

Intervention of Dr Samir Khalaf : Michel Chiha and the Struggle for Palestine

The credibility and standing of scholars and public intellectuals, even some of the most distinguished among them, is rarely uncontested. Indeed, in virtually all societies or intellectual circles, the most discerning and visionary intellectual leaders – particularly those who challenge or break away from mainstream or established paradigms – are more inclined to suffer such fates. Michel Chiha, the man we are celebrating this evening, is no exception. The astute political analyst and strategist that he was and the ardent advocate of open, liberal and cosmopolitan political cultures, he had more than his due share of detractors and critics.

One can understand, since the bulk of his writings and bi-weekly editorials were in French, why Chiha was overlooked in Anglo-Saxon circles. It is unpardonable though, at least in my view, that he was often overlooked and misunderstood by some of his own compatriots. Before dwelling on the overriding themes and issues which he addressed in his editorials and essays on the crisis and predicament of Palestine (between 1945-1954), I wish to take a few moments to dispel, albeit briefly, a few of the misrepresentations Chiha was subjected to. Altogether, they converge on about five misconceptions: First, as a Francophone, he was depicted as a narrow-minded Levantine obsessed with preserving or safeguarding Lebanon as a “Merchant Republic” for a privileged coterie of its upper bourgeoisie. Second, he was unfairly characterized as a Lebanese chauvinist, enraptured and captivated by little more than the country’s enchanting geography and pristine landscape. His detractors, likewise, claim that he has gone further in romanticizing and idealizing Lebanon’s cosmopolitanism and Mediterranean republican virtues. He is also depicted as a disengaged intellectual recluse with a penchant, as an erudite essayist, for the literary arts and poetry; at best a renaissance man of letters.

A cursory review of the 116 editorials he wrote on Palestine (January 14, 1945 to December 15, 1954) easily reveal that all these attributions are blatant distortions of Chiha’s image or legacy as a public intellectual. Foremost, he is the Francophone zealot he is made to seem. As a young man, Chiha carried out some study in Britain where he must have developed his admiration for the resilience of the unwritten British Constitution. Brief, as it was, this interlude must have had an impact on the defining role he played in drafting the Lebanese Constitution. It also must have informed his critical input in articulating the premises of the “National Covenant” of 1943, an unwritten pact to secure Lebanon’s independence from France. This gentlemen’s entente evolved into a pragmatic political strategy which alleviated the tensions engendered by the two inveterate and nagging issues in Lebanon’s political history: national identity and confessional harmony. Equally important, this interlude must have sharpened his political analytical skills as a liberal intellectual with profound humanistic predispositions.

In historical hindsight, thanks indeed to the foresight of Michel Chiha and his enlightened circle of intellectual, business, and political associates, who articulated a vision of Lebanon more open to European and Western contacts without necessarily undermining the nascent Arabist and nationalist sentiments coveted by Muslim and Christian secularists. It was largely the ideas of this circle along with thoughtful Sunnites, equally mindful of the legitimate fears of Christians being engulfed in an avalanche of Arabism, which were incorporated into the constitution of 1926 and the National Covenant of 1943. External events facilitated the workings of this more consociational resolution of the discord. France's political demise after World War II tilted in favor of the Constitutional Bloc of Bishara al Khoury which was more receptive to such an accommodationist view.

Chiha was also far from the incurable Lebanese chauvinist. He was fully aware of the foibles and pitfalls of the country he loved. He was never sparing in disclosing such inherent weaknesses or proposing alleviating strategies. Nor was he just an intellectual recluse and stylistic essayist. Quite often he donned the garb of an academic social scientist bent on making categorical propositions and meaningful generalizations of an abstract and analytical character. While re-reading some of his essays I could easily imagine myself in the company of Raymond Aron, an Andre Malraux; a bit of Emile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu. Finally and, perhaps most striking, Chiha was an activist and ardent public intellectual. As early as 1946, he was part of the core group which founded the Cenacle Libanais as a free forum for rational and spirited public debate.

The founding of the Cenacle became a radiant landmark in the intellectual life of Lebanon during its vibrant post-independence epoch. It was a critical threshold that signaled the emergence of indigenous initiative for self-determination and national discourse. The times were auspicious. With the evacuation of all foreign troops, Lebanon's independence became a reality. The specters of World War II had disappeared. In quick succession, the country won international and regional recognition by being ushered into the Arab League and the United Nations.

The founders of the Cenacle intended it as an open forum for the articulation of the various ideological views and visions underlying Lebanon's national character as pluralistic society. It was hoped that the open discourse would invite concerted efforts to forge the outlines of a coherent national identity with a modicum of consensus on its political, sociocultural, and aesthetic philosophy. Three different viewpoints or perspectives were contesting for dominance. The first affirmed that the country was much too small to form a viable independent state. Hence it should be absorbed in the larger Arab World. The second, even more negative, asserted that in its present composite form the country was too fragmented and cumbersome to manage politically. Hence the most viable prospect was to reduce its size still further by ridding itself of some of its unwanted elements. Only by so doing could its survival be assured, albeit as a diminished and isolationist entity. Thanks to

the input of Chiha, the Cenacle opted for a third and more realistic perspective, one more consistent with Lebanon's pluralistic structure and prospects for harmonious coexistence among its differentiated parts. Cofounders of the Cenacle shared the optimistic view that through open dialogue it is possible to approach consensus on the common constituent elements defining Lebanon.

Those defining elements they held converge on the following set of beliefs: Lebanon, as a Mediterranean country, is heir to a long succession of Mediterranean cultures – Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Hittite, Ancient Egyptian, and Arab. In addition to language, it shares with its neighboring Arab states a common culture and common political destiny. Lebanon's Arabness is more than just an accident of history. Eminent Lebanese scholars and literary figures had contributed significantly to its nationalist ethos and Arab culture and literary revival. But Lebanon has also an international character. By virtue of its strategic position and multiculturalism, it has been since, the 22nd century B.C. open and receptive to world cultures. It is both Arab and international, a gateway between East and West but, above all, it has its own personality and unique national identity.

The articulated credo of the Cenacle was not, naturally, uncritically endorsed. All its underlying premises and visions invited heated public debate. The periodic lectures of the Cenacle became eagerly awaited public events. They attracted some of the country's most eminent intellectuals and polemical figures. More telling, at a time when political discourse in adjacent Arab regimes had already degenerated into the belligerent and militant rhetoric of radical change and bloody confrontations, Lebanon opted for the pacifist give and take of open dialogue. The Cenacle lectures always drew some of the eminent persons of the day. There were no holds barred on the topics to be discussed. Discretion of speakers was the only form of censorship.

Coming in the wake of a recently won independence, the concerns of the Cenacle converged understandably on three vital issues: Lebanon's foreign relations, its philosophical groundings, and some of the unsettling socioeconomic problems the country was grappling with at the time. Chiha, along with some of the country's most established intellectual and political figures of the likes of Charles Malik, Philip Taqla, Emile Bustani, Muhieddin Nsouli, Fuad Ammoun, Ibrahim Ahdab, René Habachi and Manuel Yunis grappled with these and related public issues.

The most I can do with the time at my disposal is to focus on two matters: First, to highlight the themes and issues which aroused the concerns of Chiha in his editorials. Second, identify the unusual, original and prophetic modes he employed to frame and elucidate his strident and visionary messages. Without much injustice, his editorials can be readily reduced to three general concerns which he deplored and was alarmed and outraged about.

First, the partition of Palestine, the creation of the Jewish state and Zionism, which in his view, constitute "the monumental error" in contemporary history.

Second, he was equally unsparing in lambasting America's historic uncertainty towards Israel and its endemic double-standards. As early as 1945, Chiha was already noting a profound shift in the US foreign policy. America's proverbial even-handedness and a champion of "soft power" and as a "righter of wrongs" was beginning to give way to a patronizing stance which explicitly and avowedly favored Israel's colonial designs and ambitions.

Finally, Chiha was also outraged about what he called the habitual ineptitude, weakness and failure of the Arabs to resist Israel's military violations or to mobilize diplomatic initiative.

Israel's Global Power

In most of his editorials, before and after the partition of Palestine, Chiha continued to deplore, often in the most disparaging prose, the ominous implications of what he had perceived as the most misfortunate and tragic situations of our time. Indeed to Chiha the creation of a Zionist Jewish State stands out as the gravest of errors of contemporary politics; "a foolhardy and hazardous venture destined to shake the world to its foundations." As early as 1945, he was already alarmed about the incessant influx of Jews, especially East Europeans, into Palestine. The consequences of such influx, in his view, were grievous. Other than Tel Aviv, Palestine is such a mixed confessional entity, that it was problematic to attempt a division along faith lines.

Early in the inception of the Jewish state Chiha was fully cognizant of the goliath-like manifestations of its disproportionate global power. He also foresaw that the only strategy which could ultimately thwart its dominance was Arab resistance. On July 5, 1948, he was characteristically resolute and unwavering in disparaging its calamitous consequences.

It would be suicidal for the Arab countries to give way; like a deliberate journey into night. Because, and it can never be repeated enough, Zionism is not the product of miserable Jews seeking refuge, *but of a truly global power with networks encompassing the whole globe, whose avowed or secret aspirations transcend all else* (July 5, 1948).

So adamant about the pernicious implications of the state of Israel bearing down on Lebanon's borders, Chiha never felt the need to apologize for returning time and again to remind his readers about its proximate presence behind the "shaky walls which separate us". Israel's desire for conquest is ferocious and boundless.

The Passover greeting openly or secretly exchanged by Jews all over the world is still: "Next year in Jerusalem". This universal dream conceals a limitless desire for conquest. Whilst purporting to be establishing the State of Israel, America is above all preparing the ground for the Jewish struggle for Jerusalem. An underhanded struggle with no holds barred,

including money, cunning, intrigue, allurements and worse if need be (July 14, 1948).

This insatiable desire for conquest, given the indifference of the world, can only beget further aggression. This is the one dreaded and foreboding reality Chiha had no illusions about. It will never be quelled. "Israel's boundless ambitions are leavened with hate and discord. It has a plan which can endanger and destroy peace for a long time...As far as Israel is concerned, the whole world can perish provided the Kingdom of David emerges triumphant" (July 29, 1950). Though Israel's venture, in Chiha's view, "is the greatest absurdity on earth", this state of madness is not likely to be wished away. Its effect will surely continue to haunt us.

In the face of such flagrant miscarriage of justice, Chiha had no choice but to keep repeating its pernicious consequences. Jewish pressure on governments might momentarily ease. Sooner or later, however, it always finds the alibis to reinvent itself. He saves his most strident remarks when witnessing the Holy City being forsaken. In an unusually sharp and terse editorial (December 6, 1949) he cried out: "One single atheistic or heathen voice amongst the nations of the world can determine its destiny". By heathen voices, Chiha was, of course, pointing aspersions at the USSR, which, in his view, has tenaciously sided with Israel.

Within such an ambivalent diplomatic setting, Chiha could be forgiven for continuing to view future prospects with measured scepticism. The failure of the UN to tame Zionist ambitions only compounded his fears. Indeed to Chiha's opinion the world was witnessing the sad spectacle of an unprecedented buckling of moral forces (September 6, 1949). In the process, Christianity and Islam are allowing themselves to be treated as fugitives in the Holy Land.

America's Double Standards

Chiha was equally unsparing in decrying America's historic uncertainty towards Israel. As early as 1945, he was already noting a profound shift in US foreign policy. Its proverbial even-handedness and the image it once enjoyed as a "righter of wrongs" was beginning to give way to a patronizing stance which explicitly and avowedly favored Israel's colonialist designs and ambitions. Perceptively Chiha was fully aware of America's patronizing role in safeguarding Israel's interests. He rarely minced his words when he was dramatizing the evils inherent in such flagrant partiality and intellectual and political derangement.

To put it plainly, America continues to bring its considerable weight to bear in influencing countries for the benefit of Israel and all the decisions coming out of Lake Success show the effects of this. A United States representative in the Security Council has just been heard to state that, should one of the parties accept a prolongation of the truce and the other refuse, *the latter would be liable to sanctions*. In that case it would

constitute truce by force. It is difficult to understand this interpretation, which does not reflect credit on American legal thinking (July 10, 1948).

This form of patronage is jarring on two counts. The State of Israel is not only its unlawful child, as it were. It was also born in the pain suffered by others. Writing his editorial of July 18, 1948 on a Sunday, the Lord 's Day on which, as Chiha put it, we are called upon to be calm and reserved, he could not restrain his outrage regarding the explicit patronage the US bestows on Israel.

The power of Israel did not only penetrate the White House and take it hostage but the US, willfully or otherwise, was transformed into an agency for Israel.

As it is, Western Europe, having been materially ruined and morally weakened by the war and doctrinal conflicts, is now dependent on the United States' assistance for its survival. *And in return the United States compels Europe to adopt its viewpoint on crucial issues, as has happened with Palestine.* The same applies to Latin America, albeit for different reasons. Thus Western Europe is manifestly subject to moral coercion; of course to a greater or lesser extent; (the Belgians for instance, were it not for the United States, would feel less compunction in their attitude to Israel than the French; because in France the Jewish presence in politics is much more influential, all things being equal, than in Belgium) (August 30, 1948).

Despite America's global lobbying on behalf of Israel, the converts were not always willing parties to such avowed pressures. Indeed, more than just a few countries in Western Europe, we are told by Chiha, were quite reluctant in voting for the creation of Israel.

The disastrous byproducts of such moral confusion on a global scale were immense and Chiha had no illusions whatsoever about their pernicious implications, particularly those inherent in its essential anomaly as a "faith-based" state. Throughout, he remained obdurate in his scepticism of America's occasional measures and predispositions, in the face of Israel's mounting belligerency and defiant violations, to impose any restraints on it. "The Past", he bemoaned, "is full of examples of how far American blindness and indulgence towards rampant Zionism can stretch" (October 17, 1953).

The Habitual Weakness of Arabs

Chiha, certainly, did not absolve the Arabs, particularly with regard to their perpetual ineptitude and failure to resist Israel's military violations or mobilize effective diplomatic initiative on their behalf. In fact to him, the lethargy and weakness of the Arabs always stood in stark contrast to Israel's bold initiatives on virtually all dimensions of the crisis. As Israel mastered the diplomatic art of forcing the hand of all the great powers, the Arabs were "losing their way in futile lamentation and palaver... with one failure to act after another, one miscalculation after another" (August 6, 1953).

Foremost he lays blame on the divisiveness and blunders of the Arab League. They simply do what they have been doing for so long: indulge with futile palavers and illusory concerns.

Meanwhile the Arab League is engaged in palavers with illusory economic concerns as the main topic. They are firing up public opinion on internal quarrels. They are firing up public opinion on matters of pride, when even haughty Europe itself no longer cares about such things (May 30, 1953).

He found it necessary to repeat "that the Arab League countries do not devote a fraction of the attention they should to Palestine in their policies and concerns". Chiha, incidentally, became aware of such lamentable shortcomings much earlier. Indeed, as early as 1948, he was already telling us that there are no shortages of reproaches and regrets. Otherwise, "Arab refugees would not have replaced the Wandering Jews on the highways". He was always keen on adding:

...that the Arab countries, despite prior warning, have proved deaf to the strongest arguments and urgings. For months and years it was like crying in the wilderness (August 30, 1948).

He was also adamant as to where ultimate salvation is going to come from:

This is no longer the time for childish games. Let us obtain the international contractual guarantee of our frontiers and the internationalization of Jerusalem. At the same time, let us organize a collective defence with those powers which defend the freedom of the soul and the freedom of the seas (May 30, 1953).

Fully aware of the patience of the US, the failings of the UN and the habitual weakness of the Arabs, Israel became adept, often with temerity and insolence, at exploiting such misgivings. Within such a setting, no armistice is going to enhance the chances of peace. Indeed, Chiha was persistent in warning us that the reverse was bound to happen. "With each day the problem engendered by Israel became more difficult to resolve and every day a peaceful solution seems more and more untenable" (October 1, 1953).

Chiha as Probing and Dispassionate Scholar

Chiha has long been admired as an engaging and spirited essayist and as an astute analyst of his country's convoluted political culture. But one can easily extract from his editorials perhaps a more compelling role: that of an academic or empirical social scientist keen on making meaningful and abstract generalizations about human conduct and societal transformations.

Many of these assertions are extracted from lived historical realities. They are also perceptively and analytically stated and bear a prophetic tinge. For example, he ends his editorial of "strange Behavior" of April 20, 1948, by the following inference: "the more the

Zionist position appears faith-based and racist, the less likely it will be tolerated.” In the same editorial, and equally insightful, he advances the proposition that “Jewish solidarity in the world goes too far. It is clearly impinging on countries’ right to legitimate self-defense”.

A few weeks later, on May 11, 1948, he elucidates the probable association between Jewish Diaspora and the growing hegemony of the Jewish State as a powerful colony and center of global capital and banking magnates. In other words, more than half a century before contemporary observers were becoming aware of some of the unsettling manifestations of such global incursions, Chiha was already anticipating and decrying their foreboding consequences.

All the Jews of the diaspora, naturalized everywhere, will overtly or covertly identify themselves with a homeland. In many countries the new State will be represented by powerful colonies and often by members of parliament and government figures. Using international finance a tight web of intrigue will cover the world’s capitals, large and small; and Israel’s diplomacy (doubtless more affluent than any other) will be conducted by illustrious high financiers and banking magnates of all nationalities (May 11, 1948).

His remarks regarding the association between Zionism and Marxism are also revealing. He reminds us that the Jews were the main contributors to the revolution which consigned Russia to Marxism in 1917. More important, Marxists continue to exert considerable influence on the USSR. Revolutionary fervor, he maintains, suits their purposes everywhere and doubtless, the collapse of Christian civilization as well.

As a deliberate but measured scholar, Chiha was always keen on distinguishing between Judaism and Zionism. We could live in peace easily with the former but Zionism, he tells us, was an altogether different species. “Like an incurable disease, heralding unbridled fanaticism”, it is an invasive and aggressive human venture

While he often employs the stern and biting rhetoric in depicting Zionism, particularly its fanaticism and belligerency, as the greatest aberration in today’s world, in no way could he condone any moral and political justifications for resurgent anti-Semitism. In this, as well as in depicting the anguish and human suffering of refugees, with his disarming erudition and refined use of prose, Chiha remains at heart a humanist.

A religion is a religion, he tells us. In other words it is a personal matter and a profession of faith. “To prosecute someone for their faith runs counter to natural and human law” (February 12, 1953).

In much the same tone he reassures his reader that he takes the existence of Israel as an established fact. “It is not a question of throwing the Israelis into the sea. We have been saying for a long time that the issue of Israel is less one of *presence* than *power* (December 10, 1952). It is this historic reality of Israel as a militant and warring culture which Chiha

decried time and again. *"The unfortunate thing is that the Jewish State was designed for indefinite expansion.* In the minds of its creators it is the homeland of all the world's Jews and its intended purpose is a global one. This is a world power, to varying degrees both undisguised and secret" (December 10, 1952).

Chiha's editorials, it must be recalled, were all written in the post second world war interlude, a time of unanticipated diplomatic turnaround and sudden shifts in regional and global settings. As an astute historian he was always perceptive and prophetic in assessing their nature and consequences. Much like a dispassionate academic, he gave the events the scholarly readings they deserved. For example, when the USSR, in February of 1953, broke diplomatic relations with Israel in the wake of the attack on their consulate in Tel Aviv, Chiha was characteristically perceptive in framing the episode within its historic perspective. Unlike others, he was not taken by surprise. Given Russia's intrinsic anti-Jewish sentiments, the USSR to him was, all along, waiting for the right opportunity.

Here again, he does not spare the moment to cast aspersions at the "ruthlessness of Marx's disciples" who are now turning their belligerency on those belonging to his race (February 13, 1953). Even more prophetic, he predicted that, given the United States visceral suspicion and hatred of the USSR, they will now become more benevolent towards Israel.

Public Intellectual and Advocacy

Chiha was not only a profound and intuitive humanist, a dispassionate social scientist and an erudite essayist. He was also a formidable advocate and public intellectual. In this regard he was ahead of his times and served as a precursor to the roles renowned public intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Ibrahim Abu Lughod and the like, assumed forty years.

The mild-mannered and peace-loving man lost his cool at times, especially when confronting the arrogance and outright fanaticism inherent in Israel's belligerency and expansionist designs. He alerted us repeatedly that Israel wishes to regain the land of the "Twelve Tribes". To Chiha that portends nothing but aggression and war in the immediate or near future. Nothing is to be gained, he warned, by talk of reconciliation and appeasement. Indeed, any appeasement considerations mean, in effect, falling prey to deception and delusion.

Long before Israel started to amass its arsenals and enhance its military powers to become one of the world's formidable engines of war, Chiha was denouncing such foreboding. The Arab world cannot possibly remain impassive faced with all the daunting threats of such a "racist and tentacled State". It is here that Chiha abandons his cool-headed and sober analysis to assume the more strident tone of a confrontational advocate. He implores Arab activists to become more aggressive in dramatizing the evils they are beset with. He goads them to emulate other such comparable instances of collective mobilization. He cites what the

Jewish members of the British Parliament had done on April 30, 1946. As one collective body, they officially lobbied his Majesty's government on behalf of Zionism in Palestine. He wondered why the significantly more numerous Christian and Muslim parliamentarians everywhere do not, for their part, speak up and out for Arab Palestine or the Palestine of Christianity and Islam.

As an advocate on behalf of human justice and sovereignty, he was often sparked by the impulse to dramatize the evil. So keen not to entertain anti-Semitic sentiments or leanings, he turns at times his sharp and acrimonious pen to decry the wickedness inherent in Zionism. Depending on the circumstances, and depending on what Israel deems expedient, it can willfully make dissonant diplomatic stances without any moral reserves.

Its policies are *sui generis*, peculiar to the chosen people; fundamentally monarchic and royal in memory of King David, theocratic and by divine right in memory of the Judges, in other words policies which can turn anarchic when required to unsettle the world. Depending on the circumstances, depending on what is expedient at the time, Israel draws closer to the USSR or moves away from it, courts the West or defies it (July 22, 1953).

It is Israel's horrendous diplomatic schemes and shenanigans which, however, continued to outrage Chiha. Within this entangled morass, there is to him but one way out, not two: the effective internationalization of Jerusalem and the contractual guarantees of frontiers. Even when Chiha started to entertain the prospects of negotiation with Israel, the starting point can be nothing other than an international presence in Jerusalem.

Concluding Remarks

One cannot help but ask, given Chiha's penetrating and prophetic analysis, what he could have said and done had he been with us today. He wrote unceasingly, often with bitter irony but always with the erudition of a formidable essayist. His texts were replete with intuitive and profound humanistic sensibilities but, on occasion, also peppered with terse, pithy and refined prose and inflections.

Calamitous as the disaster has been, he would have been the least surprised. After all, he had alerted us long before the State of Israel was established – and often as a lonely voice in the wilderness – that Israel's boundless ambitions as a Zionist entity is leavened with hate and discord and that its plans are destined to engender and destroy peace for a long time.

With the same trenchant but humane voice, he also decried the discordant and inconsistent perspectives and policies of the United States and Russia, the failure of the UN and the lethargy and timidity of the Arabs. He certainly did not spare the foibles of his own beleaguered country. As an outspoken public intellectual he never shied away from disclosing these blemishes. They were most lamentable perhaps in the indifference which characterized Lebanon's reactions to Israel's strategic designs over the Litani River. We have the tendency,

he bemoaned, to “treat the serious lightly. We have often sold or risked selling our birthrights for less than a mess of pottage” (March 17, 1951).

Chiha can be easily enlisted posthumously to disclose and decry all the cruelties engendered by the creation of Zionist State. By changing a few names and episodes, we can make his denunciations our denunciations; his despair and alarming forecasts a motif for our own lamentations and apathy; his insights a beacon for our darkness. Just like Chiha was uncompromising in decrying the evils of Zionism, the moral incongruity of America and the inaptitude of Arabs, we can heed his sense of outrage to transform such inspiring epiphanies into programs of action and reform. Above all, he understood the insidious aspects of political and moral detriment and the debasement of a cosmopolitan cultural heritage.