

## **The Middle East Conflict: What would Albert Einstein have said?**

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Albert Einstein was not only the most celebrated genius of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was also a man that put imagination before knowledge. So, imagine that we would get the possibility to set his mind today on how solve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. What would he have said, where would his imaginative mind have led him? This is certainly a speculative question, not least because since Einstein died in 1955 there have been four major wars in the region. However, considering the stalemate this conflict has reached and how far away the parties are from anything even approaching a stable peace, it does not seem unreasonable try such an exercise. The thought experiment was in fact Einstein's preferred scientific method. As a theoretical physicist he spent hardly any time in the lab and he was also not the sharpest of mathematicians. His genius was foremost his ability to think in unconventional ways or as the current wording goes, "to think outside the box" and for this he used thought experiments.

Einstein was not only the foremost theoretical physicist and natural scientist during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As is well known he was also strongly engaged in political and ideological issues and became, during the last decades of his life, something of a moral world conscience. His outspoken criticism of all kinds of nationalism, chauvinism, oppression, racism and militarism made headlines and infuriated his opponents. However, contrary to what is often thought of him nowadays, he was neither aloof from the real world nor was he politically naïve. On the contrary, his political thinking was strongly characterized by an astute realism. This realism was, according to Isaiah Berlin, connected to his ontological ideas about science which later has become known as "scientific realism". According to Einstein, the theories and concepts used by scientist resulted from their inventive imaginations, or to use the language of today, they were "social constructions". However, the purpose of the human imaginations was to discover the truth about an objective reality that existed independently of the concepts and theories that (fallible) humans had constructed. .

A result of this realism was that he, much earlier than most of his contemporaries, understood the barbarian nature of the Nazis. He warned his fellow Jewish scientists that their

assimilationist strategy would be useless in a Germany that was more and more dominated by the Nazi type of virulent anti-Semitism. His conclusion that Nazism had to be fought also made him abandon the international pacifist movement that he until 1933 had strongly supported and been engaged in. It is noteworthy that Einstein never compromised with the demand for the respect for human rights. Although he was some kind of socialist it is telling that contrary to many contemporary leftist intellectuals, he withstood all invitations to visit the Soviet Union or to collaborate with their cronies in the West, understanding that the Soviet leaders would use him in their political propaganda. Contrary to Jean-Paul Sartre and many other Western intellectuals, he had no illusions about Stalin or the Soviet leaders.

Einstein's relation to Zionism is, still today, under debate. Experiencing the virulent anti-Semitism in Germany after his move to Berlin, not least in the academic world, he came to support the Zionist movement in the early 1920s. He was, however, in the beginning more of a cultural Zionist than a political one and he expressed strong scepticism against the type of nationalistic militarism that occurred in part of the Zionist movement. According to Einstein, it was especially three ideals that a Jewish state had to defend and protect, namely "the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice and the desire for personal independence." As early as in the 1920s, Einstein warned the leading Zionists that if they did not come to a fair agreement with the Arab population in Palestine, the central lessons of the Jewish people's 2000 years of suffering would be betrayed. In what now seems like a true prophetic warning, he argued that if the Zionists could not create a harmonious relationship with its Arab neighbours, the conflict would haunt them for many decades to come.

From this and many of his other statements about conflicts in general and human rights in particular, it is safe to conclude that Einstein would have been very troubled by much of Israel's policies against the Palestinians as it has developed since the late 1960s. As a secular humanist, he would also have been troubled by the strongly increased religious character of the conflict on both sides. However, although he detested all kinds of nationalistic chauvinism, his realism led him to defend Israel's right to defend its existence, if so needed by military force.

Einstein's point of departure was that problems in science as well as in politics should be dealt with by going to their root causes, that is, from "first principles". Moreover, he also thought that conflicts could usually not be solved at the same level of perception as that which

had created them. He would therefore have turned away from the “who-is-mostly-to-blame” problem that since long has characterized most of the polemics about the conflict. Not because he would have thought that moral problems were unimportant, but because such a “book-keeping” idea of guilt could not lead to a lasting solution.

By going to the root of the problem he is likely to have concluded that this is a conflict that has the form of an “absolute zero-sum game”. A zero-sum game is a conflict in which what one side wins is equivalent to what the other side lose. An absolute zero-sum game is when what the conflict is about can not be divided – if one side wins it wins and then the other side loses everything. The reason why the conflict is “absolute”, its root cause, is that both sides claim that they have a divine right to the same piece of land. Einstein would have questioned if such a claim can be seen as valid. Can vast areas of land be holy, he would have asked? His answer would have been that neither Zionists not Palestinians can make such a claim because both groups buy and sell the land they claim is sacred. It is against the fundamental principles of logic, Einstein would have said, that something you are willing to sell for the right price can be holy. If you haggle about something, you can not claim that it is a sacred thing to you. Both sides could of course claim that the sacred status of the land determines that it can only be sold and bought within their own group. For Einstein, this would have been equivalent to accepting ethnic discrimination and therefore unacceptable.

This de-sacralization of the conflict would have been central to Einstein for the simple reason that it would change the basic character of the conflict so that it would no longer be an “absolute zero-sum game”. Something that can be converted into money can not be sacred and money has the additional advantage that it can be endlessly divided. Contrary to what Karl Marx thought, the conflict between capital and labor did not develop into a total conflict because unions and employers could negotiate endlessly because the substance of the conflict was (and still is) endlessly divisible.

Einstein’s next question would have been to ask what has been the foremost reason why all efforts to reach a stable peaceful solution has failed. We know the answer, namely the Israeli settlements on the West Bank and the Palestinians demand for the right of all refugees (including their descendants) to return to the land from which they fled or where forced away in 1948. Both claims are based on the principle of “sacred land” that Einstein would have refuted. He is also likely to have argued that the settlements, because they are the result of a

military conquest, are “un-Jewish” by their very nature. The right for the Palestinian refugees to return because Einstein would have seen it as completely unrealistic (and very dangerous) to place about four millions Palestinians in central parts of today’s Israel. He would also have pointed at the fact that although the situation of the Palestinian refugees is (and has been) deplorable, what happened to them in 1948 is in principle no different to what happened to many other groups of people during that period. For example the 400,000 Finns that a couple of years later were forced out of Karelia, or the many millions in central- and southern Europe (mostly Hungarians, Poles, Germans, Greeks and Slovaks) that through systematic ethnic cleansing were forced to leave their native lands. He would have remarked that none of these groups of people are today demanding a right to return to their “homeland”, probably because they do not believe that the soil their parents and grandparents had to leave some sixty years ago is sacred.

If we follow through on this thought experiment, what would then be a solution that would be in line with Einstein’s thinking based on the principles of justice, realism, respect for human rights and secular humanism. Einstein was, to put it mildly, not very fond of the combination of nationalist ideology and the State. His distaste for all kinds of “patriotic heroism” is well-known. It is therefore likely that he would have considered the type of two-state solution that “everyone” now argues for as unhealthy and a possible recipe for a future escalation of the conflict. Instead, he would have preferred a solution in line with the Swiss model with very strong local (cantonal) self-governing political structures and a weak and very limited central government combined with a proportionally elected cabinet in which all major groups had to collaborate. Given the conflicts between the Hamas in Gaza and Fatah at the West Bank, this is not so unrealistic. Add to this the conflicts between various groups of Jews in Israel, for example the secular majority in the Tel Aviv area and the now orthodox majority around and in Jerusalem, this turns out to make even more sense. The area is in practice already moving into a cantonal structure.

Einstein’s most radical proposal for a solution would be his thinking about the Palestinian refugee problem. Given that in his mind no such thing as “sacred land” can exist, it is easy to imagine that he would have reasoned as follows. Independently of why they (or their ancestors) left, if they did so voluntarily hoping to return with the victorious Arab armies or if they were forced away by Israeli military forces, they have suffered an injustice. Property that once was theirs has been taken away from them and for this they *as individuals* have the right

to first an official apology and secondly to be compensated. The property they left or had to leave has a market value today, the earnings they have lost can be estimated. Israel would have to compensate them (or their heirs) economically for what they have lost and by this recognize the injustice that they have suffered and in return the individual Palestinians would relinquish their demand to return. This may sound unrealistic, but new empirical research about this specific conflict by Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod indicates that a sincere recognition by the other party of the injustices done together with compensation for losses may be a way forward.

Claims for compensations would have to be decided by impartial courts (Einstein would have preferred the Swiss courts) and paid out to individuals. Einstein would have said no to the idea that such compensation should be distributed by the Palestinian authorities because their lack of respect for human rights and systemic corruption. Einstein's solution would change the situation from a conflict between states to a civil law conflict. The harm has not been done to a state but to individuals and it is therefore individuals that have the right to be compensated. Since all efforts to solve the conflict through international law have failed, Einstein's solution based on civil law as above is the central part of a thought experiment like this, not least because of his strong support for individual rights and his genuine mistrust of authoritarian states.

The result of such a solution would among other things be a large group of fairly (or very) wealthy ex-refugees, a Palestinian middle class that would be likely to use the money to invest in good future means of subsistence for themselves and their children. Certainly costly for Israel, but should be compared to the prospect of fighting a war every seventh year. Such an offer from Israel would also create a real challenge for the Islamist fundamentalists considering what they can offer the refugees in a foreseeable future. Einstein was unique not only as a scientist but also in his ability to sway the world public opinion, something that today's Israeli leadership could be well advised to learn from.

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The literature about Einstein is enormous. For this essay I have mainly relied on the following:

Berlin, Isaiah. "Einstein and Israel", *The New York Review of Books* 26, nr 17, 1979.

Clark, Ronald W. *Einstein: His Life and Times*. London: 1971.

Isaacson, Walter. *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. London: 2007

Jerome, Fred & Taylor, Rodger. *Einstein on Race and Racism*. Newark: 2005.

Stern, Fritz. *Einstein's German World*. Princeton 1999.

Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod's research is published in an article titled "Reframing Sacred Values" *Negotiation Journal* July 2008

About the ethnic cleansing in Europe after World War II, see Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*. New York: 2005.

#### *Abstract*

*What if we could ask Albert Einstein today about how to solve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Such a question is certainly speculative, but thought experiments were in fact Einstein's preferred scientific method. Einstein's political thinking was based on the principles of justice, realism, human rights and secular humanism. Problems should be dealt with by going to their root causes and cannot be solved by the level of awareness that created them. It is argued that Einstein would have criticized the idea of "land as sacred" and argued for a solution based civil law instead of international law.*

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<sup>1</sup> This is an English version of two articles published in Swedish media (*Göteborgsposten* June 3, 2010 and *Judisk Krönika* 2009:1). Bo Rothstein is August Röhss Professor in Political Science at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden and head of The Quality of Government Institute. Among his publications are *Just Institutions Matters* and *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust*, both at Cambridge University Press, as well as articles in scholarly journals. He has been serving as Visiting Professor at the Russell Sage Foundation, Harvard University and Cornell University.

