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Realism in the Middle East

There was a discussion about Israel at the San Francisco Jewish Community Center last week. A substantial part of the audience consisted of Arab and pro-Arab students.

The presence of the Arab students was not disturbing. They were polite and straightforward. They were there - and perhaps in that polite frame of mind - because their professor was there. He is a local academic with strong pro-Arab sentiments. He attempted to veil his bias with the pretense of lofty and dispassionate academic objectivity. But the veil was thin, at best, and, once lifted, the litany of his propaganda-leaflet opinions about Israel, Zionism and American Jewry was not unexpected.

Much more interesting were the questions and comments of the Palestinian Arab students. One young man asked: "Why do you Jews, who have undergone such suffering, now impose suffering on us, and stand in the way of our national longings?"

There are some questions which skip so many intervening premises that they are not easy to answer. That is the predicament of parents who fumble with an answer to such child's questions as: "Why does an egg fry?" A teacher once put it this way: "I've known the answer for so long, I've forgotten how to deal with the question."

Did that young Arab man really believe that the Israelis could, by an act of good will, dissipate the sufferings of the Palestinian Arabs, and the problem of the Middle East? If he did, an evening wasn't long enough to tell him what he had to know.

The Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Arabs are both victims. They are victims of a long train of history. They should weep for each other. But weeping is not enough. A realistic political solution is needed. Let's set the scene again.

Some of the Arabs who lived in Palestine in 1947 were presumably descended from the Mohammedan invaders of the 7th century. A substantial segment of the Palestinian Arabs were descendants of 19th century immigrants from surrounding lands. And up to a hundred thousand Arabs immigrated to Palestine between 1918 and 1940.

In the early 1920s, there were about 80 thousand Jews and about 600 thousand Arabs in Palestine. This was the time when Palestinian Arab nationalism was born. In 1921, an Arab Congress in Haifa rejected the Balfour Declaration and demanded "an agreement which would safeguard the rights, interests and liberties of the people of Palestine, and at the same time make provision for reasonable Jewish religious aspirations, but precluding any exclusive political advantage to them which must necessarily interfere with Arab rights . . . "

By 1947, there were about 600 thousand Jews and about 1200 thousand Arabs in Palestine, between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. Neither the Arab nor Jewish aspirations could have been served by a bi-national state. The U.N., in one of its last sensible actions, proposed two states. The Israelis accepted the idea of another Palestinian Arab state on, roughly, the West Bank. The non-Palestinian Arab nations turned it down.

As Western history has proved, the idea of nationalist self-determination is a powerful

one. Some thought that the Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank would be happy if they just had a better life, with higher wages and so forth. But Zionists, especially, know better than that: national independence and freedom is more important than bodily comfort.

So, there seem to be two nationalist aspirations in a tragic deadlock. But there is at least one other decisive factor in this situation which had better be kept in mind by those who attempt to equate these two nationalisms: only for the Israelis, is their nationalism literally a matter of life and death. That is the irreducible framework for any realistic solution.