A Personal Middle East Conflict In The Fight For Palestine

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Ali Abunimah and Hussein Ibish were best friends and their generation's brightest lights. Then the two-state consensus fell apart, and so did their friendship.

The Twitter account @Ikhras means "shut up" in Arabic. It devotes a fair share of its time to attacking Hussein Ibish, a moderate advocate for a Palestinian state. The attacks are harsh and unrelenting, if not always accurate, and favor words like "liar" and "clown" and "house Arab."

But sometimes, the takedowns are more sophisticated. And then Ibish thinks he knows who is writing them: his old best friend, Ali Abunimah.

"If you ever see the IQ level jump up about 80 points, it's probably him," Ibish said.

Abunimah, a prominent radical voice on Palestine, scornfully denies [2] a role in the anonymous attacks. But neither he nor Ibish make any secret of the rubble of their friendship. Their divide over their shared cause — how to create a Palestinian state — marks a particularly poisonous feature of the conflict over Israel and Palestine: That so many people who have spent their lives working for the same thing despise one another.

When they met 15 years ago, Ibish and Abunimah were two of the best young minds among the American advocates for Palestine. They were a formidable pair, both fiercely intellectual and joyously confrontational. Abunimah is slim, quick, with the accent of an educated Englishman, and so passionately personal in his politics that some of his graduate

school classmates said they were afraid to take him on. Ibish, no less confrontational, is physically massive and more phlegmatic in his approach. They were close friends, speaking every day and sometimes several times a day, Ibish recalled, and sharing bylines on their most important work.

They were also among the relatively few Arab-American voices making the case — against the Iraq War, for the Palestinian cause — in American outlets like the *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times*. They contributed a chapter on media bias to an October 2001 book called *The New Intifada: Resisting Israel's Apartheid* and shared a byline in the radical newsletter CounterPunch, among other outlets. Their most ambitious project was a [2001 monograph](#) [3]making the legal and moral case for the Palestinian Right of Return, which called it "an essential element of [Palestinian refugees'] reconciliation with Israel." The paper warned against giving into "the barefaced racism in the disparity between Israel's Law of Return and the Palestinian Right of Return."

A decade later, the hope that undergirded their work — of a Palestinian state — has stalled. And the two men, once best friends, are the bitterest of enemies, standing on either side of a deep divide over the future of Palestinians and Israelis. Each has written a book making the case for his side of the argument that increasingly divides supporters of the Palestinian people: one state or two. Ibish, now 50, has accepted the twin Israeli and Palestinian nationalisms as, he says, necessary evils. Abunimah, now 42, tweeted in 2010 that "supporting Zionism is not atonement for the Holocaust, but its continuation in spirit." But their split is hardly just about lines on a map.

"There's some personal animosity there that goes beyond disagreements over policy," said a Palestinian activist who knows both men and who was one of many to ask that his name not be used for fear of getting caught in the crossfire. The two men, who live in the public debate — which is to say these days, mostly on Twitter and their blogs — make no effort to disguise it.

"How did Hussein Ibish turn from a defender of Palestinian rights into an apologist for Zionism? Was it something in the water?" Abunimah [asked on Twitter in 2008](#) [4].

"Pathetic how @AliAbunimah has totally degenerated into a totalitarian enforcer of political correctness & hatred vis all alternative views," Ibish [tweeted last November](#) [5].

Many in the digital conversation have taken sides. Abunimah is a popular figure among the online advocacy community and traditional activists, a leader of the one-state cause. Ibish has become a respected Washington figure whose byline has graced the *New York Times* op-ed page, whose group hosts gala dinners with the likes of Hillary Clinton, and who can be found in the capital's better power dining rooms. Many of their peers regard their intellect and commitment with respect; others are pained by the spectacle. Radical voices for a binational solution, like Abunimah, have little traction with the Islamists in Gaza whose legitimacy they sometimes defend. Moderates like Ibish recently lost their champion in the West Bank capital Ramallah, the technocratic former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad."

The real reason an Arab voice or Palestinian voice in Washington doesn't exist is because of jackasses like these people," said [Fadi Elsalameen](#) [6], a fellow with the New America Foundation's American Strategy Program in Washington who once worked with Ibish at the American Task Force on Palestine but is now a critic of the group. "Everyone is a one-man show, everyone's ego is bigger than the other, and they have no involvement in the process."

The feud between Ibish and Abunimah is the sort of bitter and all-encompassing divide on which aficionados of American Jewish intellectual life have written volumes, many of which open with a scene in the City College cafeteria in the late 1940s. Arab-American intellectual life, itself long riven by important divisions, has drawn less attention. The split between Ibish and Abunimah also follows a central and widening fault line in the pro-Palestinian debate. Running through their personal break is the idea — which Abunimah was among the first to abandon, and on which Ibish continues to stake his career — that two states, Israel and Palestine, can and will co-exist.

When Hussein Ibish first, as he remembers, encountered Ali Abunimah, these questions had simpler answers. The scene for their first real encounter, Ibish said, was the 1999 convention of the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee at a Marriott just outside Washington, D.C. When they met, Ibish had just left the radical precincts of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst to become communications director for the group, which then split its attention between civil rights in the United States and advocacy on international causes. A mountainous man with "campus hair," as his future boss Ziad Asali recalled, he had started wearing a suit for the first time. He also had deep roots in Arab intellectual life: His Syria-born father, Yusuf, was a leading scholar of Islamic culture, a fixture at the American University of Beirut (where Abunimah's father had been educated) and in Beirut's vibrant pre-Civil War intellectual scene, where his friends and admirers included Rashid Khalidi, now the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia.

Ibish, who had studied film at Emerson College in Boston, was finishing his dissertation in comparative literature, which he defended in the fall of 2001, on "Nationalism As an Ethical Problem for Post-Colonial Theory." The paper was a high-theory critique of the ability of post-colonial critics including Edward Said — the leading figure both in post-colonial studies and the Palestinian national movement — to reckon with the cultural phenomenon of nationalism after post-colonial states became independent. When Ibish had a chance to interview Said for his dissertation, he asked a question that continues to run through his thinking (if not in the most comprehensible form): "How is secularism available to the ethical narration of decolonized collective subjectivities, and how would you deploy it as a practical point of view, politically?" Ibish's own conclusion was that Palestinian, Israeli, and all other contemporary nationalisms are a sort of indefensible "lesser evil" — a political necessity but an intellectual embarrassment.

Ibish's intellectual skepticism — of faith, and of nationalism — run through his work. But he was better known in the Palestinian movement for the confrontational politics he expressed as a graduate student, delivering radio commentaries for the leftist Pacifica radio network and writing in the more accessible pages of the Daily Collegian. There, he was accused of "hate speech" for a column titled "Zionism and Assassination" that accused Jewish militias of terrorizing Palestinians to clear the land (it made Jewish students "very upset," the director of the college's Jewish Affairs office said). In another column, he condemned "the racist logic of Zionism."

Like Ibish, Abunimah's roots in intellectual life were deep and personal, and even more closely tied to the fight for Palestinian statehood. He was raised, he later wrote, on his mother's memories of growing up alongside Jews in the town of Lifta, and then of fleeing Jewish militias there in 1948. His father, the former Jordanian ambassador to the United Nations, Hasan Abu Nimah, "spent nearly four decades as a diplomat working for peace," Abunimah wrote in his 2007 book, *One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse* [7].

"He believed in a two-state solution," Abunimah wrote of his father, who has been a regular contributor to the website his son founded, Electronic Intifada, for years. "When he was Jordanian ambassador in Brussels, I often listened from behind the door as he briefed and argued … and I too became convinced that such a solution — while it did not mean justice for the Palestinians — would nevertheless be a path to peace.

Palestinians would not become Zionists, but they would accept the reality of the Jewish state and endeavor to live with it." (Abunimah responded to repeated inquiries about his friendship and enmity with Ibish by saying he is "not interested [8]." He is, however, a

prolific writer and an extremely prolific tweeter, even by the standards of a person who tweets a lot — more than 118,000 times since joining the service, more than twice an hour on average — and his tweets and his writing offer regular snapshots of his thinking.)

Abunimah arrived at Princeton from an education in Britain and Brussels, and he fought his own student battles — he was accused of, and denied, destroying fliers advertising a pro-Israel speaker. He received his masters degree in political science in 1995 from the University of Chicago, and directed his energy to media criticism. In particular, he was among a first wave of activists to discover the power of the internet, in typically obsessive, combative, and stylish fashion. Around the time he first visited the West Bank, in 1996, he began writing emails, sometimes more than once a day, to National Public Radio, politely alleging bias in their coverage of the Middle East. He emailed each day's letter to fellow activists and published it on his website, which he called Ali Abunimah's Bitter Pill, signing off on the first one [9] in classic NPR style: "In Chicago, this is Ali Abunimah." He said in 1998 that he had written "several hundred" of them already (some 237 are online [10]), and his complaints about bias grew harsher over time, though he continued to intersperse occasional emails of praise for, for instance, "Julie McCarthy's outstanding report from Jenin." (The website is no longer online, but some of its contents are preserved on archive.org [11].)

The network took his complaints seriously, and engaged him, which in turn brought him an immediate measure of respect and attention in a community that had long railed with less effect about media bias. NPR's first ombudsman, Jeffrey Dvorkin, said he recalled Abunimah vividly 18 years later, as a "very dogged and persistent critic."

Then, in February 1997, Said — a revered figure for Palestinian activists — gave Abunimah his blessing during a speech at Bethlehem University in which he told students to "write your own history." "Each time I check my email, I find copies of email sent by a young Palestinian to radio stations, TV reporters, and newspaper editors, commenting on their coverage of the Palestinian issue. In his effective, electronic way, this man, Ali Abunimah, is writing his own history every day," Said said, according to accounts from the time. "For the past four months, I too have been checking my email each day in anticipation of Ali's perceptive, well-honed responses. Nor am I alone. By word of modem, as it were, Ali now has over 200 on his 'cc' list. Even NPR News interviews him!"

Ibish and Abunimah were young stars of a movement in desperate need of fresh, engaged faces. They also had a great deal in common. They were schooled in the humanities, unlike the professionals, doctors, and engineers who largely populated the previous generation of activists. They had deep roots in the Arab world and Arab politics and intellectual life,

matched by total confidence in their ability to navigate the American debates in the new 21st century, ones that some of their elders struggled to penetrate. And much of their work from the time — like the 2001 two-state monograph — still stands out for its attempts at rigor in a space dominated by polemics. In that paper in particular, they attempt to square the principle that Palestinians have a right, under international law, to houses from which their families were forced out; with the goal of a quick peace."

For Palestinians, the recognition of the right of return is an essential element of a reconciliation with Israel and a just resolution to the conflict," they wrote. That monograph was their largest collaboration; in retrospect, Ibish said, he wonders if he and his collaborator saw the project differently from the start.

"I always saw it as an effort to strengthen the Palestinian negotiators' hand," he said. "I think he understood it as something that was immutable and non-negotiable and sacred. I don't think I quite realized the difference at the time."

But both their personalities and their chosen paths pulled them in different directions. Abunimah, whose email list gave him an early taste of the transformative power of the web, worked with a small circle of activists to build a new digital network, first on email lists and then on the web, when the Second Intifada broke out in 2000, after the collapse of the peace process Bill Clinton led, ending a wave of optimism for the two-state solution. With a few allies, he created a website named for the moment — Electronic Intifada. At first, it was meant to extend the media criticism Abunimah had done elsewhere, recalled Nigel Parry, a co-founder of the site who first learned of Abunimah from Said's speech. But its mission soon changed: "We realized that it's one thing to critique the media, but what you really want to be doing is reporting on the things you think they're not," Parry said.The site really hit its stride on April 18, 2002. Israeli military operations in the West Bank had disabled the website of the Palestinian Authority, pna.net. So the authority's internet service provider redirected it to Electronic Intifada, whose traffic jumped from about 60,000 visitors a month to more than a million, Parry recalled. (The site does not reveal its current traffic, and Abunimah didn't respond to an inquiry about it.)

The Second Intifada wore on, and suicide bombings dominated the American press, even as Abunimah raged about the exclusion of Palestinian victims. As the site — and the sense of an outsider momentum — grew, Abunimah's own views shifted. He and Ibish and their peers had always viewed the Oslo process, which created the Palestinian Authority in the early 1990s and was intended to set the path to peace, as unfair and incomplete, at best. But now Oslo increasingly appeared to him (as it did to harder-line activists on both sides) as a totally unacceptable compromise in the first place in which the Palestinians gave up the

right to resist in exchange for a weak, limited kind of self-governance. He saw the Palestinian Authority as a Quisling body.

Oslo's failure proved, he wrote, that the path toward two states was blocked, and he went looking for a different way. The men were still talking every day, Ibish recalls, between his Foggy Bottom bachelor pad and Abunimah's place in Hyde Park, Chicago. By Ibish's recollection, it was during 2003 and 2004 that their daily conversations became "entirely monologues by him and then he would run out of breath and I would start to say something contradictory and he would interrupt me."

Yasser Arafat died in the fall of 2004, and Abunimah derided the Palestinian Authority election to replace him — which he considered illegitimate. Ibish approved of the election and supported the results, and that was the final break between the men. "The die was cast.

There was no agreement between us," Ibish recalled.

Abunimah had abandoned the hope of a negotiated settlement or a Palestine rising out of the framework of the failed peace talks. (When, a year later, the Islamist group Hamas won an election in Gaza, the debate was roughly reversed: Ibish was dismayed by the result, while Electronic Intifada heatedly defended both the process and the result.)

Their chill was evident when they appeared together on *Democracy Now* [12] on Feb. 8, 2005. Ibish made the baritone case that the apparent breakdown in negotiations had actually put Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in a box.

"Well, it's good to try to put an optimistic and positive spin on things, but I really can't share the optimism," Abunimah responded drily.

By then, Abunimah was deep in the new ferment of the web. Ibish is webby too, but his intellectual life had taken a totally different turn. Soon after arriving in Washington in 1999, he'd tagged along to a lunch — which turned into 10 hours of drinking and talking — with Christopher Hitchens, the iconoclastic leftist writer who was in the process of turning into an unlikely admirer of elements of George W. Bush's war on terror. Hitchens and his friend, whom he referred to affectionately as "Mount Ibish," shared both wide intellectual range — Ibish's recent publications include an essay in *The Baffler* [13] on the Marquis de Sade's influence on the United States — and a deep dislike of what both men described as "theocracy."

Their minds met on Palestinian issues as well. Ibish's militant secularism, like Hitchens', has made him an outspoken critic of Islamist groups like Hamas — which Abunimah has cast as carrying on legitimate resistance — and of Israel's leadership. And Hitchens never extended to support for Israel: Its tribalism and its religious roots repelled him. Hitchens cited "my friend" Ibish in his first column after Sept. 11 as his source for the claim there had been acts of retaliatory violence against Arabs and Muslims. Friends of both men describe them as extremely close and see Hitchens, who died in 2011, as a major influence on, in particular, Ibish's polemical style.

His mark is visible on, for instance, Ibish's scathing assault [14] on one of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's favorite stories, of how archaeologists recently unearthed a signet ring carrying the name "Netanyahu." The prime minister's family name, he noted archly, was Mileikowsky; his father's adoption of the name, and his son's reliance on it for national legitimacy, was for Ibish, a metaphor for the entire national myth.

Hitchens also drew Ibish into a different Washington, one that could at least flirt with the

political power that is the city's reason for existing. And Ibish found a way into the pragmatic politics of the Palestinian issue when Asali, who had been president of the ADC, decided to create a new advocacy group focused on Palestine. In his view, the ADC needed to focus on domestic civil rights; and meanwhile, there was an opportunity, in Asali's view, to create an advocacy group that made the case for a Palestinian state based on American national interests. He launched the American Task Force on Palestine in 2003, and Ibish joined about a year later.

The move away from the traditional, outsider struggle and toward a time-honored Washington insider route — figures like Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell spoke at the banquet of the ATFP — "took a little chutzpah on our part, and involved confronting the community a little bit," said Asali. The old leadership, including figures like Abunimah, "depends on the misfortunes of the peace process — it will all evaporate if we have a peace agreement next month. All of them, the Alis, will have to justify their existence."

When Ibish signed on with Asali's new group, its commitment to two states, and its place inside normal American politics, "he started on the irreversible track of separating from these guys. He had a lot of work behind him in that 'struggle' — he had emotional as well as intellectual investment," said Asali. "He's a really singular talent — he had no match among all these people, that's why they felt his loss so acutely," Asali said. "That explains in large part the animosity to me — that I lured [Ibish] out of the revolutionary path."

The majority of the organized Palestinian movement in the United States saw things a bit differently. Ibish, Columbia's Khalidi said in an interview, had become a "Palestinian neocon." ("I am a liberal in every possible sense — I can't think of a single conservative position I hold," Ibish responded in an interview, calling the label "ridiculous.")

The two men's debate culminated with the publication of a pair of books: Abunimah's *A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse,* published in 2007, and Ibish's 2009 response,*What's Wrong with the One-State Agenda?*

Abunimah's book is, if you are a reader of his confrontational, lacerating online persona, surprisingly gentle and humane. Though he devotes much of it to Palestinian suffering under Israeli occupation, its core is a vision of a functioning, democratic binational state that includes the current state of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, an old idea and one that Said himself had championed. The book begins with nostalgia for his mother's friendship with a Jewish girl in Lifta, and imagines, in detail, a campaign of international and internal pressure based not on competing nationalisms but on international principles of human rights — the vision that underlies a current attempt to launch the sort of boycott against

Israel that helped topple South Africa's apartheid regime and drives the allegations of "apartheid" in Israel.

Ibish is mentioned (though not thanked) in the acknowledgements, as one of a half-dozen people with whom Abunimah "often replayed our many conversations." *One Country* devotes 12 central pages to a study of Belgium, and suggests that "Israelis and Palestinians may actually be better-positioned [than Flemish and Walloon Belgians] to develop truly cross-community politics."

The book has helped spark a rich online conversation over a democratic binational state, largely among the diaspora. But many more traditional activists deride Abunimah's vision as a fantasy — "starry-eyed enthusiasm," in Khalidi's words.But the book helped spur a shift — at least in the burgeoning online conversations among activists — toward an alternate vision from two states. *One Country* is "one of the foundational books of the core canon of the dawning shift," said Virginia Tilley, a professor at the University of the South Pacific and another leading writer in the one-state movement.

As Abunimah articulated that inclusive vision in print, he had become both a more divisive and a more central figure online. In 2008, he "seized control" of Electronic Intifada amid a debate about whether it should be structured as a nonprofit, raise more money, and professionalize, Parry, the co-founder of the site, recalled.

(Parry was also at the center of a separate community battle: He was arrested in 2007, the NYPD confirmed, for aggravated harassment in New York. He once described the incident [15] as a "psychotic episode of sorts" that was misunderstood by its targets, including women in the Palestinian movement, and which included both emails and pounding on a neighbor's door. Abunimah "was very supportive during that whole period as a friend and he got targeted by a lot of people in the community for that support," he said in an interview; he was not ultimately convicted of any crime. Some in the community say they still haven't forgiven Abunimah for siding with Parry over his alleged victims.)

The raw anger in Abunimah's digital voice, and his quickness to throw words like "fraud" and "liar" and "imperialist scum" at his digital foes, meanwhile, has made him an intimidating presence. His targets frequently include sometime allies: He's currently waging internecine battles on *The Nation* and the *London Review of Books*. Three Arab-American activists who are broadly sympathetic with his point of view cited a fear of clashing with him on Twitter as a reason not to be quoted by name. Electronic Intifada is "really a useful resource," said one, who declined to be quoted, saying even that for fear of his "slash-and-burn style." His Twitter persona is "a bit rash," said one of his leading intellectual allies.

Supporters of both Israel and of the nationalist leadership in the West Bank see Electronic Intifada as a dangerous channel for the Islamist politics of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to enter the mainstream. Though Abunimah has condemned suicide bombings against civilians, he has had kind words for some Islamist leaders. In 2009 he [memorably described](link) [16]Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Shallah as "super intelligent, eloquent and hot." He has also pointedly suggested that the definition of "combatant" is pretty broad: "Israeli occupation worker shot and killed while helping to enforce siege of Gaza," [he tweeted](link) [17] of a [Bedouin Defense Ministry worker shot dead](link) [18] while repairing the fence between Israel and Gaza. In 2011, the pro-Israel site NGO Monitor helped persuade the Dutch government to drop indirect funding for [the site](link) [19], pointing to Electronic Intifada's campaign to boycott Israel and to specific posts, including a letter from a Palestinian artist and activist in New York saying that "Israel has lost its moral right to exist."

EI's parent nonprofit brought in more than $243,000 in donations in 2011, the last year for which public tax returns are available; the site says that a combination of reader donations and private foundations pay for its work, but [doesn't disclose its backers](link) [20].

Ibish pointed to the tonal gap between Abunimah's book and his tweets [in a blog item](link) [21], but also responded in more detail to Abunimah's *One Country* in the 2009 book published by his own task force, *What's Wrong with the One-State Agenda?* The book was driven, Ibish said, by a sense that the one-state movement was gaining momentum broadly, not to Abunimah in particular. The book argues that the Gaza conflict, which had pushed Abunimah toward belief in a single state, "reminded us, with a fury and horror that few other recent events could match, that the choice facing Israelis and Palestinians is between peace based on two states or continued conflict, increasingly in the name of God, for the foreseeable future" and speaks of the lack of a practical path toward a single state. "The idea that a single, democratic state in all of mandatory Palestine is a viable, plausible and serious political option for both peoples and for the Palestinian national movement is simply an illusion," Ibish wrote.

He also took a backhanded shot at his old friend, comparing Abunimah's book (the subject of nine of Ibish's 41 footnotes) to Tilley's on the same subject. "Tilley's book is more scholarly, serious and sustained, while Abunimah's is better written, more engaging and probably more effective with the general public," Ibish wrote.

That was their last sustained and civil public exchange. Now Ibish and Abunimah battle it out in the trenches of Twitter (though they don't actually follow each other) and on their blogs. Many of their friends and allies have no idea that they were once close.

TAGS: <u>One State Solution</u> [22]<u>Peace Based on Two States</u> [23]<u>Palestinian Society</u> [24]

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