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Response to Sivan

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I shall speak to you today as an Irish journalist trying to do what journalists like to think we do best: react to challenging material and exciting opinions. And I shall do so by drawing upon my experience of life in the divided country of Ireland.

I. Simplifying Complexity

To identify and analyze the implications of identity and nationalism in the Middle East could hardly be more daunting. We are, therefore, in Dr. Sivan's debt for his attempt to help us comprehend the main ideas that animate this confusing and maddeningly contorted region of our world.

A contribution of Dr. Sivan's essay is the treatment of Arab identity and nationalism that, in his opinion, are at the heart of the Middle East. He speaks about the decline of three major myths in the Middle East. Times, he says, are not easy for pan-Arab nationalism. While it is still espoused by a number of intellectuals, it has, on the whole, been forsaken by most Arab elites. This is due, according to Dr. Sivan, to the realization that all pan-Arab regimes, despite the sincere idealism of their founders, ended up as tyrannies. For me however, it was the poetry of Nizzar Qabbani, quoted in the essay, that spoke volumes about the disillusionment surrounding the ideal of pan-Arabism.[1]

As a journalist who is used to dealing with immediate reality, this voice was a welcome one. I would like to have heard more of such voices in Dr. Sivan's essay, particularly the opinions of those who support pan-Arabism. According to Dr. Sivan, the alternatives to a failed pan-Arabism are Radical Islam and Middle Easternism. The first "fluctuate[s] over time between reform and revolution, propaganda and violence."[2] Some movements have turned from reformist to bloody revolution and others moved in the opposite direction, while in Egypt and Jordan movements in both directions seem to coexist.

The resurgence of Islam has helped intensify a number of conflicts both inside and outside the Arab world. But Islam, like any other ideology, soon discovers the rude pragmatism of international affairs. We saw this in the 1980s during the Afghanistan War: while Iran denounced the United States as the "Great Satan," it supported the same anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan that the Americans did.

Dr. Sivan explains very well how the communication skills of the Radical Islamic movements have contributed to their success. "[M]odern media…the fax machine, satellite television,… and the Internet," he says, allow these ideas to "[circumvent] the state's monopoly on television [and radio] and give civil society…a voice."[3]

I found Dr. Sivan's insight into Middle Easternism interesting, and what was news to me was the great importance that some are attaching to the emergence of an Arab subsystem within the framework of Middle Easternism. This subsystem may help to combine old and new ideas, to reconcile Arab culture and Middle Eastern politics. But many problems lie ahead, and the concept of Middle Easternism remains fuzzy and elusive.

My main criticism of Dr. Sivan's paper is that he assumes that we all have the same level of understanding of the Middle East as he does. My experience of the Middle East is limited—that of someone who has watched it — but I was surprised that Dr. Sivan seemed to ignore the role of Israel in the region. Even those with a scant knowledge of the area will know that the conflict between Arabs and Jews has been one of the most continuous and confounding in the world. In his essay about identity in the Middle East, we hear only about pan-Arabism, Middle Easternism, and Radical Islam. What about the Jewish identity and Zionism? Is it not the existence of Israel that has been the trigger of many of the conflicts in the Middle East? The Arab world may be a divided one, but it is united in its antagonism toward the Israeli state. The separate identities and interests of the Arab nations have always been cast aside as Arabs united to face off against what they see as a common enemy in their midst.

II. Identity and the Irish Question

As I read Dr. Sivan's essay, the similarities between the Middle East and a region very familiar to me — Northern Ireland — sadly became clear. The main similarity is, of course, a long-standing and complex conflict with no end in sight.

As is well known, Northern Ireland has been locked in a bitter conflict for the last twenty-five years. The conflict is fundamentally a clash of national identities representing a standoff between British and Irish nationalism. The two communities involved are most easily identified by religious and cultural traditions — Catholic and Protestant. The majority of the people — namely the Protestant unionists — want to remain within the United Kingdom, while the minority — Catholic nationalists — prefer to see Northern Ireland incorporated within the Republic of Ireland. Since insurrection began nearly a quarter of a century ago, more than three thousand individuals have lost their lives. This is an enormous number for a tiny territory with a population of only one and a half million people.

As I mentioned earlier, Dr. Sivan writes about how three of the major myths of Arab nationalism have withered in the last quarter of a century. In Ireland, some would argue that the dream of a truly united Ireland has also withered, or must be surrendered if the whole island is to know a lasting peace. Certainly the Irish nationalist dream of uniting Ireland by force and violence is seen by many as a destructive myth that should perish. In more ways than one, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and their Protestant counterparts in the north strongly resemble the militant leaders of Radical Islam. In the bitterly eloquent words of the Irish songwriter Paul Brady, they would "sacrifice our children to feed the worn-out dreams of yesterday." Unfortunately, the complexities are often misunderstood by the protagonists. The London bus bombing in 1996 in which a young IRA man was killed when the bomb he was carrying went off prematurely, was a perfect example of how young zealots are prepared to sacrifice their lives and the lives of innocent people to further a cause that has been fueled by nationalist dreams and ideals.

Dr. Sivan also speaks of the "utterly artificial British creation" of Kuwait.[4] One could argue that Northern Ireland is also an

artificial creation of the British, yet, to apply Dr. Sivan's words about Kuwait to the Protestants of Northern Ireland, they have "develop[ed] a community predicated upon a common attachment to territory [and] upon a collective memory."[5] Nature placed the islands of Britain and Ireland in such close proximity that it was inevitable that their destinies would be interwoven in so many ways. The conflict between the British and the Irish stems from an Irish determination to govern themselves and get rid of the British, and a British insistence on domination.

In the words of John Hume, a Northern Ireland politician who with Gerry Adams drafted a peace initiative that persuaded the IRA to announce a cease-fire, the Irish story is "a story of conflict between the aspirations of ordinary men and women of two traditions, Irish nationalist and British unionist, trapped by a tragic error of history."

So what does it mean to be Irish in the late twentieth century? Like other identities, Irishness is indeed a state of mind, which in my opinion is not unconnected to a legacy of repression by the British and a pride in the bravery and ability of Irish ancestors to stand up to them. For hundreds of years, the Irish were forced to abandon their native language, games, music, poetry, and culture. But as always, repression only made the will stronger, and the sense of Irishness not only survived but blossomed.

I was five years old when the troubles flared up in Northern Ireland in 1969. My earliest memory of the troubles was my family praying for my brother's safety when he had to take a trip to Belfast. I remember my mother making us pray again in 1974 when loyalist paramilitaries planted bombs in Dublin, killing several people. As a Catholic family, we regularly prayed for an end to the conflict, but when it came close to home we had to pray all the harder!

For many people living in the south, the only contact with the northern conflict was through the media. Apart from hearing about violence and death on the radio and television, my only experience of the north during my childhood was through a pen pal in a Catholic area of Belfast. She was born shortly before the troubles started and knew nothing else. In the typical breezy fashion of a twelve-year-old, she told about her own and her family's experience of living with the presence of armed British

soldiers on the streets and of violence and death close to her home. It gave me a far better impression of life in Northern Ireland than could any news bulletin.

As we watch more and more wars being played out on our television screens, it soon becomes clear that in any violent situation, life must go on whether in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, or Bosnia. These people never imagined they could get used to violence or death on a daily basis, but they still have to feed their families, try to make a living, and make the best of things even though they are losing loved ones. For many ordinary people, the reasons for the violence have become less important—they don't care. Keeping themselves and their families alive is their only goal.

But even in a war there is room for celebration. Dr. Sivan uses the example of bank notes and stamps in Middle Eastern countries to point out that many nation-states are interested in celebrating only heroes and events that relate to their specific state. He informs us that while the works of great Middle Eastern writers are read beyond state borders, each state celebrates only those born on its territory. Although bitterly divided when it comes to politics and religion, Irish Catholics and Protestants share a pride in their rich heritage of music, poetry, and literature. Novelists and playwrights like George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and James Joyce are considered Irish—not Northern or Southern Irish, simply Irish. When it comes to music, religion is also unimportant. Although U2 hails from Dublin, the Cranberries from Limerick in the south, and Van Morrison from Belfast, their music bridges religious divides, and old traditions and beliefs have no place at concert venues north or south of the border. Indeed, many churches, a range of professional and educational bodies, and some major sporting organizations undertake activities that include all of Ireland.

Growing up in southern Ireland in the late sixties and seventies, most families remained completely untouched by the violence. I had plenty of Protestant friends because my family was surrounded by Protestant families living in a rural area of Wicklow County on the east coast, thirty miles from Dublin. These families were different from us: most of them were wealthier, for one thing. As a child, this was the only important difference. Religion did not matter when you spent hours playing with

your friends. They went to church; we went to mass. I even wanted to become a Protestant when I realized they didn't have to go to mass every Sunday like we did!

As you can imagine, our discussions rarely focused on religious identity, but when we did engage in that, it was usually to clear up mysteries about what the other believed in. As teenagers the differences became apparent for me when all the Catholic boys seemed to be more interested in dating the Protestant girls. These girls did not attend our convent schools and rumor had it they were not being taught any morals. There was never a shortage of male attention for them. Meanwhile, Catholic girls were being told by the nuns not to sit on a boy's knee unless he placed a newspaper there first!

In my work as a journalist in Ireland, dealing with news stories about the northern situation has been a daily event. It is difficult not to become cynical. Our northern staff covers deaths and funerals on a daily basis—they joke about having a book of clichés on standby for any eventuality. On a quiet day in the newsroom, many a news editor feels "rescued" by a bomb or a killing in the north. It has become just that, another story. A situation that started as a human rights issue in the 1960s has become a series of tit-for-tat murders, shootings, and bombings. It took major atrocities like the Enniskillen bombing and the Greysteel massacre to renew feelings of revulsion and horror and to remind everyone—the media and the general public—that a sick war was going on just a few miles up the road.

Despite all of this, in my opinion there has never been a better time to be Irish. In the past few decades, no country has changed as dramatically or as drastically as Ireland. The image of the country as a deeply religious one is fading and is being replaced by one of a young, liberal, and forward-looking society. Although the country is 90 percent Catholic, the Church no longer has any say in the running of the country, and although most young Irish people profess to be Catholic, many have abandoned Catholic principles and ideals.

The IRA cease-fire in August 1994 gave the people of Ireland, north and south of the border, great hope for a peaceful time. Even those completely removed from or bored by the political quagmire began to take a renewed interest in events. At last, Northern Ireland was moving away from violence and death to

negotiation and discussion. Sadly, however, this feeling was rudely shattered by the news of the IRA's return to violence. Many thousands immediately took to the streets to register their deep disappointment.

It would be impossible to live in Ireland and not be touched by the Irish situation, impossible for any reasonable person not to feel betrayed by paramilitaries who are killing innocent people in the name of Irish or British nationalism. The same must be true, too, for the Middle East. It is clear that the only way to forge a bright and prosperous future for the children of all conflicting identities is mutual acceptance, respect, and compromise. In my opinion, this holds for Irish Catholics and Protestants, as well as for Arabs and Jews.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Sivan, "Contending Arab Visions" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 62–63.

2. Ibid., 71.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 60.

5. Ibid., 61.