



Gandhi's Dream of Hindu-Muslim Unity and its two Offshoots in the Middle East

Simone Panter-Brick

Independent scholar

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Abstract

This article is a historical exploration of some of Gandhi's attempts to unite the Hindu and Muslim populations of India, as well as his political experiments with non-violent resistance. It provides an outline of the period beginning from his first campaign in South Africa to the eve of the Second World War. In light of Gandhi's dream to unite Muslims and Hindus, his defiance to British imperialism, and the results of his political struggles, it presents aspects of the Mahatma's political maneuvering that remain largely unknown until this day – a secret episode still shrouded in mystery. His intervention in the Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine has been kept a carefully guarded secret, decades after Gandhi's assassination. Within the historical and political timeline of Gandhi's political actions, within and outside India, this article analyses the conditions that led him to intervene in Palestinian affairs, his expectations thereof, and the outcomes of his endeavours.

Keywords: *Satyagraha*, India, Palestine, Hindu-Muslim unity, Arab-Israeli conflict

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi aspired to represent all his fellow-countrymen, Muslims no less than Hindus. This he had achieved in South Africa. It was also in South Africa that he firstly experimented with non-violent resistance, to which he gave the name of *satyagraha*. On his return to India (1915), he sought Hindu-Muslim unity on an all-India scale. He was initially successful in winning Muslim support by backing and leading the movement for the maintenance of the Ottoman Caliphate (Panter-Brick 2008a). This interference in the affairs of the Middle East was the first incidental offshoot of Gandhi's dream. He became involved in the Palestinian conflict in 1937, when approached by the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem for his support. His involvement was kept secret and did not bear fruit: success could not be achieved without the Muslims of India, who so heavily outnumbered their Muslim brothers in Palestine. Moreover, the political environment in India and Palestine was not conducive to the realization of his dream.

This article reviews the nature and scope of the Mahatma's original vision, which aimed to achieve a common Hindu-Muslim cause by means of political resistance against British imperialism. This vision was a dream that turned into a nightmare in March 1940, when the Muslim League adopted the so-called 'Pakistan resolution'. Hindu-Muslim unity remained elusive and Gandhi had to renounce his ambition to represent Muslim India. Non-violence, however, became under his



leadership a formidable political weapon, well-rooted in a series of prolonged experiments in South Africa and in India. He never visited the Middle East, but was nevertheless drawn into Palestinian politics, on one occasion to help the Muslim cause, on another to respond positively to an approach from the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem.

South Africa, India, and Palestine - each of these countries in turn - saw the development of his experiments in Hindu-Muslim unity. Four distinctive phases mark the unfolding of the dream. Firstly, Gandhi led a campaign in South Africa on the behalf of the Indian community, Hindus and Muslims alike (1906-1914). Secondly, the campaign organized by Gandhi for the sake of the Caliph's jurisdiction over Jerusalem grew into a joint Hindu-Muslim campaign on an all-India scale (1919-1922) – thereby catapulting the Mahatma to the head of the main political party, the Indian National Congress. Thirdly, the nightmare of the Hindu-Muslim tensions grew unremittingly over the years, with the expansion of the Muslim League and Jinnah's meteoric ascendancy as its president (emulating that of Gandhi twenty years previously). Finally, Gandhi's quest for Hindu-Muslim unity underlay his discreet involvement in Palestinian politics in 1937.

Scope and nature of Gandhian resistance

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) forged his new weapon of political resistance in a century of unstoppable arms race and extensive killing fields. He offered this mode of action, not simply as an alternative to violence, but as an efficient method of resistance. From the age of 37 to the end of his life, Gandhi was actively engaged in political campaigns, either against repressive legislation or against British dominance over India. Except for intervals as short as four to six years between four campaigns of non-violence, he was devotedly preparing or leading non-violent resistance, or being jailed as a result. He achieved some of his ambitions, notably in South Africa, with the repeal of the Asiatic Registration Act of 1906 and of the Immigration Act of 1907, and also in India, with the emancipation from British rule. However, he made no impact in Palestine.

Non-violent resistance as an experiment in politics

Gandhi was not a political theorist. He was a man of action, not of words (although the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* fill one hundred heavy volumes). In so far as there is a theory of non-violence, it is an *ex post facto* formulation, a reflection on practice. It was in South Africa that Gandhi's first foray into a political campaign of resistance took place, with little inkling of the future scope of that experiment.

He ploughed his own way with the help of his 'inner voice', in a way that had to adhere to truth and non-violence, since 'God is Love and Truth' (Gandhi's well-known definition: see Panter-Brick 1963, chapter 1). He was led by intuition, by courage and determination, and by political astuteness. However, he soon realized the originality of his method of resistance. When people referred to it as *passive resistance*, this struck him as a misnomer. Passivity, he rejected. His was not the weapon of the weak, but that of the strong, not of the coward, but of the brave, not of hatred, but of respect for the adversary, not of harmful design, but of love. He coined the word *satyagraha*, meaning adherence to truth. It is generally translated as non-violence.

Satyagraha as a sequence of experiments

Upon his return to India, Gandhi continued to experiment. He made one 'experiment' after another, applying the lessons of the preceding experience to the next. Indeed this was the way he looked at



the work of his life and why he chose to entitle his autobiography: *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

His *satyagraha* involved a variety of methods, such as deputations, lobbying, strikes, demonstrations, picketing, bonfires of documents or clothing, public speeches, marches, boycotts, illegal crossing of borders. It also included, more threateningly, infringement of certain laws, non-cooperation with the government, civil disobedience on carefully selected items, open rebellion, to be used as a last resort, when mediation and diplomacy had failed.

Gandhi organized four *satyagraha* campaigns, sustained with the help of the Indian National Congress: the South African campaign (1906-1914); the Non-cooperation campaign (1920-1922) preceded by two years of political agitation and followed by two years of Gandhi's imprisonment; the Civil Disobedience campaign with the famous Salt March (1930-1934); and the campaign of Individual Civil Disobedience followed by the Quit India Rebellion (1940-1942).

The beneficiaries of the experiments

Who were the beneficiaries of Gandhi's political campaigns? The answer is short and clear: Indians only, in South Africa, where Gandhi was living for two decades, and in India, when he returned home to the mother country. For charity begins at home. From what did they have to be saved? The answer is even shorter: British hegemony.

Like the rules of grammar, this principle suffered exceptions. On two occasions, Gandhi's solicitude concerned the inhabitants of Palestine. The same British adversary was being tackled there, but the beneficiary, or rather, the beneficiaries were not Indians, but were to be Arabs and Jews. His two interventions in the affairs of the Middle-East are woven on the warp of the dream of Hindu-Muslim unity.

First phase: the South African experience

The Indians of South Africa were the first recipients of *satyagraha*. Gandhi, himself a resident of Natal and Transvaal, was practicing as a barrister on behalf of Muslim merchants, but was as yet a stranger to politics. Because of his profession, he soon became involved in upholding the interests of local Indians.

The lesson of unity

At the end of the nineteenth century Indians in Natal were deprived of political rights, except for some wealthy, mainly apolitical Muslims. Gandhi stepped into politics, when they were removed from the electoral roll. This was his first, lawful but unsuccessful exercise to resist anti-Indian legislation.

Indians in South Africa were divided traditionally by cultural background in a mosaic of religions, castes, languages, regional origins, social classes and type of employment. But the Europeans had no time for these niceties, and despised Indians globally for what seemed like unhygienic living conditions and their illiteracy, binding them all in the same basket.⁵⁵ To them, this group of people was known as 'coolies'. Even Gandhi, the educated gentleman, fresh from the London Inns of

⁵⁵ Gandhi was very keen on cleanliness and hygiene. He performed the cleaning of latrines, a job incumbent on the untouchables – his lack of sense of smell was the butt of a joke by Kallenbach, in one of his letters to the Mahatma.



Courts, was referred to as a ‘coolie-barrister’. Moreover, prejudices against the ‘coolies’ were growing for economic reasons and their continued influx from India was resented. The problem, from the Government point of view, was not the immigration of Indians on a three-year hard-labour contract of indenture; the problem was how to send them back to India at the end of their contract.⁵⁶

To escape the prejudices, the affluent Indian communities liked to set themselves apart from Indians in general, by calling themselves Arabs, because they were Muslims. Others wanted to be known as Parsis,⁵⁷ so as not to be confused with the working population of poor Indians, mainly hawkers, with the indentured Indians labouring in temporary serfdom on the sugar estates and coalmines, and those ‘freed’ to fend for themselves after their three-year contract expired.

Gandhi’s first bold defiance of the Government was sparked by legislation designed to give greater control over Asiatic: the Transvaal Asiatic Registration Act of 1906 which introduced their compulsory registration. Particularly objectionable to Gandhi, was the finger printing of all Asiatics, as if they were potential criminals. At once, he organized resistance to the so-called ‘Black Act,’ including disobedience to what he considered an abuse of power.

Astutely, Gandhi gradually overrode the heterogeneity of the Indian community. In this, he was helped by the example of Europeans who wanted to treat all Indians in the same manner. Gandhi’s unique professional status promoted him as the only acceptable leader to his community. He was well-introduced in business circles and influential in the Muslim community. He had no serious competitor for leadership. His cleverness in bonding together the interests and allegiance of all Indians is one of the main reasons for the success of his first fight.

Unity was the lesson he took back to India with him. His faith in Hindu-Muslim brotherhood deepened and became the dream and ambition of his life.

The lesson of non-violence, a means to the end

Another important reason for his South African success was that he chose, out of belief and out of tactics, not to use violent resistance, neither in word nor in deed, and in his case not even in thought. Had he not done so, the Indians would have been wiped out from Transvaal and from Natal, as they had already been cleared from the Orange Free State. Gandhi managed to keep his flock entirely non-violent, right through eight years of resistance; this was an extraordinary feat indeed.

This achievement had an impact on his future expectations. When the second *satyagraha* campaign was launched in the larger context of India, he demanded from his people the same non-violent commitment than in Africa, and, confronted with violence in his ranks, he did not hesitate to suspend the campaign at a crucial stage. Later, he realized that, in India, he was demanding the impossible. Therefore, before starting the third campaign in 1930, he warned, loud and clear, that this time he would not suspend the movement, if outbreaks of violence occurred. In the fourth campaign, he went to even further lengths in risking anarchy and casualties, in a *do or die* call to his followers in the Quit India campaign (1942).

This short analysis leads to another observation. The success of the South African campaign in difficult circumstances was proof enough for Gandhi that the new weapon he had forged through eight years of resistance was, not only a potent way to resist in the political field, but also worth of

⁵⁶ A three-pound poll-tax on these Indians and their families was imposed to dissuade them from settling in South Africa. Gandhi took the lead of the resistance against the tax and demanded its repeal as part of his campaign. It was rescinded in his final deal with General Smuts, who was his main adversary.

⁵⁷ The Parsis are an affluent Indian community with their own religion.



universal application. He would be proud, if not anxious, to ascertain this potency in the future, when the occasion arose. When he sailed back to India just before World War I broke out, was he not spoiling for another fight?

Exclusion of the black population from the South African campaign

Universal application did not mean that people, other than Indians, did benefit from Gandhi's South African campaign. Although Gandhi believed in the applicability of non-violent resistance in the political field at this stage, he had no intention to use it for anybody except for Indians. He cared exclusively about his own community, studiously looking after the Indians' interests only. In South Africa, Gandhi deliberately avoided contact with the indigenous black population and its political plight.

He knew how to limit his demands. He believed that when launching resistance in support of some specific reform, he should be satisfied if and when his original claims were granted. Thus the black population stayed apart from the Indians. Gandhi also congratulated himself on keeping his distance with the Chinese community, affected by the Asiatic legislation; their resistance collapsed, leaving the Indian resistance unaffected.

Second phase: Hindu-Muslim unity sealed (1920)

The dream came true in the form of a non-violent movement, led by Gandhi in 1919 after his return to India, for the sake of Muslim Jerusalem, and in the name of Indian Muslims. Gandhi was espousing the defense of the Sultan and Caliph of the Ottoman Empire, defeated in the First World War. Dismemberment of the autocratic state was to be the penalty for having chosen the wrong side in the war. Gandhi's interest lay in the part of the Empire called the *jazirat-ul Arab*, the 'island of Arabia', so called because of the seas and great rivers on its borders. On these lands, the Sultan as Caliph exercised temporal as well as spiritual power as a Quranic injunction.⁵⁸ Deprivation of temporal power on these lands raised, in the hearts of the Indian Muslims, the cry of Islam in danger.

Gandhi's involvement in the Caliphate struggle

The threat concerned mainly the lands stretching from Syria to Egypt. Only the small administrative unit around Jerusalem bore the name Palestine. The Mandate of Palestine would give the new country a name. From 1917, when British troops entered the holy city, the Sykes-Picot agreement with the French, promised the two 'Christian' countries a share in the Middle-East: Syria and Lebanon to the French, Palestine and Mesopotamia to the British.⁵⁹

Jerusalem was of crucial importance to Muslims, because, next to Mecca and Medina –already in the hands of Arab Muslims fighting the Ottomans - it was Islam's most sacred place of pilgrimage. Rushing to the help of his Muslims' brethren, Gandhi suggested to them to use his weapon of civil resistance for the maintenance of the *status quo ante bellum* in the holy shrines and for saving the Caliph's temporal power on these - so far neglected - backwaters of the Ottoman Empire.

⁵⁸ "The Muslims claim Palestine as an integral part of *Jazirat-ul-Arab*. They are bound to retain its custody, as an injunction of the Prophet" (Gandhi, cited in *CWMMG*, vol.19, p.530).

⁵⁹ "The existence of Islam demands the total abrogation of mandates taken by Britain and France" (Gandhi, cited in *CWMMG*, vol.19, p.444).



Why and how did he intervene? He did it for the sake of Indian Muslims only: “If I were not interested in the Indian Mohammedans, I would not interest myself in the welfare of the Turks any more than I am in that of the Austrians or the Poles.” (Shimoni 1977, p.25) Muslims from other countries were far less vocal and concerned by the fate of the Caliph. Many Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East were either in a state of revolt, or in a state of relief for escaping the draft into the Ottoman army. Indian Muslims did not see it that way. The brothers Mohammed and Shaukat Ali, took the lead of a powerful agitation, whipped up by *ulemas* and *maulanas* in villages and towns, organizing *khilafatist* committees and conferences. One Indian deputation went to the Viceroy, one to the British Prime Minister, to no avail. Muslims then turned to Gandhi’s weapon of resistance. They knew about his success in South Africa. When he offered to lead them into non-violent resistance in exchange for their non-violence, they agreed to promote his strategy and follow his instructions. It was thus that Gandhi launched a non-violent movement, a new experiment of *satyagraha* on an all-Indian scale, for the sake of Hindu-Muslim unity in 1920.

Unity sealed at Nagpur (December 1920)

The non-violent campaign entailed a policy of non-cooperation with the British *Raj* (rule), over a wide range of activities – boycotting, to start with, elections, courts and schools. Without waiting for Hindus to join, Gandhi launched the Non-cooperation movement in August 1920, before asking for the still questionable endorsement by the Indian National Congress. The largest and predominantly Hindu party had to be persuaded to fight for the sake of the Caliphate. Two sessions of the Congress, in Calcutta (September 1920) and Nagpur (December 1920), were necessary to adopt non-violent resistance and the leadership of the Mahatma. Martial law in the Punjab and the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre helped the Congress to make up his mind to join the Muslim fight. Moreover, Gandhi warned that another opportunity, for Hindus and Muslims to join hands, would not reoccur before ‘one hundred years’ (Choudhury 1985, p.25) and promised ‘*swaraj* (independence) in one year’, an irresistible bait.

Hindus having joined the movement with Gandhi at its head, the British Government was faced with the biggest threat to its rule since the Indian Mutiny in 1857. As argued in *Gandhi and the Middle East*: “Palestine proved to be the unlikely platform on which Mahatma Gandhi was to build his political power in India itself” (Panter-Brick 2008b).

Indian unity defeated by the Turks (March 1924)

Gandhi’s imprisonment in 1922 put an end to his concern for the holy places. He was arrested after he unexpectedly suspended the Non-cooperation campaign, as it was about to enter active resistance, following the murder of policemen in the village of Chauri-Chaura. The movement was never resumed. The movement was deflated. The Turks buried the Caliphate issue shortly after Gandhi was released from prison in 1924. They established a secular state, ending the Ottoman Empire and Caliphate – an abolition the Indian *khilafatists* refused to endorse.

Hindu-Muslim unity never recovered its strength and became elusive in spite of Gandhi’s continued efforts. Communal riots increased. However, from this experiment, Gandhi and Congress gained a strong arabophile profile. Jawaharlal Nehru, in charge of the party’s foreign policy, stood out as a convinced partisan of Arab nationalism in Palestine. “The Arab struggle against British Imperialism is as much part of this great world conflict as India’s struggle for freedom.”⁶⁰ As for Gandhi, after

⁶⁰ Quoted from Nehru’s presidential address at Faizpur in December 1936, cited in Zaidi (1987), vol.3 (period 1928-38).



the abolition of the Caliphate by the Turks, he shrunk from any more inroads into foreign affairs, leaving them for Nehru to handle.

Third phase: Hindu-Muslim contention (1924-1939)

The days of pleading for clients had gone forever, but Gandhi behaved in politics the way he had behaved in courts. As in law, he was dealing with cases, from which jurisprudence would emerge, giving rules and conclusions. He would always try conciliation and compromise to save time and money, rather than engage in confrontation. More or less blindly, he was feeling his way in politics, reacting to challenging circumstances. He made mistakes, but also learned from them. He often changed his mind, seemingly inconsistent in his consistency, which was to believe in the universality and perennial efficiency of his South African discovery, ever stretching it to new limits. As stated in his own words: “At the time of writing, I never think of what I have said before. My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements on a given question, but to be consistent with truth, as it may present itself to me at a given moment.”⁶¹ However, he would not abandon Hindu-Muslim unity, and, therefore, would not renounce his pretension to represent Muslims.

The claim of representation

Gandhi saw himself as the mandatory of the people he was defending. The claim to be the spokesman of his fellow-countrymen came to him as a natural aftermath of his South African experience and extended to all Muslims. But the consequences of this stand were to be tremendous, since it led to the partitioning of India.

Who were the Indians Gandhi claimed to represent? India, to Gandhi, was *mother India*, the mother of all the inhabitants of that continent. His India stretched geographically to the external borders of the Indian Empire, no more, but no less. Her children aspired to independence from British rule for all the lands bequeathed to them by recent history.

In Gandhi’s mind, India was one and indivisible, in spite of there being two political Indias: British India under the direct British rule and Princely India under autocratic rulers in their sovereign states, linked to Westminster by treaty. Gandhi looked forward to a single democratic state, not only for the people of British India, but also of the princely states, including his own, Rajkot, where his father had been Prime Minister.⁶²

The desire to care for all Indians was expressed strongly in 1931 in London, after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact in the middle of the Civil Disobedience campaign (the third *satyagraha* campaign). At the Viceroy’s request, Gandhi participated in the Round Table Conference, hoping for a general consensus among representatives of different communities and principalities to settle divisive issues. But the claim to truly represent Hindus and Muslims made agreement elusive. It provoked disclaim from all the other delegates. Gandhi’s political isolation at the meetings, his simple attire – even his portable spinning wheel- among the distinguished gathering, failed to convey the strength of the absent Congress. Confronted by an array of unconvinced compatriots, sounded by the new Labour Prime Minister, questioned by the media, Gandhi gave his dream of Hindu-Muslim unity an undesired publicity, since it caused the failure of the Round Table Conference. Representation of Muslims, as understood by Gandhi, became a sore issue.

⁶¹ See full quotation in *Harijan*, 30 September 1939, *CWMG*, vol. 70, p.203.

⁶² In 1939, Gandhi intervened in that state to increase the influence of his party, the Indian National Congress, and failed in his attempt. The princely states were extremely reluctant to relax their autocratic rule.



The consequences of the claim

The issue became vital eight years later, when Jinnah opposed Gandhi with a credible counter claim – a claim to represent all Muslims, whether members of his party, the Muslim League, or not. Jinnah justified his own claim by the ‘two nations theory,’ which effectively took the wind out of Gandhi’s sails. He denied the ‘Hindu’ Congress the right to speak for any Muslim (see Jinnah’s story, narrated in full by Wolpert 1984).

The two men had known each other since 1915, when Jinnah had welcomed Gandhi back from South Africa on behalf of a Bombay reception committee. Gandhi commented that Jinnah should not have expressed himself in English. Jinnah was then an Indian first and a Muslim next, a nationalist and ‘ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity’ to quote the poetess Sarojini Naidu, a Congressman as well as a Muslim League man – not a man to be given lessons. At the Nagpur Congress, he opposed Gandhi and his unconstitutional methods of resistance, but was howled down as a result, a very unpleasant experience witnessed by his young and beautiful wife. Eight years later, Congress rejected him again at Calcutta, when his constitutional amendments to the Nehru Report were not accepted. He could not repress some tears, when Gandhi and the Congress for the sake of Hindu cohesion refused to agree with his proposals to act in unison on the eve of the 1930 campaign for *purna* swaraj (full independence).

Not easily discouraged, Jinnah made a last attempt to cooperate with Gandhi and the Congress in 1937. The elections in the wake of the Government Act of 1935 had offered political power at the provincial level for the first time. In exchange for the cooperation of the Muslim League he presided, Jinnah had asked for a share of power in the newly formed provincial ministries. He was rebuffed by Nehru, and Gandhi refused to intervene in spite of Jinnah’s personal appeal to him. Although they met again in seemingly sweeter – but inconclusive – discussions, the rift worsened at an alarming rate⁶³ with the spectacular growth of the Muslim League under Jinnah’s presidency.

Thereafter, the two leaders competed for the recognition of Indian Muslims. The Indian National Congress pushed to the forefront some of its renowned members, so as to stress the importance of the Muslim connection. Jinnah substantiated his own claim by making the Muslim League vote for Pakistan (March 1940).

Whether Jinnah meant a real Pakistan or whether he used the vote as a threat, is still strongly debated. But whatever the game that Jinnah was playing on the political chessboard, it ended with the creation of Pakistan. Gandhi was outplayed. Was Jinnah also outplayed? For he seemed reluctant to accept the ‘moth-eaten’ Pakistan that the Viceroy finally offered him, so much so that, rather than say ‘yes’, when asked by His Excellency, he replied with a sullen nod of the head. Lord Mountbatten told the story himself and adds: “Isn’t it fascinating that the whole thing should have depended on which way he (Jinnah) was going to shake his head” (Collins and Lapierre 1982, p.46).

Fourth episode: an offer of mediate in Palestine (1937)

Gandhi intervened for a second time in the affairs of Palestine in July 1937. Having been approached by an emissary of the Jewish Agency from Jerusalem, he responded with an offer to mediate in the

⁶³ Gandhi to Jinnah, 3 February 1938: “...everybody spoke of you as one of the staunchest of nationalists and the hope of both Hindus and Mussalmans. Are you the same Mr. Jinnah? ... What proposal can I make except to ask you on bended knees to be what I thought you were.” Jinnah’s answer, 15 February 1938: “I think you might have spared your appeal and need not have preached to me on bended knees to be what you had thought I was” (see Panter-Brick 2008, pp.103-104).



Jewish-Arab conflict (Panter-Brick 2008b, pp.53-65). The Offer was buried for half a century in the archives of the Central Zionist Agency and in the graves of the team of would-be mediators, who kept the secret to their last breath.

The political context of the Offer

In the *khilafat* episode, described earlier, no weight was given to the Jewish question, because, in 1919, the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine was still in limbo. Frictions occurred between Muslims and Jews - two riots actually in 1920 and 1921 – just skirmishes, judging by Indian standards, unnoticed by Indians at the time of the *khilafat* campaign.

Ottoman rule over the small Jewish community had mainly been tolerant and benevolent. Theodor Herzl, at the end of the 19th century, foretold the creation of a Jewish state, but he kept the prediction to himself, because it would have met with unbelief and scorn. “If I were to sum up the Congress in a word – which I shall take care not to publish – it would be this: at Basle I founded a Jewish state. If I said this loudly to-day I would be greeted with universal laughter. In five years, perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it.”⁶⁴ He consequently discussed – hopefully, if not successfully - with Ottoman authorities about Jewish immigration in the Holy Land. Some years later, in wartime, the main problem for the Jews, who had kept their Eastern European nationalities, was either to renounce their passports, which denounced them as enemies of the Ottoman state – since so many of them were of Russian origin – or to take the risk of being drafted to the war against Russia.

At the end of the war, Gandhi seemed unconcerned by the Balfour Declaration (dated 2 November 1917), which welcomed in Palestine “a national home for the Jewish people” (Panter-Brick 2008b, pp.39-40). Likewise, Indian *khilafatists*, under the spell of the Caliph, were unconscious of the threat of mass Jewish immigration to their shrines.

However, by 1937, the Balfour Declaration was at the centre of the Arab-Jewish conflict, with a strong, if divided, nationalist Arab movement opposing the Jewish community, the *yishuv*, with growing animosity and violence (Panter-Brick 2008b, chapter 5).⁶⁵ The Mandatory Power tried to deal with the contestants, White Paper after White Paper, but did not escape their wrath. The Palestinian Arabs were adamant that the Jews had no right to enter Palestine, no right to buy land, no right to settle – in this context, the terminology ‘Arab’ and ‘Jew’ refers to opposite power-politics in the Arab-Jewish conflict at the time of the Mandate. Violence was resorted to, and in 1937, Palestine suffered from terrorist activities in the Great Strike of April to October 1936 (Panter-Brick 2008b, pp.46-47). Gandhi’s proposal of mediation to the Jewish Agency happened in the lull between the Great Strike and the armed rebellion that was to devastate Palestine from the autumn of 1937 to 1939. The lull and respite from violence from October 1936 to September 1937 was obtained by other Arab states from reluctant Palestinian nationalists so as to give the Peel Commission (1936-1937) a chance to search for a peaceful solution.

⁶⁴ See Walter Laqueur (1972), *A History of Zionism*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, on the first World Zionist Congress at Basle in August 1897, p.108. Theodor Herzl was the founder of the Zionist movement.

⁶⁵ During the period under consideration, namely the period of the Mandate preceding the start of the civil war, land was bought for cash – from the State, from private owners, and even from the feudal Arab families owing large estates. The Arab tenants of these estates were evicted because Jewish emigrants (both Zionists and anti-Zionists) followed the policy of employing Jews only (a policy which served them well in the six months’ strike of 1936). If ‘force’ was used, it was the force of the law. This was an increasing cause of mounting tensions, disruption, resentment and hatred, as a growing number of tenants had to leave the land they farmed for centuries.



Gandhi's secret Offer of July 1937 coincided with the publication of the recommendations of the Peel Commission, that Palestine should be divided.⁶⁶ In the Arab armed resistance to partition, Gandhi's Offer of 1937 was doomed from the start.

The emissary

How is Gandhi's initiative to be explained? The reason why Gandhi tried his hand at solving the Arab-Jewish conflict is to be found in the identity of the emissary, sent by the Jewish Agency in May 1937. This emissary had been selected with care, vetted in London and instructed about his mission by the Zionist leadership. He was not the first to contact Gandhi on behalf of the Agency. Olsvanger, also a South African Jew, well-learned in Sanskrit, had contacted Gandhi in October 1936. He reported "having spent twenty minutes with "ein Laemmel" (a simpleton; Panter-Brick 2008b, p.31). This time, the emissary was Gandhi's dearest friend and his right hand in the first non-violent resistance. They had not seen each other since their common fight, but the friendship was still alive and strong. The twenty-two years of absence only made their loving hearts fonder and the joy of the reunion sweeter.

They had been separated by the war, as they were sailing for a new life together in India. The friend, Hermann Kallenbach, was travelling on a German passport. He was sent to a detention camp in the Isle of Man and later, to Germany in an exchange of civilians. When the two friends contacted each other again after the war, Gandhi was canvassing support for the Caliphate. Kallenbach, understandably, did not join the *Khilafatist* fight and went back to South Africa, to his job as an architect.

In May 1937 Kallenbach arrived in India, stayed six weeks with Gandhi, explaining Zionism. Did Gandhi change his mind as a result? How far he did so, is debatable. Whatever it be, on the day of his friend's departure, the Mahatma had found three personalities willing to negotiate a settlement between Jews and Arabs, one Hindu: Nehru, his political heir; one Muslim: Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, president of the Indian National Congress; one Christian: C.F. Andrews, a well-connected and trusted friend, versed in diplomacy.

Gandhi owed Kallenbach a debt of gratitude from the South African days. Were the recipients of Gandhi's solicitude not so much the Jews in Palestine than Kallenbach, a Jew who helped him so effectively in his South African struggle?

The conditional Offer of 1937

The offer of help was unavoidably conditional. The Jewish Agency had to declare the end of its dependence on the Mandatory Power, before negotiations could start. A settlement with Arab Nationalists should involve only two parties, Arabs and Jews, with no interference from Britain. Gandhi, Nehru and the Indian National Congress had no love for Mandates, considered as a sanitized version of colonial rule.

The Jewish Agency made no such declaration. Nothing came out of the Offer. Kallenbach did not come back in time for the follow-up, as he was supposed to have done. And the Offer, which could very well have been the last chance for dialogue before the end of the Mandate and the Arab-Israeli wars, was soon irrelevant, as dependency on British protection became a life-line for the Palestinian Jews - Zionists and anti-Zionists alike (Panter-Brick 2008b, p.49).

⁶⁶ Offer made on 4th July 1937; Peel Report published on 7th July.



Goodwill, Hindu-Muslim unity and the Offer

Before making the offer of mediation, Gandhi had taken care to include in his team of negotiators prominent political figures with untarnished pro-Arab record, who might exercise influence with Arab statesmen in the Middle-East and be amenable to Gandhi's promptings. As for Gandhi himself, he had the credentials of the Caliphate fight and, in July 1937, he was the most powerful politician in India.

Having now, through Kallenbach, the ear of Jewish personalities such as Moshe Shertok, head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency (who was to become Israel Foreign Affairs Minister) and Chaim Weizmann, the leader in London (and future President of Israel), Gandhi thought he might have a chance to settle the Arab-Jewish issue on the basis of Muslim goodwill.

At this stage, goodwill could not be guaranteed, and results even less, as Gandhi let Shertok know on the fourth of July 1937. In the form of a written statement that was to accompany the verbal offer, Gandhi wrote: "I have little doubt that immediately the support of physical force is disclaimed, and the Jewish colony begins to depend upon the goodwill of the Arab population, their position would be safe. But this, at best, is a surmise. My opinion is based purely on ethical considerations, and is independent of results." (*Central Zionist Archives*, S.25.3587; see Shimoni 1977).

Nonetheless, Gandhi's reliance upon goodwill rested on more than ethical considerations. The offer was to be pressed upon the Arabs by means of the political weight of the Muslims of India. That weight was considerable, as Kallenbach explained in a letter to Weizmann on 4 July 1937, his day of departure: "Both (Nehru and Abul Kalam Azad) think that by direct conversation between Arabs and Jews only, will it be possible to reach an understanding and they believe the time is ripe for such conversations. They are willing to assist to bring about these conversations, when called upon to do so, so is Mahatma Gandhi. The Mohammedan population of India, being 70,000,000, is by far the most important in the world. The intervention of some of their leaders with a view to reach conciliation, may have far reaching results. What do you think about it?" (*Central Zionist Archives*, S.25.3587; see Shimoni 1977 and Sarid 1997).

It is noteworthy that the figure stated by Kallenbach in his letter to Weizmann covers "the Mohammedan population" - not the Muslim membership of the Indian National Congress. And is it not worth stressing that the whole idea of mediation took shape before the rift with Jinnah, just before the Muslim League was refused a share in the formation of the Provincial ministries, and at the very time its president was offering to implement Gandhi's constructive program - spinning included?

As Gandhi wrote to Kallenbach in August 1937: "much of the work lies in India as I visualize the development of the settlement talks." (*CWMMG*, vol. 96, p.290) He also informed his friend of a 'long' discussion with Andrews on that vision, who then reported to Kallenbach: "Here (in India) in an extraordinary way is the key to the whole question" (*ibid.*). History tends to repeat itself. Gandhi had sought yet another re-enactment of his dream of Hindu-Muslim unity, through yet another elusive dream, peace in the Middle-East.

Conclusion

Eventually, Gandhi drew his own negative conclusions regarding his intervention in Palestine and his hopes to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity at home. On 22 March 1939, he convened a secret meeting to signal to the Jewish Agency that he was abandoning any prospect of mediation in



Palestinian affairs. He required the presence of six people, not only that of his friends Kallenbach⁶⁷ and Andrews and the assistance of his two secretaries Mahadev Desai and Pyarelal, but also invited two Jewish personalities to attend. One was the editor of the official organ of the Bombay Zionist Association and the other, from Tel-Aviv, was collecting funds in India on behalf of the Jewish Agency.

Nothing transpired of the secret meeting, except that this was the end of the Palestinian road for Gandhi. Shohet, the Indian Zionist attending the meeting, wrote accordingly to Epstein, his contact in the Political Department of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem on 24 March 1939: “He (Gandhi) has been frank about the part the Muslims play in the question, though it is evident he will not say anything about it even in the minutes of a private interview” (Shimoni 1977, p.51).

Without the weight of the seventy million Indian Muslims, Gandhi could not achieve his ambitions in the Middle East. The Mahatma’s dream of Hindu-Muslim unity faded away with the creation of Pakistan and the civil wars in Palestine.

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⁶⁷ Kallenbach paid a second and ill fated visit in 1939 to India, when he nearly died of malaria. He recovered sufficiently to attend the March meeting and left for South Africa, never to return. He died in 1945.



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