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The Jewish Diaspora and Israel: belonging at distance ?

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Abstract

The involvement of diasporas in the advent of modern nationalism is not a new phenomenon: already in the 19th century some diasporas wanted to “normalize” their national existence by building a state of their own. However, with the growing globalization trend in the 1990’s , especially in the areas of transportation and communication, Benedict Anderson put forward the idea of long-distance nationalism (LDN), as a new way of linking diasporas and the national project and creating thus a more intense sense of belonging. LDN has been characterized by him as having two main features: its unaccountability which allows for intense political radicalism and its instrumental function for strengthening ethnic identity in the diaspora and thus a sense of belonging. I will test those hypotheses in the case of the archetypal Jewish Diaspora

Diasporas played an important role in the advent of modern nationalism in the 18th and 19th centuries. The reason for their involvement was well stressed by Ernest Gellner in his masterwork *Nations and nationalism* (Gellner, 2006). Indeed the transition from an agrarian traditional society to an industrial modern one modifies the situation of Diasporas. In the pre-modern era they had well ascribed niches, both in the bureaucratic apparatus of empires and in the economic stratification of society. In the former, they often hold military and financial positions which were deemed as highly sensible; in the latter, they specialized in middlemen

occupations, many of them linked with trade and money. They held key positions which were essential for the functioning of state and society but they were deprived of real power because, as minorities which were differentiated from the majority of the population, generally by religion, they owed their specific position to the ruler and his protection. Paradoxically they were both structurally vital and politically marginalized. In the Ottoman Empire, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, scattered over the whole empire, perfectly fit these description (Braude & Lewis, 1982). With the strengthening of the nation-state, which requires a process of nationalization of the masses, Diasporas become fragile. In theory, they could benefit from the broadening of the social basis of the state: indeed, those minorities were often better educated, more mobile than the peasant masses which surrounded them and, thus, had suitable skills which were needed by the modern state. In practice, things turned out quite differently. The modernization of the state led to its reordering around a core culture which was the culture of the majority, a culture that the minorities did not share. They lost their past privileged status, became excluded from the national polity and, sometimes, this exclusion went so far as expulsion and genocide. In this tremendously changing environment, minorities have no choice but to turn themselves towards nationalist mobilization for their own sake: they want to build a protective state for their people. Here, again, the Ottoman Empire is a good example both of a radical policy of ‘Turkification’ and of counter-nationalisms (for Greeks and Armenians).

Exile and nationalism

The experience of exile for nationalism is a sociological fact that led Lord Acton, a liberal Catholic and professor of history at Cambridge, to state in 1862 that ”exile is the nursery of nationality” (Balakrishnan,1996,28); meaning by that that people become nationalist precisely when they live for long periods outside their homeland. Of course, this statement should not be taken at face value. Nationalism has bloomed among deeply-rooted people, it does not

require exile. However, it should also clearly be stressed that exile is not in contradiction with a nationalist commitment, on the contrary. It may well foster nationalism because exile feeds a sense of estrangement which, by reaction, causes a longing for belonging.

It is undisputable that many people became committed nationalist leaders after long stay abroad. Let us just briefly think of Giuseppe Garibaldi, Lajos Kossuth, and Gandhi. Their struggle for Italy's unity, Hungary's and India's independence was reinvigorated by their forced or voluntary exile. Thus, even for nationalisms which could count on a strong following in the homeland, the exile of some of their prominent leaders, far from weakening their nationalist commitment, strongly fostered it (Shain, 2005).

However, if exile is not antithetical to nationalism there is nevertheless a manifest difference between exile as an individual experience for some nationalist leaders and exile as a collective condition for a people. When a significant portion of a people is severed from his homeland and aspires to restore its sovereignty something very unique emerges: a diaspora nationalism. Anthony Smith defined the later as "an ideological movement to secure for a self-defined ethnocultural population collective autonomy, unity and identity by restoring its members to their historic homeland" (Smith, 2010, 4)

The key success of diaspora nationalists is the building of a new state and the consistent support provided to it afterwards. However, the advent of the state does rarely completely put an end to the diaspora: if some parts of the people may return to the homeland, others will stay put but nevertheless feel an attachment to the new state and often get involved in various ways in its political, economic, social and cultural evolution. They are connected to this new polity which gives meaning to their lives and nurtures their sense of belonging.

Of course, for the vast majority of people, national belonging is experienced directly by living in a specific society, the one in which their parents and themselves have lived, the one whose language they speak. It is an everyday belonging which is routinely reenacted through daily

shared practices which unites the people in a collective self (Billig, 1995: Skey, 2011). This everyday belonging has a strong spatial dimension as it takes place in a bounded national territory.

However, this kind of “natural” identification is not possible for Diasporans who, by definition, live outside their homeland. First of all, belonging from abroad remains a possibility because belonging should not be understood only as a given. In modern societies, belonging has become, at least partly, a choice i.e. the consequence of a free will, the willingness to assume a self-identity by sharing freely a group membership (Guibernau, 2013). This dimension of will is crucial as Diasporans living in democratic states have the clear choice to be entirely severed from the homeland, to assimilate entirely within the host society and to belong only to their host society. However, they can also choose to keep their specific identity by maintaining various links with the homeland through different kinds of involvement (advocacy, fundraising, traveling...). This multidimensional involvement creates an emotional attachment of the Diasporans towards the homeland which gives them the feeling that they share a common existential experience despite geographical distance. The communication revolution (television, Internet, social media...) has vastly contributed to a tremendous time-space compression which has, at least symbolically and emotionally, reduced the difference between the inside and the outside. This major process has undeniably eased the expression of belonging and its maintenance in the long run. Globalization especially in the areas of transportation and communication has thus been a powerful push factor for national belonging by keeping a new closeness between “outsiders” and “insiders” (Dufoix, 2008)

One eminent way of concretizing this sense of belonging is through politics by giving support to political parties in the homeland or by taking part in the elections (when one has a dual citizenship), two ways of concretizing long distance nationalism.

Let us briefly define LDN. It is a “nationalism from abroad”, the nationalism of diasporans or immigrants in favor of their homeland. LDN “binds together immigrants, their descendants, and those who have remained in their homeland into a single transborder citizenry” (Schiller & Fouron, 2001, 20). By so doing, it fosters the idea that, despite the fact that the people are scattered in different places (including the homeland), they form one unit which shares a common transnational identity. Schiller and Fouron have isolated five specifications of LDN: its ideological dimension that links people to a specific territory – its practical dimension as long-distance nationalists take actions on behalf of the homeland (political and financial support) – its contextual dimension (LDN may be eased or discouraged both by the host country and the home country) – its political dimension and, lastly, its imagined dimension. The two last features are especially relevant for us. The political foundation of LDN lays in its vision of a transnational polity which includes homeland and diaspora around a common political destiny. This vision leads to an imagined community of a special kind, a “transborder nation” which has its axis in the national territory but many ramifications in diaspora countries. Because LDN is linked with the defense of an existing state or with an aspiration to create a new state it is thus a specific form of collective belonging which should be distinguished from other forms of collective belonging based on religion or ethnicity which are devoid of this yearning for a state (Glick - Schiller & Fouron, 2001,23).

The late Benedict Anderson has been the first one to put forward this stimulating idea of LDN (Anderson, 1998). He linked long-distance nationalism to two very specific features.

The first feature is the unaccountability of LDN which allows for intense political radicalism. Because they live in democratic countries of which they are often citizens, the immigrants and their descendants can take extreme political positions by supporting the fiercest nationalists in their home country because they don't fear any coercive measures. As Anderson writes:

“Many of the most uncompromising fanatical adherents of independent Khalistan do not live in the Punjab but have prosperous businesses in Melbourne and Chicago. The Tigers in Jaffna are stiffened in their violent struggles by Tamil communities in Toronto, London, and elsewhere, all linked on the computer by Tamilnet” (Anderson, 1998, 73).

Although he was cautious to state it would be “a mistake to assume that long-distance nationalism is necessarily extremist”, he emphasized that “in general, today’s LDN strikes one as a probably menacing portent for the future”. What makes LDN dangerous is that diasporans have it both ways. On one hand, they take benefit from their location in free democratic countries to express harsh political views, collect money for their most radical brethren abroad and even sometimes send arms to the homeland. On the other hand, they don’t owe anything to the political authorities in the homeland and they don’t pay any price for their words and deeds. The long-distance nationalist “need not fear prison, torture, or death, nor need his immediate family” (Anderson, 1998, 74).

The second feature of LDN is its instrumental function as it helps to strengthen ethnic identity in the diaspora. In the various host states where ethnicity has become more and more salient since the 1970’s asserting nationalism in the diaspora has become a way to defend an “embattled ethnic identity” (Anderson, 1998, 74). LDN gives those people, who are often socially marginalized and stigmatized (at least when they originate from post-colonial countries), a kind of self-esteem: they experience being nationalist political agitators who fight for the collective emancipation of their people and against the oppression of ruthless rulers.

I would like to test these two hypotheses in the case of what is often described as the most “archetypal diaspora” (Armstrong, 1982, 206-213), the contemporary Jewish Diaspora.

Jewish nationalisms

To begin with, as is well known, modern Jewish *nationalisms* were products of the diaspora. It could not be otherwise, as a matter of fact, because Jews lived as a people almost all in the diaspora at the end of the 19th century. Two main varieties of Jewish nationalism developed. The first one was a fully assumed diaspora nationalism which fought for national rights of the Jewish people in the diaspora. It took various forms such as Dubnow's diaspora autonomism (Dubnow, 1970) or bundism. The Bund, which became a large mass party in the Russian empire, claimed cultural autonomy for the Jewish people, i.e. their right to develop their own culture within democratic states, mainly in a democratic Russia which should have superseded the tsarist empire (Levin, 1978, 219-373). The second trend of Jewish nationalism was Zionism which advocated the migration of the Jews out of the diaspora and their settlement in Palestine where they should build a sovereign state. Zionism promoted a political-modernization project while drawing upon an ethnic identity which was preserved by religion (Roshwald, 2004).

Zionism was a very unusual nationalism. Indeed the vast majority of nationalisms emerged among rooted people "which can habitually claim to have been the physical possessors of the land for centuries, with few co-ethnics residing for long outside the homeland ethnic community or ethnic state" (Smith, 1995, 8). What is more it was also a unique diaspora nationalism, different from other diaspora nationalisms (Shimoni, 1995 ; Dieckhoff, 2002). However, it shared with two other mobilized diasporas (Armstrong, 1976), the Greeks and the Armenians, several common features. From a sociological perspective, they were all three 'middleman minorities' which turned largely to commercial and liberal occupations and their dispersion was an asset helping them to establish transnational networks. From an identity perspective, the groups were based on powerful collective memories enshrined in religious texts and on a rich sacred history. Finally, dispersal was an ancient phenomenon which lasted

for centuries (Smith, 1995). However, there is uniqueness in the Jewish case, because the general dispersion affected almost the whole people and lasted for almost two millennia. In the Greek world, there were identified ‘outside’ Greek communities scattered in the three empires (mainly the Ottoman empire, but also the Habsburg and Romanov empire) but the core Greek people was settled in mainland Greece and in the islands of the Aegean and Ionian Sea. The same held for the Armenian people whose bulk remained in central Transcaucasia and Eastern Anatolia, till the great massacres of 1895-1896 and the genocide of 1915. In the Jewish case, the picture was very different. When the Zionist Organization was created in 1897, 99% of the ten million Jews lived in the diaspora, spread in a large area stretching from Russia to the United States. It was pressing for the success of Zionism to bring large parts of people to settle the ancestral homeland, *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel); even more so as it was inhabited by an Arab people which made up 95% of the whole population at the end of the 19th century. The very unique feature of the Jewish people led anyway a majority of Jews to believe that Zionism was nothing but a pipe dream. However, progressively Jews took roots in Palestine during the interwar years, giving more credit to Zionism. After the Holocaust, within the Jewish world, Zionism was able to garner more and more support and in the wake of the Six-day war (1967) it became an undisputed rallying point. Of course, the saliency of the commitment to Israel changes over time: it is stronger in crisis/war time, less visible in “normal” time. However, a threat to the homeland’s survival serves often as an important mobilizing force for diasporic communities. For example, a wide emergency campaign was launched with much success in 2006 for Israel’s Northern residents who were threatened during Israel’s war against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Even if there are variations in the intensity of the attachment to Israel, the symbolic centrality of the State of Israel for modern Jewry cannot be denied and has clearly deepened over the last 65 years. However what can we conclude as far as long-distance nationalism is concerned?

To answer in depth this question, I will focus my analysis on American Jewry, for two different reasons. The first reason has to do with substance. American Jews are the largest Jewish diaspora in the world. The National Jewish Population Survey (2000-01), sponsored by the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella organization of the Jewish federation system, estimates that the Jewish population totals 5.2 million people in the United States (United Jewish Communities, 2003). The figure has been disputed by some scholars who have used a different methodology for counting and have thus ended up with a higher estimate of 6.5 million (Saxe, Tighe & Boxer, 2014, 37-54). This disagreement does not call into question the fact that American Jewry makes up 70% of the 8,1 million diaspora. What's more this diaspora matters, especially, politically as it is settled in the most powerful country of today's world which, too, has developed a very close partnership with Israel.

The second reason for focusing on American Jewry has to do with the broad availability of data. Contrary to French or British Jewry for which data is scarce, the scholar is able to use many surveys and polls commissioned by various Jewish organizations (American Jewish Committee, United Jewish Communities), universities and research centers (Pew Research Center) which provide useful data, essential to decipher the link between American Jews and Israel and thus the relevance of the LDN paradigm as understood by Benedict Anderson.

The Jewish diaspora and politics

When we speak about the Jewish Diaspora in the US we should first distinguish clearly between organizations and ordinary people. The most important Jewish organizations (Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress) are legitimist i.e. they support the State of Israel and the government which is in charge of the country. The same could be said about the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish

Organizations which is mainly active on the executive level, with the White House and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the powerful lobbying group at Congress. AIPAC officially at least tends to be neutral, i.e. both bipartisan in the United States and supportive of any Israeli government (on AIPAC, see Buck, 2014; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). These organizations pretend to defend “consensus politics” by avoiding clear cut positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They try to embody a kind of general attachment to Israel which is indeed very present, on the average, among American Jews. The Pew Research Center’s “Portrait of Jewish Americans” showed that overall, 70% of Jews surveyed said they felt emotionally either very attached (30%) or somewhat attached (39%) to Israel. In addition, 43% of Jews have been to Israel, including 23% who have visited more than once (Pew Research Center, 2013).

The major American Jewish organizations are thus avoiding taking strongly ideological positions but support Israel by principle and are reluctant to publicly criticize it (Waxman, 2013). However, some warnings have to be issued. First, beyond the proclaimed neutrality of the organizations, their communal leadership lean, unquestionably, more towards the Israeli right than the left. Both Howard Kohr, AIPAC’s CEO, and Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice-chairman of the Conference of Presidents, have obvious political affinities for Likud (currently Israel’s leading right-wing party). Thus, at the end of the day, those leaders are more receptive to nationalist policies in Israel than they are to politics of compromise. American Zionism has changed over time: until the end of the sixties, it was rooted in political liberalism; afterwards it has drifted away, becoming more and more narrowly communitarian and “indifferent to whether democratic values governed American life and whether those values governed the Jewish state” (Beinart, 2012, 48).

The conservative communal establishment has been able to rely on the support of some American right wing donors. Thus, the business magnate Sheldon Adelson financially

supports both Republican candidates in the US Congress, AIPAC and the strongly right-wing Zionist Organization of America, while at the same time supporting Netanyahu in Israel. In the same vein, Irving Moskowitz, another American businessman (1928-2016), has generously supported the most extreme Jewish settler groups like Ateret Cohanim (Crown of the priests) and El'ad (Ir David Foundation) which develop housing projects in the heart of Arab neighbourhoods in the Old city and in East Jerusalem. With both people, we have figures who can indulge in nationalism by proxy without ever bearing any negative consequences for their actions.

However, this is only part of the picture. Indeed, what is striking is the huge gap between the main Jewish organizations and the average American Jew. As stated by a shrewd observer:

“In their support for a halt to settlement growth and their comfort with public criticism of Israel policy, the mass of American Jews are to the left of the organizations that speak in their names, organizations that almost always oppose US pressure on Israeli leaders and blame the Palestinians almost exclusively for the lack of Middle East peace” (Beinart, 2012, 43).

Indeed, starting in the late 1970's, after Likud came to power in Israel, which fed Israeli nationalism, many liberal American Jews felt discomfort and began to support the Israeli peace movement (Peace now). They were also involved in back channel negotiations with the PLO. For instance, in December 1988, five prominent American Jews (among them international lawyer Rita Hauser) met Yasser Arafat, chairman of the PLO, in Stockholm. They were able to get a commitment from the Palestinian leader for the acceptance of Israel's existence and direct negotiations on the basis of U.N. Resolutions 242 and 338 (which materialized five years later with the Oslo Accords). Liberal American Jews also established the New Israel Fund in 1980 as an alternative organization to the United Israel Appeal which

channels funds to the Jewish Agency for Israel. For more than 35 years, NIF has supported various organizations in Israel which fight for religious pluralism within Judaism, women's rights, equality between Jews and Arabs. Many diaspora groups played a softening – and not radicalizing – role in Israel: they promoted peace initiatives with the Palestinians and worked for a more openly tolerant Israeli society. Finally, in 2008, a genuine lobby, JStreet, was created as a counter-balance to AIPAC. The two core principles it defends are the following: commitment to the people and the state of Israel, and achieving a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinian people.

It financially helps candidates for the Congress with real success. The JStreet political action committee, which supports candidates who defend actively a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was able to distribute over \$2.4 million to its 95 endorsed candidates during the 2014 Congress election. In a very competitive political environment, 79 out of 95 endorsees won their races, including 92% of incumbents. The 2014 Congress included 12 Senators (out of 100) and 74 Representatives (out of 435) endorsed by JStreet PAC (JStreet PAC, 2015).

The success of the “pro-Israel, pro-peace” lobby, as it depicts itself, would not have been possible without the clear support of a wide range of donors who predominantly are members of the Jewish community. This strong commitment is, in many ways, not surprising when we take into account that 78 % of American Jews in 2008 and 69% in 2012 voted for Barack Obama. When it comes to Israel, American Jews are also, clearly, supporters of a negotiated agreement between the PLO and Israel. 87% of American Jews supported Rabin's government initiative to open peace negotiations with the PLO in September 1993. Only 8% said the government was wrong and 5% were hesitant. Of course, there were nuances among American Jews: Reform Jews, Conservative Jews and “unaffiliated” were a crushing majority in favor of Rabin's peace efforts while there was only a slim majority (52%) of Orthodox

Jews sharing that view (Green, 1995: 53-70). However, Reform, Conservative and “unaffiliated” constitute the bulk of American Jewry while Orthodox Jews are a minority.

American Jewish opinion has, of course, shifted in the last twenty years. Obviously, the bloody al Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005), Iran’s nuclear program and the dangerous growth of jihadism in the Middle East, has reduced American Jewish enthusiasm for a stalled peace process. However, even without any sign of progress towards a permanent settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 50% of American Jews still favor the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel (47% oppose it). A majority of 56% thinks also that, as part of a permanent settlement with the Palestinians, Israel should dismantle all or some of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank (American Jewish Committee, 2013). Clearly, American Jews are not especially hawkish; they are not extreme long-distance nationalists who condemn any compromise solution with the Palestinians. On the whole, far-right nationalism, which advocates the annexation of part of the West Bank to Israel, the permanent subordination of the Palestinian people and the rejection of a Palestinian state, is much stronger in Israel itself than it is in the diaspora, as shown by March 2015 general elections. Strong nationalist ideas are not only taken up by far-right parties (Israel Beitenu and Jewish Home with 12% of the votes), but also by ultra-orthodox parties (Shas and United Judaism with 11% of the votes) and the main right wing party (Likud, 24%).

The degree of attachment to Israel by American Jews may vary according to religious denomination and age (see below), but overall it remains high (Sasson, 2014). Regular surveys confirm the attachment of American Jews to Israel. To the question “do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘Caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew.’” 70% answer in the affirmative (American Jewish Committee, 2013). To the question: “How close do you feel to Israel?” 31% answered “Very close” and 37% “Fairly close” (American Jewish Committee, 2011). However, there is an interesting finding: it is not

possible to make a direct connection between attachment to Israel and right-wing political leanings. In other words, a strong attachment to the Jewish state does not necessarily translate into supporting right-leaning positions in the USA and in Israel. It is one possibility, but attachment may also go with support for the left or with the absence of any political commitment. In their study of non-Orthodox Jews, Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman state clearly that “those with left-leaning and right-leaning political identities hardly differ with respect to Israel attachment”. Interestingly they even find that “younger right-of-center Jews are actually more distant from Israel than left-of-center Jews of their same age range” (Cohen & Kelman, 2010: 290). This counter-intuitive observation has to do with the fact that taking up a Republican position in the US, which differs from the general voting pattern of American Jews, is a strong indicator of assimilation within the American polity and thus leads to a de-identification with Israel. In other words, those young Jews who support the Republican party have a strong sense of belonging to American society and a weak sense of belonging to the Jewish people (which translates in a weaker attachment to Israel).

Another in-depth study has been conducted among young adult diaspora Jews (18-26 year olds) who take part in the Taglit-Birthright program, whose aim is to familiarize young members of the diaspora with contemporary Israel (Saxe & Chazan, 2008). The program financed by private philanthropy, Jewish charities and the Israeli government, is organized around a 10-day educational tour. It is a tremendous success as, since 1999, it brought more than 350,000 diaspora young Jews to Israel. In terms of the impact of this program on those participating, it raised awareness of Israel’s political and social reality. It gave them also a general knowledge of Israel which helped them to formulate more informed opinions. It strengthened their Jewish identity and the sense of belonging to a transnational Jewish people. On the whole, the program reinforced their attachment to Israel. However, it did not move massively their political sympathies towards the Israeli right and generate deep nationalist

feelings. The program had quite marginal impact on the political views of the participants. The conclusion of the study is straightforward: “the program has been able to encourage homeland attachment, predicated upon shared diaspora-homeland Jewish identity, without promoting the ethnonationalist projects of the Israeli right” (Sasson et al., 2014: 451), thus calling into question Anderson’s assumption that there is a propensity for people living outside the homeland to indulge in intense political radicalism.

To conclude, two main lessons can be drawn. First, by linking American Jews and Israeli Jews, long-distance nationalism is indeed leading to a “transborder belonging” : by partaking in a “single political project” (Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001:22-23), Diasporans and “homeland Jews” experience a common peoplehood revolving around the defense of the territorialized state of Israel. The state becomes the axis of a shared identity.

Secondly, long-distance nationalism is not politically unidimensional. It has many different shades. To begin with, there is a growing discrepancy between the leadership and the donors of main organizations who are receptive to nationalist positions, and the rank and file of the Jewish community who are politically more liberal and not sensitive to nationalist appeals. Moreover, there is a wide diversity of political trends within the Jewish American diaspora (as in France and the United Kingdom). Unaccountability gives room for manoeuvre to supporters of political radicalism, but there are many more people prone to compromise and in favor of political negotiations than the reverse. Thus, attachment to Israel does not translate into a uniform political stand supportive of ethnonationalist positions. In fact, as for localized nationalism, “the long-distance version can contain and be used to express a myriad of political agendas” (Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001:29). It is not structurally different from classical territorialized nationalism which can take either liberal or more authoritarian forms.

Nationalism and ethnic identity

The American Jewry identification with Israel became undoubtedly more intense in the wake of the Six-Day War (1967). It was also facilitated by the fact that the United States became Israel's main strategic ally: a strong commitment to Israel was in tune with the foreign policy orientation of the country of which there were citizens. The symbolic centrality of Israel led some commentators to state that Israel had become the "religion of American Jews" (Glazer, 1979:233). This mass conversion to pro-Israel positions is confirmed by the recognition of Israel as the spiritual and cultural center of world Jewry by almost all Jewish denominations in the US, from Reform to Orthodox and Conservative. This recognition went for long time hand in hand with an unconditional support for Israel by most American Jews. It translated in generous and centralized fundraising, consensual advocacy and deference to Israeli political leadership. However, the era of blind support for Israel is now past. In the last twenty years, a growing trend of criticism towards Israeli leaders and their policies has developed among American Jewry as Israel seemed more and more dominated by strongly right-wing nationalists and unable to end a fifty years occupation (Waxman, 2016).

Today the American Jewish community is more divided over Israel, a trend which cannot be without consequences when it comes to examine the role played by LDN in the strengthening of Jewish collective identity. Indeed Anderson's second assumption is that remote nationalism helps to strengthen ethnicity in the diaspora. In what sense is this actually warranted in the Jewish case?

The first observation has to do with the kind of attachment linking American Jews to Israel. Indeed, it looks in many ways more symbolic than concrete. To the question, "Have you ever been to Israel?" 59% answer negatively. Among those answering no, 31% say that they are not interested ¹ (American Jewish Committee, 2012). The percentage is significant and leads

¹ Other answers are : 48% : I have never had the opportunity to go - 32% : it is too expensive – 13% : I am afraid – 11% : other.

us to a further question: who are those American Jews who are the least interested to visit Israel? The answer is obvious when we link interest in Israel with religious denominations. Indeed to the question “Have you ever visited Israel”, 73% of Orthodox, 53% of Conservative, 34% of Reform, 27% of “just Jewish” answer yes. Concurrently, 68% of Orthodox, 39% of Conservative, 21% of Reform, 24% of “just Jewish” feel very emotionally attached to Israel (National Jewish Population Survey, 2005: 21). The conclusion is straightforward: the more one is strictly religious, the more one is attached to Israel. Religion is the core of Jewish identity in the US and along religion comes concern for Israel.

Commitment to Israel is a consequence of religious affiliation, it does not function as a substitute for religion. Conversely, involvement in Israel’s affairs does not work as a strong ‘ethnic marker’ for non-religious Jews. Affiliated Jews are closer to Israel than Jews who are not organizational members.

This, indeed, is an important conclusion which is confirmed by a study undertaken by Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman on the basis of a national survey focusing on the non-Orthodox respondents (Cohen & Kelman, 2007). The feelings of closeness towards Israel have been measured through various questions aiming to measure the emotional attachment to Israel, the caring for Israel, the engagement for Israel and the support for Israel. The conclusion is clear: the overall attachment to Israel is weaker among non-orthodox younger Jews than among their parents and grandparents. The authors stress that we are confronted here with a cohort effect rather than a family life cycle effect. This means that the level of attachment is strongly linked with age (when the people were born) and will not improve with passage of time and the evolution of the family structure (e.g. marriage, arrival of children). While this conclusion has been disputed by some critics (Sasson, Kadushin & Saxe, 2010), the study shows a clear pattern of declining attachment to Israel over the last 50 years among non-Orthodox Jews.

The distancing from Israel is affecting primarily the category of Jews who are non-Orthodox, i.e. the fastest-growing segment of the American Jewish population. We used to think of American Jews as a community divided along three main religious denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform). However this view is more and more out of touch with reality as more and more Jews are “beyond religion”: they do not define themselves as Jews by religion, but they nevertheless define themselves as Jews. This category of population has been defined as Jews-not-by-religion or cultural Jews. It is a growing fraction within the Jewish population which has jumped from around 20% in 1990 to around 37% in 2008 (Kosmin, 2009). It is interesting to notice that this trend is perfectly in tune with the general trend of the American population where the number of “Nones” (i.e. those not identifying with any religion) has increased from 8% to 15%. Although the de-identification move is more pronounced in the Jewish case, it takes place against a steady, even if slow, decline of religious affiliation in the US.

What kind of links do these Jews-not-by-religion have with Israel? Another study based on the American Jewish Identity Survey (AJIS) 2001 gives a clear answer: “While more than half (62%) of those who identify as Jews-by-religion are very or somewhat emotionally attached to Israel, more than half of Jews with no religion are not (not at all or not very) attached to Israel” (Kaysar, 2010). In other words, the Jews-not-by-religion are undoubtedly less attached to Israel than Jews by religion. With the regular growth of this fraction of the population (especially through intermarriage) the distancing from Israel can only widen.

Here we get at the heart of the matter. Indeed who are these Jews-not-by-religion? Predominantly, the spouses of non-Jews or the *jewishly* identifying children of Jewish

and non-Jewish parents who cannot define themselves as Jews by religion.² They take up an exclusively ethnic identity, devoid of any religious content. However, contrary to what could be intuitively expected, the attachment to Israel, and thus to LDN, does not play an active role in sustaining ethnicity. In practice, LDN cannot have this sustaining role because these Jews-not-by-religion are deeply acculturated and assimilated to American life. Their differences with the “average American” in terms of life style, social habits, and professional activities are more and more limited. In many ways, they already belong, almost exclusively, to the American nation. Thus they cannot develop a strong national attachment to a country (Israel) which is in many ways foreign to them. When ethnicity becomes too symbolic, it runs the risk of disappearing altogether. Thirty five years ago, American sociologist Herbert Gans put forward a challenging diagnosis which run counter the mood of the day which celebrated an ethnic revival in the United States. For him, this ethnic upsurge was just a myth. In depth, the processes of acculturation and assimilation are going on, giving way to a symbolic or soft ethnicity which manifests itself through some rites de passage, consumption of ethnic foods, involvement with national politicians and international issues (Gans, 1979). Gans noted with insight that symbolic ethnicity can express itself through politically and geographically distant phenomena, “such as nationalist movements in the old country”, thus heralding long-distance nationalism. He added very cautiously: “It is possible that as allegiances towards organized local Jewish communities weaken, Israel becomes a substitute community to satisfy identity needs” (Gans, 1979, 10).

Based on the various data we have looked into, this last possibility is not materializing, and will not. Indeed, what we are witnessing is the hollowing of Jewish ethnic identity when it secularizes. Attachment to Israel is clearly not giving ‘substance’ to a Jewish secular identity.

On the contrary, the process of secularization is distancing cultural Jews from Israel and

² There is one exception with Reform Judaism. Indeed, in 1983, this denomination adopted the principle of patrilineal descent which means that the child of a Jewish father, in an interfaith couple, will be considered as a Jew if he receives a Jewish education and does not practice another religion.

excludes the possibility of LDN. On the other side, attachment to Israel goes hand in hand with Jewish religious identity: commitments to Israel and to Judaism go together. In other words, long-distance nationalism is reinforcing already “deep identities”, it does not reinvigorate already “thin identities”. LDN is an expression of a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people when belonging is already structured around religion, it does not help to create a sense of belonging from scratch. This observation leads us to qualify Montserrat Guibernau’s main argument of belonging by choice in modern societies when it comes to Jews in the diaspora (Guibernau, 2013): indeed the Jews who already follow religious practices (the more traditional Jews) develop concomitantly a strong sense of belonging to a transnational Jewish people while the Jews who are detached from religion and behave as “free individuals” do not, for the most part, choose to proclaim a strong membership of the Jewish people. Belonging by choice is definitely an option in modern societies, but it has much more meaning for some group membership (political, social...) than for others (ethno-religious).

The interplay between national commitment and religious identity leads us to relativize the often made opposition between nationalism, seen as a modern ideology, and religion, seen as an ancient belief. Benedict Anderson himself wrote that “in Western Europe, the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but also the dusk of religious modes of thought” (Anderson, 2006:11). He was undeniably right to stress the genuine modernity of nationalism which could only arise with the decline of religious belief, but he may have underestimated the connections between the national imagined community and the religious imagined community which explains why committed believers are also today sometimes the most committed nationalists and the promoters of a vigorous religious nationalism (Juergensmeyer, 1993), a noteworthy trend in Israel (Shelev, 2010) but also elsewhere (Veer, 1994).

Beyond the Jewish case

The careful examination of the Jewish (American) diaspora's standing vis-à-vis Israel does not confirm Anderson's intuition that long-distance nationalism works as a mobilization category that fosters unaccountability which allows for intense political radicalism and that has an instrumental function for strengthening ethnic identity in the diaspora. As the Jewish diaspora is rightly seen as an archetypal diaspora, the refutation of Anderson's assumptions puts into question any overt generalization of his intuition. It has to be a great deal relativized as some scholars have already done (Jaffrelot & Therwhat, 2007; Sasson et al., 2014).

Indeed, the central feature of diasporas are their deep internal heterogeneity. They are crossed by multiple cleavages (ideological, religious, social...), by differing interests and, thus, engage in various forms of political mobilization vis-à-vis their homeland. Sometimes mobilization materializes in the support for extreme nationalist options as was the case with the Croatian (Ragazzi, 2009; Skrbiš, 1999) and Tamil diaspora (Fuglerud, 1999); sometimes it can give way to the support for liberal political options, even pushing the diaspora to act to foster peace, as was the case with the Irish diaspora which played an decisive role in supporting the process which led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement on Northern Ireland (Mac Ginty, 1997).

It is also decisive to examine the shifting relations with nationalism in the homeland and abroad. Thus, in the Tamil case, during the war years in Sri Lanka (1983-2009), the diaspora and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) shared the common objective of turning north and east Sri Lanka into a separate Tamil state. After the crushing defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the people in the homeland, weary of war and longing for peace, contemplated a democratic solution within Sri Lanka while the diaspora stuck to rhetoric of mobilization in

favor of an independent state. The Tamil case is one of disjuncture between a more militant diaspora and a more accommodationist homeland (International Crisis Group, 2010; Brun & Van Hear, 2012).

The Tamil case underlines also the fact that the structural positioning of the diaspora matters very much. To use Gaby Sheffer's seminal distinction, it is not the same to be a stateless diaspora and a state-linked diaspora (Sheffer, 2003). The stateless diasporas are longing for a state, a prospect which in a world already completely divided among more than 190 states can only become a reality through a process of secession. Yet, secession is rarely welcomed by the leaders of an existing state, which means that armed struggle is very often promoted as the only way to become an independent nation (Pavkovic and Radan, 2011). Stateless diasporas have a proclivity to take radical political positions. Conversely, state-linked diasporas which have already a state to defend are certainly more pluralistic in their political attitudes, a pluralism that mirrors the one existing in the homeland – of course, when the regime is democratic.

Another parameter which has to be taken into account is the time factor. Indeed, diasporas do not develop a unidimensional relationship with their homeland: the links are changing with the passage of time. Obviously, times of crisis lead to more clear-cut stands than ordinary times.

The second feature of LDN, according to Anderson, is its driving function in bolstering ethnic identity in the diaspora. The Jewish case shows that a nationalist commitment alone does not reinforce ethnicity; it is a complement to religion, which plays the key role. How is nationalism working in other cases? Can it be an enduring force which is able to sustain ethnicity on a mostly secular basis? Or has it to be linked to other 'identity providers', foremost religion? To answer those tough questions, we need both more case studies and comparative research, in the line of the one undertaken by Daniele Conversi (2012) in order to

better understand long-distance nationalism and the kind of belonging it fosters as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon.

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