinned the Arab intellectuals' discourse toward him, urging him to understand the central cause that preoccupied them in 1967: Palestine. This explains their eagerness to invite him to Cairo, an invitation he accepted, bringing immense joy to figures such as Suhail Idris, who wrote: "This visit gladdens the hearts of all Arab intellectuals… It carries another crucial

4 - Souheil Idriss, A Letter to Sartre, al-Aadaab al-Bayrutiyya, Issue 1965 ,5.

5 - Ahmed Abbas Saleh, al-Katib al-Qahiriya, Issue 1967 ,72.

dimension—the hope of persuading Sartre of the justice of the Arab cause: Palestine.[6]"

The enthusiasm permeated literary circles as well. In a 1964 issue of al-Katib, Egyptian novelist Yusuf Idris described the literary event of the year as Sartre's refusal of the Nobel Prize, in his article The Prize That Rejected the Prize. Meanwhile, critic Galal al-Ashri, in al-Fikr al-Mu'asir, dubbed Sartre "the conscience of the age." Sartre's presence in Arab thought reached its zenith in early 1967, when diverse analyses and impassioned letters revealed a deep-seated admiration and conviction in his ideas. What we have presented in the preceding citations reveals what Zaki Naguib Mahmoud called "intellectual magnetism," what Abdel-Kebir Khatibi termed "revolutionary rapture," what Abbas Saleh described as "touching the heart's core," and what Mujahid Abdel-Moneim Mujahid simply named "passion." It was an ardor that coursed through the very fabric of Arab intellectual life, manifesting in their translations of Sartre's works, their writings about him, and even their critiques of his philosophy and stances. The Arabs found in Sartre's thought the challenge they had long sought, and thus he became their Sartre—an intellectual preoccupation, a presence that occupied their minds and hearts. They crafted for him a singular image, one shaped by the hundreds of studies dedicated to him, giving rise to a rare cultural phenomenon that bore his name: Sartre.

This enthusiasm was summed up by Khairy Mansour in an issue of al-Fikr al-Arabi al-Mu'asir, where he wrote: "Reading what Arab intellectuals have written about Sartre, one might feel as though he were our own discovery, our own creation. Since we welcomed him into our libraries, he has been the most pervasive presence in our literature, politics, and even our way of thinking. He is, in this sense, the emblem of an era. Just hearing his name—like Proust's madeleine—illuminates the memory of a generation convinced of the superiority of its recent past, its gravity, and its earnestness.[7]"

The reception of Sartre in contemporary Arab thought was thus marked by intensity,

6 - Souheil Idriss, al-Aadaab al-Bayrutiyya, February Issue, 1967.

7 - Khairy Mansour, Sartre and the Arabs, al-Fikr al-Arabi al-Mu'asir magazine, Issue No. 3.

controversy, and ideological struggles. While many championed his philosophy of freedom, commitment, and responsibility, others dismissed existentialism as reactionary. Just as Existentialism is a Humanism was translated into Arabic, so too was Jean Kanapa's Existentialism is Not a Humanism. Just as R. M. Albress translated Sartre and Existentialism—which, according to its Arabic rendition, provides a precise account of Sartrean thought and does him justice—Lucien Goldmann's Sartre and Philosophy was also translated, a work that confronts existentialism as a heresy and subjects it to critique. Enthusiasm was met with criticism, though the former often prevailed. Yet, even amid this fervor, one can discern various forms of philosophical, religious, and political critique directed at Sartre's work, each driven by distinct motivations—motivations that merit careful examination and analysis.

Despite Abdel Azim Anis's fierce denunciation of existentialism as a reactionary social philosophy, his critique is primarily directed at Sartre's existentialism, drawing heavily on Roger Garaudy's Marxist-era writings on the literature of cemeteries. Anis engages with existentialist discourse as it appeared in al-Katib al-Masri magazine, portraying it as a social philosophy championed and defended by Sartre—the eminent French writer and philosopher—who, in speaking of freedom, means nothing other than anarchism in its most distilled form.

Anis argues that existentialism's stance on freedom and human will must be understood through two fundamental roots: science and history. Yet existentialism disregards the accumulated wisdom of human experience, dismissing it entirely. Sartre himself asserts, "Man must begin from nothing."

In contemporary Arab thought, figures such as George Tarabishi sought to reconcile Sartre with Marxism. Tarabishi, who translated several of Sartre's works, explored this connection in his study Sartre and Marxism (published by Dar al-Tali'a, Beirut, 1964). The book encapsulates the anxiety and ideological turmoil of the 1960s generation, who, in their quest for a theoretical foundation for Arab socialism, found themselves adrift. The author repeatedly references this crisis in his introduction:

"We felt the ground shifting beneath our feet. We felt we had no theory. And the

only available socialist theory at the time filled us with dread. When we began reading, it was not to become true socialists but to stand our ground against the terrifying specter of Marxism.[8]"

It was in this climate of caution and apprehension toward Marxism that Arab intellectuals discovered Sartre. At that moment, he appeared as the long-awaited philosopher, simultaneously fulfilling two needs: the leftist rejection of the oppressive Arab regimes and the search for a revolutionary alternative to Marxism. They fashioned an image of Sartre that suited their aspirations—a non-Marxist revolutionary—long before he wrote The Critique of Dialectical Reason. For these young Arab leftists, Sartre became the bridge to Marxism, the necessary first step toward it[9].

During the 1950s and 1960s, Sartre emerged as one of the most influential thinkers in Arab intellectual and cultural circles. Many Arab intellectuals sought to align his existentialist and humanist philosophy with Islamic heritage and Sufi thought, hoping to establish a philosophical foundation for a modern Arab renaissance. Others emphasized the connection between Sartrean existentialism and Marxism as a means of forging a revolutionary path to address pressing Arab realities—particularly two issues that preoccupied the Arab world at the time: the assertion of national independence and the pursuit of social transformation. Sartre thus appeared almost as an Arab philosopher, his works seeming to articulate

8 - Georges Tarabichi, Sartre and Marxism, Dar al-Tali'a, Beirut, 1964.

9 -Initially, Sartre was misunderstood as an alternative to Marxism—»We first misunderstood Sartre.» Rather than reading him directly, we projected onto him what we wished to find. This Arab enthusiasm for Sartre, among certain circles, eventually led to a reassessment of both Sartre and Marxism. Through Sartre, they discovered a new, dynamic Marxism—one more akin to the twentieth-century interpretations of thinkers like Garaudy (before his ideological shift), Lukács, and Adam Schaff.

Sartre, in prompting this reassessment, guided them toward a Marxism distinct from its orthodox form—what Tarabichi calls «living Marxism.» Sartrean existentialism thus became a catalyst for this rediscovery, culminating in Tarabichi's study, which sought to achieve two goals: a renewed understanding of Marxism and a reevaluation of Sartrean thought, initially misinterpreted.

As Tarabichi explains, «We found in Sartre a critical intellect that challenged Marxism without falling into the traps of the right. We found in him the leftist we aspired to be—a leftist who maintained his leftist convictions without being a communist, and indeed, without even being a Marxist.» Sartre, if only temporarily, fulfilled a need for a generation of defiant rebels, searching for a path to revolution and change—rejecting the prevailing right-wing systems while simultaneously harboring deep apprehensions about Marxism.

the struggles, realities, and aspirations of the region. His positions and writings provided answers to the pressing questions of the time, especially regarding the most urgent issue: the Arab-Israeli conflict, or more precisely, the Palestinian cause. Yet it was precisely here that the tide began to turn against him. Enthusiasm for Sartrean philosophy waned as Arab intellectuals shifted their focus inward, toward self-examination and self-critique—both in their internal dynamics and in their relationship with the Other.

In 2005, Sartre's centenary was commemorated with multiple events. Akhbar al-Adab dedicated a major feature to him, as did al-Qahira, a newspaper published by Egypt's Ministry of Culture, in its July 12 issue of that year. The Supreme Council of Culture in Cairo also organized an international symposium under the provocative title: Existentialists, Leftists, and Zionists. Al-Qahira's special edition featured an interview with Mahmoud Amin al-Alim titled This Is My Explanation for Sartre's Betrayal of the Arabs and His Alignment with Israel. Al-Alim attributed Sartre's stance to the influence of Simone de Beauvoir and Lanzmann—both of Jewish descent—and to the success of Zionist propaganda in marketing the Jewish tragedy. Meanwhile, Kamal Zuhairi argued that Sartre's support for Israel was not his gravest error; rather, his most serious misjudgment was the belief that the Arab left was the only viable force for reconciliation with Israel. Mujahid Abdel Moneim Mujahid, a translator of several Sartre works, examined the roots of Arab intellectuals' fascination with him. The al-Qahira feature also included essays and discussions, most notably an excerpt from Ali al-Samman's Memoirs of My Life, recounting Sartre's visit to Egypt.

2- Jewish Question and Sartre's Contradictions

In Reflections on the Jewish Question, Sartre analyzes anti-Semitism and offers a philosophical justification for Zionism—at the expense of Palestinian rights[10]. He examines anti-Semitism's behavioral, social, and historical dimensions, while

10 - Sartre's book is titled Réflexions sur la question juive, translated into Arabic by Dr. Hatem al-Johari under the title Reflections on the Jewish Question, published by Rawafid for Publishing and Distribution in 2016. (https://m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=719575&r=0).

also grappling with the ambiguity of Jewish identity, distinguishing between Jewishness as race and as history. Yet, as noted by Mohamed al-Hilali, Sartre abandoned his critical lens when addressing the Palestinian issue. He did not critique the Zionist project; instead, he defended it, arguing that "Zionism is the answer to the problem of the persecuted Jew." His work provided an unprecedented philosophical endorsement of Zionism.

Sartre posits that the root of the Jewish question lies in the nebulousness of Jewish identity. Jewishness, he argues, provokes social unease: "A Jew is whoever others consider a Jew." He describes the Jew as "a person in a situation"—a concrete individual embedded in specific economic, social, and political conditions. Thus, physical traits do not define Jewishness; it is not a matter of race, for Jews vary in their physical features. Historically, they gradually lost their distinct national and religious characteristics, becoming "an abstract historical community." Without a singular historical reference point, what unites them, he contends, is a "memory of prolonged sorrow" and the hostility they have faced. Since defining Jewish identity through race proves futile, Sartre sees religion—or "the Israeli society"—as its logical basis. Yet he acknowledges that modern nations remain reluctant to integrate Jews, perceiving them as a source of social ills[11].

According to Jawhari, the Arabic translator of Sartre's work, Sartre's existential Zionism underpins his philosophical defense of Israel. He treats the existence of Israel as an undeniable historical reality, dismissing any examination of its origins while ignoring the plight of the Palestinian people. Sartre, Jawhari argues, persecuted, negated, and erased the existential freedom of Palestinians, equating oppressor with oppressed. In his view, the Arab-Israeli conflict is a clash between two victimized groups, one that can only be resolved by accepting two opposing truths: the necessity of a national homeland for the victims of anti-Semitism, and the imperative of securing the Palestinians' right to return. Yet Sartre's focus remained fixed on the stereotyped European Jew.

For Sartre, Israel's existence is an unchallengeable historical given; the only

11 - https://m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=719575&r=0

unresolved issue is not the existence of the Palestinian people, but that of Palestinian refugees. As Jawhari observes, Sartre often spoke of Palestinian refugees in exile, yet remained conspicuously silent on those living under occupation. He addressed human rights and humanitarian conditions but never entertained the idea of Palestinian statehood. Perhaps, in his subconscious, he understood the inevitability of conflict between the two entities, leading him to side with his so-called existential Jewishness—as manifested in Zionism on Palestinian land[12].

Sartre's contradictions are further revealed in his rejection of the Nobel Prize in 1964 while simultaneously accepting an honorary doctorate from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem—a gesture whose significance he fully grasped. He justified this by stating:

"I accepted this honorary doctorate to build bridges between the Palestinian people, whom I support, and Israel, my friend."

Indeed, Sartre went even further, declaring:

"The establishment of the Jewish state is the most significant event of our time."

3- Sartre and the Palestinian Cause

This contradiction—an existential perplexity that Sartre claimed was an expression of his neutrality regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—becomes strikingly evident in the positions taken by some of Sartre's most ardent supporters, who had once championed his radical stance on freedom and liberation. Reda Merida provides several examples of this.

In June 1967, five years after Algeria's independence, Algerian students set fire to the works of Jean-Paul Sartre—the same Sartre who had been a great friend of the Algerian revolution. Around the same time, Josie Fanon, widow of the

12 - Nidal Mamdouh, Despite His Involvement in the French Resistance, This Was Sartre's Stance on the Palestinian Cause, al-Dustour, October 2023 ,22: (https://www.dostor.org/4532163). Among Jean-Paul Sartre's works is his book Reflections on the Jewish Question, in which he employed his philosophy to reinforce Zionist illusions under the pretext of the persecution Jews had suffered throughout history.

anti-colonial psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon, instructed her late husband's publisher to remove Sartre's introduction to The Wretched of the Earth. "From this moment on," she declared, "we have nothing whatsoever to do with Sartre." Meanwhile, in Iraq, Sartre's books were banned, and Arab intellectuals across disciplines rushed to distance themselves from the philosopher who had once hailed from Paris's leftist sphere. By publicly declaring his solidarity with Israel on the eve of the Six-Day War in 1967, Sartre effectively marked the end of Arab existentialism. His revolutionary stance on liberation struggles was irreparably tainted across the Middle East and North Africa.

Sartre, along with the majority of French intellectuals—both right and left—had supported the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. "I have always hoped, and continue to hope," Sartre stated, "that the Jewish question finds a lasting and fundamental solution within the framework of universal humanism, free from geographical considerations. However, since social transformation inevitably involves a phase of national independence, we can only welcome the fact that an autonomous Israeli state has legitimized the hopes and struggles of Jews worldwide."

In the late 1940s, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir both supported the idea of a Jewish state. At the time, the French left was sympathetic to the Soviet Union, which had initially backed Israel. In 1947, Sartre openly endorsed Zionism during the trial of his former student, Robert Misrahi, who was accused of purchasing weapons for the Stern Gang, a Zionist paramilitary group that sought to seize Palestinian land by force and expel its Arab inhabitants. Sartre defended him, asserting, "It is the duty of non-Jews to help the Jews.[13]"

Nevertheless, as the researcher notes, the Palestinian question became inescapable for Sartre after Algeria gained independence in 1962. He found himself torn between his political convictions and what he termed his "emotional commitment."

13 - https://www.alfalq.com/%D%8B%9D%-86%9D%8AC%D%8A%7D-86%9 %D%8A%8D%88%9D%-84%9D%8B%3D%8A%7D%8B%1D%8AA%D%8B%-1D%88%9 D%81%9 D%84%9D%8B%3D%8B%7D8%9A%D86%9/
https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/jean-paul-sartre-and-palestine?disableGlobalInfo Collect=false

Ultimately, he opted for neutrality—a paradoxical stance that he upheld through convoluted and contradictory means. On one hand, Sartre consistently condemned the living conditions of Palestinian refugees and supported their right to return. On the other, he endorsed Israel's existence as a sovereign state. His desperate attempts to maintain this so-called neutrality only plunged him into a profound cultural crisis.

The escalating tensions between Egypt and Israel led to military confrontations in the region, and in France, support for Israel surged in the wake of Sartre's widely publicized journey to Egypt, Gaza, and Israel in March 1967. This pro-Israel sentiment soon morphed into a broader anti-Arab campaign. In this context, Le Monde published a petition in support of Israel, which Sartre signed—an act that unmistakably severed his ties with his Arab allies. Only later would they come to learn that Sartre had signed the petition begrudgingly, loath to do so.

If one seeks further confirmation of Sartre's neutrality—or, rather, the contradictions of the man once hailed as the conscience of his era—his wavering stance from the 1970s onward provides ample evidence. As the Palestinian resistance intensified and extended its struggle to Europe, leftist intellectuals dramatically reassessed their views on Israel. Even Sartre himself eventually went so far as to endorse suicide attacks, stating, "I have always supported counterterrorism against entrenched terrorism, and I have consistently defined entrenched terrorism as occupation, land seizure, arbitrary detention, and so forth." No longer was Israel seen as a besieged island adrift in a hostile Arab sea; rather, it had come to be viewed as a heavily armed cog in the machinery of American imperialism—a relentless force attacking a people already crushed by centuries of Ottoman rule, only to be later subjugated by British colonialism.

To affirm Sartre's neutrality, another incident from June of that same year stands as testament. In a letter to the mother of an Israeli military conscription objector, Sartre insisted that "it would be in the court's best interest to acquit [the defendant], who now faces years of imprisonment for an act both courageous and pragmatic: refusing to serve in an army that began as a force of defense but swiftly adopted

offensive tactics and became an occupying power.[14]"

In the wake of the controversy ignited by his signature, Sartre retreated into silence, later asserting that his stance was "against the impending Six-Day War" rather than opposed to the struggle of Arabs and Palestinians "for freedom and progress." He condemned Israel's use of napalm, branding it "a criminal act," and explained why French public opinion had leaned toward Israel in 1967. According to Sartre, the French position had been clouded by fears of witnessing "a second attempt at the extermination of the Jews" and was also shaped by ignorance of the true realities on the ground. He further declared that "wars of liberation are the only legitimate wars," thereby denouncing Israel's expansionist ambitions and describing the plan to annex Jerusalem as "absolute madness." Finally, he lamented that "powerful reactionary forces" had gained a foothold in Israel, undermining all prospects for peace[15].

Reinforcing Sartre's claim to neutrality, the writer notes that when he received an honorary doctorate from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1976, he declared in his acceptance speech that he would be equally honored to receive the same distinction from Cairo University. In 1979, he organized a symposium to promote peace in the Middle East, inviting both Palestinian and Israeli intellectuals to participate. A year later, on April 15, 1980, Sartre passed away. Now, having heard the case for the defense, we must turn to the witnesses, beginning with one of the invitees who attended Sartre's symposium—the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said.

Hussein Mansour al-Hajj, in his writings on Sartre and the Palestinian cause, affirms that the Middle East conflict—pitting the Zionist state (Israel) against the Palestinian people—is among the world's most pressing concerns. He highlights how this deeply complex issue even unsettled the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who approached it with a neutrality that was more ethical than political. Mansour argues that Sartre's hesitation was striking, given that he had never

14 - Op. cit.

15 - Ibid.

wavered in taking a firm stance on the major political struggles of his time—except in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict. His uncertainty was so pronounced that his statements often failed to satisfy either the Arabs or the Israelis. Sartre sought coherence with his lifelong commitment to defending the oppressed wherever they might be, yet he struggled to reconcile this principle when faced with two peoples whom he saw as both victims of oppression, now locked in conflict. He chose neutrality, guided by particular reasons that prevented him from adopting a definitive and committed stance on the issue.

The situation was so fraught that Sartre could not take a clear position without alienating one side or the other. His deep ties to Jewish intellectuals did not preclude his friendships with Arabs, particularly those devoted to progress and socialist aspirations in their nations. Indeed, before the Six-Day War in 1967, Sartre visited Egypt, where he was profoundly impressed by the work of Gamal Abdel Nasser. At the conclusion of his tour, he also visited Israel, yet it seems that Nasser's vision left a deeper mark on him than that of the Israeli leaders. Following these visits, Sartre became nearly convinced that war between Arabs and Israel was inevitable—a belief shaped by his conversations with Nasser. Summarizing the Egyptian leader's perspective, Sartre wrote: "There is a contradiction for which no solution can be found. But resolving it through war does not seem a good solution."

Ultimately, Sartre framed the issue as one of fundamental rights: "The Palestinians possess an unequivocal right to return to their homeland." This right, he argued, was undeniable because "they were expelled and therefore must be allowed to return." At the same time, he acknowledged that Jews, too, had a legitimate right to live in Palestine—but not all Jews, only those born and raised there. Sartre put it plainly: "If I recognize the right of a Jew's grandchild or child to remain in Israel because it is his home and he should not be expelled from it, then, by the same principle, I must also recognize the Palestinians' right to return to that same

home.[16]"

In a 1969 interview with L'Arche, Sartre approached the Arab-Israeli conflict with an idealism that veered toward the utopian. He did not see Israel as the spearhead of American imperialism; rather, he argued that both Israel and the Arab world were victims of "the two great imperialisms—American and Soviet." In Sartre's view, the Middle East conflict was merely an extension of the geopolitical rivalry between these global superpowers. He believed in the eventual dissolution of the Zionist movement and placed his faith in the goodwill of both the Arab and Israeli left. In doing so, he allowed himself to express a vision more hopeful than realistic—a dream of peace in the Middle East that would unite the oppressed, both Arabs and Jews, in a shared struggle for socialist revolution. Such peace, in Sartre's eyes, could only be achieved by integrating Israel's economy within the broader Middle Eastern framework, eliminating the underlying sources of mistrust and hostility.

After Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the massacres of Sabra and Shatila—perpetrated with the complicity of Israeli forces alongside certain far-right Lebanese factions—Sartre might well have altered his stance toward Israel. Given the coherence of his thought and the realities of the situation, he could have adopted a more explicit, committed, and consequently more realistic position. In short, Sartre's stance on the Middle East serves as a paradigmatic example of the ambiguities inherent in the ethics of individual commitment[17].

Ahmed Bahaa al-Din sought to clarify where Sartre erred and where he was correct in his analytical book on the Jewish question. In his piece Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Problem (June 23, 2008), he outlined four key points:

16 - Dr. Hassan Mansour al-Haj, Jean-Paul Sartre and the Palestinian Right, last updated: 14:26 – June ,12 22) 2023 Dhu al-Qi'dah 1444 AH).
(https://aawsat.com/%D%81%9D8%9A-%D%8A%7D%84%9D%8B%9D%85%9D82%9/%D8%AA%D%8AD% D%82%9D8%9A%D%82%9D%8A%7D%8AA-%D%88%9D%82%9D%8B%6D%8A%7D8%9A%D%8A%-4793371/7D%83%9D8%9A%D%-81%9D%8AA%D-85%9%D%8AA%D%8B%7D%88%9D8%9A%D%8B%-1D%8AA%D%8B%5D%85%9D8%9A%D%-85%9D%8A%7D%84%9D%8AA%D%88%9D%8B%3D%8B%9D%8A%-9D%8A%7D%84%9D%8AB%D%8A%7D9%84%D%8AB%D%8A%-9D%84%9D%84%9D%85%9D%8B%3D%8AC%D%8AF-%D%8A%7D%84%9D%8AD%D%8B%1D%8A%7D%85%9D9%8F).

17 - Ibid.

1. Sartre greatly exaggerated his analysis, pushing the argument to its limits by attributing the rejection of Jews entirely to the societies in which they lived, holding the entire world accountable—without for a moment considering that the Jews themselves might bear even a partial responsibility for their alienation.
2. Moreover, he described the Jew as perpetually anxious, never at ease in his possessions, unable to trust in the permanence of his social standing, wealth, or power. His history, spanning twenty centuries of wandering and displacement, has conditioned him to be ready at any moment to take up his staff and depart. He can never experience the deep-rooted stability of the Aryan, whose attachment to his land and nation is beyond question.
3. Sartre approached the subject with the tone of a defense attorney, compelled to justify everything, defend everything, and absolve his client of any responsibility, no matter how small.
4. Despite his exhaustive analysis of the Jewish question, Sartre devoted merely a few lines to Zionism, failing to acknowledge that as a racial ideology, it predated Nazism by decades. Had he accorded Zionism its due significance, he would have been forced to subject a significant faction of Jews to the same withering critique he directed at all forms of racial chauvinism. Any study of the Jewish question that ignores the intellectual, political, and historical dimensions of Zionism is necessarily incomplete and biased[18].

This philosopher, committed to liberty and resolute against injustice and oppression, found himself in a state of confusion regarding the Palestinian question. The Jews, who had long endured persecution in the West, were now dispossessing the Palestinians. For the first time in his life, Sartre sought neutrality. Yet this ostensible impartiality did not prevent him from stating that Israel was America's spearhead and that both Israelis and Arabs were victims of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry.

But, as Mohsen Abdel Aziz asks: Had Sartre lived to witness the daily massacres

18 - Ahmed Bahaa al-Din, Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question. (https://group194.net/article/18299).

and genocide in Gaza, would he still have remained neutral? Certainly not[19].

Progressive—Except on Palestine

In an article for Current Affairs, Ruqayya Zarrouq examines what she calls "Jean-Paul Sartre and the Problem of Being "Progressive Except for Palestine." She highlights how many so-called progressives attempt to remain neutral, walking a tightrope to placate both sides of the conflict. She cites an activist from the campaign for Palestinian human rights, who coined the phrase progressive except for Palestine to describe American leftists who champion racial and economic justice—only to falter when asked to extend their principles to the Palestinian cause[20].

Many Arabs believed that Sartre was trading in moral reparations on behalf of the Zionists. He refrained from expressing an opinion for as long as possible. As the foremost European analyst of anti-colonial liberation struggles at the time, he was under mounting pressure to take a public stand. For Arabs advocating Palestinian liberation, neutrality was untenable. Some hoped his perspective would shift after he witnessed firsthand the dire poverty in the Palestinian refugee camps of Jabalia and Deir al-Balah.

Indeed, following his visit to these camps, Sartre declared publicly: Thanks to your assistance, I have been able to see the Palestinian reality. I would like to express my solidarity with you… I affirm my full recognition of the national right of all Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland[21].

19 - Mohsen Abdelaziz, Sartre and the Palestinian Cause, Tuesday, January 2024 ,23. (https://www.albiladpress.com/news/5579/2024/columns/846477.html).

The existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre experienced the bitterness of Nazi occupation in his homeland, France, and endured the anguish of imprisonment. This transformed him, in the eyes of many, into a global symbol of liberation—a thinker unwavering in his commitment to the oppressed and marginalized, standing resolutely against colonialism and exploitation.

20 - Ruqayya Zarrouq, Jean-Paul Sartre and the Dilemma of Being Progressive—Except on Palestine. (https://www.alhadath.ps/article/143395).

21 - Ibid.

Arabs expected Sartre to maintain intellectual and political consistency. They hoped he would wield the existentialist and humanist rhetoric he had so often deployed against European oppression in defense of the Palestinian cause. But the outcome, as they saw it, was a bitter harvest.

In 1967, as the region teetered on the brink of war, Sartre's sympathetic judgment was put to the test. At the final stop of his trip to Israel, he and Simone de Beauvoir were moved by the sight of Jews rebuilding their lives. Ashamed of what had befallen Jews in Europe, they were gladdened to see them forging a new socialist existence in Israel. Sartre left the country with a more sympathetic view than the one he had arrived with. Yet the jury was still out: he refused to take a definitive stance, claiming instead to occupy the position of absence—in other words, to have no opinion at all.

Sartre's adherence to neutrality ultimately alienated him from Arab intellectuals. His iconic act of betrayal, in their eyes, was crystallized when he and de Beauvoir signed a pro-Israel statement affirming Israel's sovereignty and right to exist. Though Sartre hoped to remain almost neutral, this gesture was perceived as an unequivocal endorsement of Israel, shattering any illusion that he had stayed above the fray.

When Lotfi al-Khouli accused him of abandoning the Arab struggle after signing the statement on the eve of the Six-Day War, Sartre replied: All I did was take a principled stance against war. I have not wavered in my support for the Arab and Palestinian struggle for freedom and progress[22].

The thinker who framed existentialism as a humanist doctrine turned a blind eye to the concept of "existential justice" and "reciprocal freedom," deliberately ignoring the Israeli occupation of Palestine. He did not address the logic of justice or the Palestinians' right to exist. In his outwardly existentialist framework, he stripped them of their existence, failing to adopt a historical approach to examine the problem and analyze its essence. Instead, he relied on a collection of subjective impressions gathered from personal interviews.

22 - Op. cit.

The philosopher of human freedom willfully blinded himself to his own transgression against the Palestinian people, whom he deprived of their existential liberty. He equated the relationship between Israeli occupiers and Palestinians as a symmetrical struggle between two equally wronged parties. As Dr. Hatem al-Johari points out, Sartre's justification for supporting Israel at the expense of Palestinian rights involved a displacement of time, place, and history. On a spatial level, the Jews were persecuted in Europe—so how could the solution lie in Palestine? Temporally, Jews suffered in Europe throughout the Middle Ages—how could their salvation in the twentieth century come at the expense of the Palestinians? Historically, Jewish political sovereignty in the region had ended more than two thousand years ago—how, then, could this be invoked to justify dispossessing the Palestinians of their land?[23]

A month before the June 1967 war, Sartre and Beauvoir co-signed a statement, alongside 66 other French intellectuals, urging the French to support Israel. The statement argued that Israel was "the only nation whose very existence is being questioned and threatened by Arab leaders" and dismissed the notion that Israel was an imperialist state. It further asserted that "it is incomprehensible to define Israel as part of an imperialist and aggressive camp." In the Arab world, the statement was perceived as a betrayal of both Arab and Palestinian causes. Despite the backlash from Arab intellectuals, Sartre attempted to maintain his ostensible neutrality between Israel and the Palestinians—a stance that angered his Israeli hosts while failing to appease his Arab readers, who saw him as having abandoned the anti-colonial struggle. When war erupted, existentialism swiftly declined in the Arab world, largely due to Sartre's support for Israel[24].

23 - Sartre in Khan al-Khalili: He Slammed the Car Door on Souheil Idriss's Fingers and Denied the Palestinians› Rights.
(https://raseef22.net/article/1087790).

24 - Sartre and de Beauvoir: How the Palestinian Cause Marked the End of Existentialism's Most Famous Duo.
(https://www.ajnet.me/culture/20/3/2020/%D%8B%3D%8A%7D%8B%1D%8AA%D%8B-1%D%88%9D%8AF%D8%9A-%D%8A%8D%88%9D%81%9D%88%9D%8A%7D%8B%-1D%88%9D%8A%7D%84%9D%82%9D%8B%6D8%9A%D%8A%-9D%8A%7D%84%9D%81%9D%84%9D%8B%3D%8B%7D8%9A%D%86%9D8%9A%D%8A9).

Edward Said and Sartre

Edward Said recounts his discussions with Michel Foucault, which ultimately left him disillusioned. Though Foucault had been an intellectual inspiration, Said noted his reluctance to engage in conversations about Middle Eastern politics. "I realized why Michel Foucault hesitated to discuss the Middle East with me," Said recalls. "Soon after publishing some articles on the subject, he quickly distanced himself from it. In the late 1980s, Gilles Deleuze told me that he and Foucault had severed ties due to their disagreements over Palestine—Foucault supported Israel, whereas Deleuze stood firmly with the Palestinian cause. No wonder Foucault avoided discussing the Middle East with me—or with anyone!"

Foucault's stance on Palestine was not unique; many French intellectuals shared his perspective, though there were notable exceptions, such as the historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Genet, who lived among the Palestinians and wrote Four Hours in Shatila, one of the most moving texts on the Palestinian cause[25].

Said viewed such academic conferences as strategic attempts to penetrate the ranks of anti-colonial intellectuals and dismantle the intellectual resistance against Israel. These seemingly "innocent" gatherings, he argued, aimed primarily to exploit leftist critiques of communist intellectuals in order to silence debate on Palestine. The result was a form of ideological blackmail that made supporting the Palestinian cause synonymous with ideological extremism.

Said was deeply engaged in Palestinian political activism, serving as a member of the Palestinian National Council. Reflecting on a meeting he attended at Sartre's invitation, he observed that the true purpose of the gathering was to consolidate support for Israel—what is now termed "normalization"—rather than to address Palestinian or Arab concerns. "I found myself in the same position as many Arabs before me, trying to convince a leading thinker, such as Sartre, of the importance of our cause, hoping he might become another Arnold Toynbee."

25 - Abdelghani Boumaaza, Failure and Disillusionment: Edward Said's Encounter with Sartre | Athara.

Yet when Sartre was asked to speak, he merely read from a prepared two-page text that made no mention of Palestinians, their tragic past, or the occupied territories. There was no acknowledgment of Israeli settler colonialism, which in many ways mirrored French colonial practices in Algeria. Said was stunned: "I was utterly shocked to see this intellectual hero surrender, in his final years, to a reactionary master. Palestine was an issue of profound moral and political urgency—on par with Algeria and Vietnam—yet he disregarded it entirely."

Sartre never wavered in his support for Israel. His unwavering commitment to Zionism stemmed from a deep fear of being perceived as antisemitic, a lingering guilt over the Holocaust, and an unwillingness to fully recognize Palestinians as victims of Israeli injustice. Or was there another reason? Said confesses, "I will never know. All I know is that in his old age, Sartre was not the same man he once was.[26]"

The Philosopher's Ethical Test

In his study Ethics in the Test of Politics, Abdul Wahab Brahmi examines how Western philosophers have engaged with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, oscillating between "timid commitment," "supposed neutrality," and "covert support for the stronger party." He argues that there is often a stark disconnect between a philosopher's ideals and their real-world political stances. The Palestinian cause, he contends, remains one of the most critical moral tests of a philosopher's ethical commitment to humanity. At its core, it is a struggle for freedom in its most profound sense—a fight against the oppression of one people by another. Thus, no philosopher can evade their responsibility to confront it, both intellectually and politically.

Sartre epitomizes this ethical contradiction. Renowned for his advocacy of

26 - The Philosopher, Israel, and the Arabs: Edward Said's Encounter with Jean-Paul Sartre, translated by Dr. Zouhair al-Khoweildy.
[Al-Rai] (https://alrai.com/article/788480) – August 2022 ,8.
al-Ahram, Cairo, April 2000 ,19-13.
Edward W. Said, Le Monde Diplomatique, Issue 09, September 2000, pp. 5-4.
(https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/09/2000/SAID/2409).

humanism, intellectual commitment, and liberation struggles, he ultimately failed when confronted with the Palestinian question. His professed moral principles were tested—and found wanting. In his refusal to take a clear stance on Israel as an occupying power, he embraced a form of false neutrality, presenting himself as a friend to both Palestinians and Israelis alike. But in doing so, he avoided the moral reckoning that true ethical commitment demands[27].

27 - Abdelwahab Brahmi, Ethics in the Test of Politics
Published on November 2023 ,16.
[al-Mothaqaf] (https://www.almothaqaf.com/qadaya/%-972372D%8B%9D%8A%8D%8AF-%D%8A%7D%84%9D%88%9D%87%9D%8A%7D%8A%-8D%8A%7D%84%9D%8A%8D%8B%1D%8A%7D%9%87D%85%9D8%9A-%D%8A%7D%84%9D%8A%5D8%9A%D%8AA%D8%9A%D%82%9D%8A-7%D%81%9D8%9A-%D%8A%7D%8AE%D%8AA%D%8A%8D%8A%7D%8B%-1D%8A%7D%84%9D8%B%3D8%9A%D%8A%7D%8B%3D%8A9).