

# Can the Palestinians Make Peace?

*Daniel Pipes*

IN NOVEMBER 1917, Britain's Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour made public the dramatic announcement that "His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." But he then added a major stipulation: ". . . it being understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

London's easy assumption of 1917 that the two parts of Balfour's declaration could be reconciled was quickly shattered, as the Arabs of Palestine showed that they very much considered Zionism an impediment to their "civil and religious rights." To their distress, British authorities found over the next thirty years that they could support the Jewish homeland or an Arab-dominated Palestine, but not both. Indeed, nothing in the vast reaches of their empire had prepared British administrators for such a bleakly zero-sum confrontation. In the end, they gave up on it; in 1947, in a unique instance of imperial defeatism, they handed the problem over to the United Nations.

This history comes to mind because the Bush administration today seems to be falling into almost the same pitfall. In a key speech delivered in May 1989, laying out the American position on what is optimistically called the Arab-Israeli "peace process," Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d called for

self-government for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza in a manner acceptable to Palestinians, Israel, and Jordan. Such a formula provides ample scope for Palestinians to achieve their full political rights. It also provides ample protection for Israel's security.

These sentences bear uncanny, if obverse, resemblances to the facile balancing of the Balfour Declaration. To begin with, where Balfour called for a Jewish "national home," Baker calls for "self-government for Palestinians." In the highly structured language of diplomacy, both are non-standard phrases, as ambiguous as they are vague. Both suggest a less than fully sovereign political

unit without spelling out what that might be. Then, too, in another parallel, where Balfour stipulated that Arab "civil and religious rights" not be harmed, Baker insists on protection for Israel's security interests. In effect, Baker has offered the Palestinians the same deal that Balfour offered the Zionists in 1917.

AS THE bitter legacy of the Balfour Declaration makes clear, however, a self-contradictory solution like this only raises hopes on one side and fears on the other. And there is another problem. The U.S. government opposes both permanent control by Israel of the occupied territories and an independent Palestinian state. What does that leave? Something called a "Palestinian entity."\* No one knows just exactly what such an entity would look like, but here are some of the conditions that Ze'ev Schiff, a leading Israeli military analyst, requires:

The Palestinian entity would be prohibited from entering into any military alliance or from permitting the stationing, transit, or training of foreign military or police forces on its territory. This ban would extend to foreign military advisers and trainers. . . .

No troops, weapon systems (such as tanks, missiles, artillery, military aircraft, or electronic warfare), military fortifications or electronic sensors (such as missile-target-acquisition systems) would be permitted inside the Palestinian entity.

The Palestinian answer to these ideas has not been encouraging, to say the least. As a prominent Palestinian intellectual, Walid Khalidi, observed in 1978: "A demilitarized state would be self-defeating. Without national armed forces the political leadership of the state would become the laughingstock of the Arab world." More recently, the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yasir Arafat, said he would accept such limits only if they applied in exactly the same measure to Israel.

Further, in a world order of sovereign states, it is not obvious that a "Palestinian entity" would last long. The dynamics of nationalism ensure

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\* Few who use this term in English are aware that it is a translation of the Arabic term *al-kiyan al-Filastini* and that it implies the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

that this eccentric unit would either become sovereign in its own right or fall under the domination of an existing state (Israel, Jordan, or Syria). In other words, foreign control or a sovereign Palestinian state are the only two realistic options. In trying to split the difference, just as the British did in 1917, Washington is bound to promote not peace but continuing conflict.

Nor is this the only thing wrong with the American government's approach. There is also the quite inexplicable overemphasis placed on Arabs and Israelis at this time of quiescence in the Middle East and of exceptional activity elsewhere in the world. The year 1989 saw revolutions in six East European countries; the likely reordering of the entire postwar security system in Europe; the first major changes in the Soviet system in thirty-five years; the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan; trauma in China; and the emergence of Japan as a true world actor. But where was the American Secretary of State's attention fixed during most of that year? According to Daniel Kurtzer, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in charge of Arab-Israeli affairs, James Baker was "in almost daily telephone contact" with the Middle East.

It is also troubling to witness what seems to be an a priori assumption in Washington that Arafat's declaration of December 1988, in which he grudgingly recognized Israel and renounced terrorism, signified a long-term change in the stand of the PLO, and was not just tactical. Yet the inflamed rhetoric and violent activities of the PLO since that declaration was made would seem both to undercut Arafat's claim to a new policy and to confirm that, once again, the PLO is more concerned with organizational survival than with making peace.

A final concern is yet more far-reaching. It has to do with the assumption in Washington that the Arab-Israeli conflict can be resolved by addressing the Palestinian issue. Yet this emphasis on the Palestinians (an outlook which I call "Palestinianism") has two important flaws: in the first place, even if the Palestinians were to be satisfied, they are too weak to call off the Arab war against Israel; and in any case, available evidence suggests they cannot be satisfied by any solution short of the destruction of Israel.

**I**N DECADES past, Israelis (and their supporters) interpreted their struggle with the Arabs as an international conflict between states. For their part, Arabs (and their supporters) saw the struggle as a communal one between the Jews, or the Israelis, and the Palestinians. This difference operated on many levels. Israelis conceived of the battlefield as the whole of the Middle East; Arabs recognized only the unit of Palestine. Israelis aspired to live in peace with neighboring states; Arabs aimed to regain what they had lost in Palestine. Israelis saw the confrontation as primarily military; Arabs saw it as a human-rights

issue. Israelis portrayed their country as a tiny sliver surrounded by huge expanses of Arab territory; Arabs pointed to Israel's seemingly inexorable spread into all of Mandatory Palestine. Nomenclature confirmed this difference: Israelis used terms like the "Arab-Israeli conflict"; Arabs spoke of the "Palestinian problem."

This once-lively controversy over how to define the struggle hardly exists anymore. Quietly, steadily, and almost without notice, Palestinianism has pushed the state conflict to the sidelines. As endless lopsided votes at the United Nations suggest, nearly every single government now sees the matter the Arab way. From all one can tell, so too does public opinion around the world. Closer to home, Middle East specialists in the United States have come overwhelmingly to embrace Palestinianism, a host of organizations and the media have followed suit, and now the executive branch is going in the same direction. So far has this opinion advanced that the Arab states are regarded as mere adjuncts to the conflict, as proxies acting on the Palestinians' behalf.

More important yet, even many Israelis have come around to the Arab viewpoint. Most of Israel's Labor party today accepts Palestinianism. It is promoted by such eloquent spokesmen as Shulamit Aloni, Abba Eban, Amos Elon, Yehoshafat Harkabi, Mark Heller, Amos Oz, Matityahu Peled, Ze'ev Schiff, Ezer Weizman, and A. B. Yehoshua. The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, the International Center for Peace in the Middle East, the Israeli Human Rights Association, Peace Now, and the Ratz party all espouse this perspective as well.

The Israeli imprimatur has served to legitimate Palestinianism in the eyes of many American Jews, including such individuals as Rita Hauser, Philip Klutznick, and Anthony Lewis, and such organizations as the American Jewish Congress, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and the New Jewish Agenda.

To be sure, the notion that the state conflict counts most still has powerful supporters in the U.S., among them the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Zionist Organization of America, and even the U.S. Congress, as well as the Likud party in Israel. Indeed, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir declared in late 1989 that "an understanding must first be reached with those Arab countries that are still in a state of war with us, because an arrangement with the Palestinians—which will not be accompanied by one with Arab states—will be useless." Yet even the Likud bastion is divided, with no less a figure than Foreign Minister Moshe Arens accepting a form of Palestinianism: "The problem most threatening to our existence," he recently said, "is the Palestinian issue. It is at the very heart of the country, near the population centers, and not somewhere in Iraq or even the Golan Heights." And in both Israel and the U.S., the proponents

of the state perspective, though prominently placed, are nowadays on the defensive.

AS ARENS's statement suggests, Palestinianism flourishes because the Palestinians now dominate Arab activity vis-à-vis Israel, both violent and diplomatic. More generally, as Thomas L. Friedman of the *New York Times* writes, this is an era "when the Middle East intercountry conflict, with marching armies and rockets, has been at least temporarily replaced by an intercommunal conflict between Israelis and Palestinians with small arms and rocks." But how is it that the Palestinians, a small people without a state of their own, have all but managed to exclude the Arab states from the picture?

In large part, the explanation lies in the states themselves, which (except for Jordan) helped develop and then sponsored Palestinianism: they actually created the PLO in 1964 and nurtured it with money, arms, and diplomatic support. In part, it has to do with the string of Israeli military victories, which changed the Jewish state's image from that of a plucky and admired underdog into that of a great regional power. Credit too must go to the Palestinians themselves. Intellectuals articulated their case with such skill that it finally won a hearing; Yasir Arafat, for all his failings as a military leader, is a brilliant publicist and diplomat; and rock-throwers launched the *intifada* in December 1987.

As all this was going on, the Arab states, beset by their own difficulties, began to distance themselves from the Arab-Israeli conflict. The oil boom of the 1970's led inexorably to the oil bust of the 1980's, causing growth rates to flatten, military purchases to fall off, and political clout to diminish. The Iraq-Iran war preempted attention formerly paid to the struggle against Israel: it became clear that the latter was a luxury, probably one the states could no longer afford. Ideologically, the Arab regimes ran out of steam: anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, and Arab socialism all faded, replaced by a greater sobriety and a harsher realism. Exuberant ambitions gave way to mordant introspection.

Accordingly, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan renounced its claim to the West Bank (temporarily, at least), and the Iraqi and Saudi authorities also found less reason to concern themselves with the conflict against Israel. But nowhere was the shift more apparent than in Egypt. For the first time since 1943, Cairo did not seek centrality in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Under Hosni Mubarak, the government's attention was (fortunately) directed toward eliminating state subsidies, building public works, keeping the birth rate down, and a host of other urgent domestic issues.

The Syrian government was somewhat different. While its hostility to Israel did not diminish, severe economic difficulties obstructed Hafez al-Assad's grandiose notions of strategic parity with Israel. Even Libya's Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi lost his

punch, largely due to a failing economy. Qaddafi also appeared to have suffered a loss of nerve as a result of the U.S. raid on Tripoli in April 1986. Iran remained the one state fully engaged in the battle against Israel, but even there means hobbled intentions.

FOR all that Cairo, Amman, Damascus, and the other Arab capitals are for the moment distancing themselves from the conflict with Israel, however, they remain key to a settlement—far more so than the residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Palestinian diaspora, or the leaders of the PLO. Further, the states still seek to control part or all of Palestine, even if they disguise this aspiration. The governments of Jordan, Syria, Libya, and Iran have highly elaborated views about the proper future for Palestine. Jordanian and Syrian ambitions are most evident; their leaders actually consider Palestine rightfully part of their patrimonies. The Libyan and Iranian governments overtly hope to place their agents in control.

Against all this, the PLO has little independent power. Yasir Arafat is more a media figure than a power broker; he cannot impose his will on a single state, with the possible exception of Kuwait (where Palestinians form approximately one-quarter of the population). Governments dispose of wealth, military force, political influence, and all the other instruments of state not available to Palestinians and on which the PLO depends.

Nor can Arafat control such Middle East ideologues as the fundamentalist Muslims (especially those in Lebanon) and the Pan-Arabists (whether Nasserist or Baathist). Indeed, he cannot even impose his will on the many Palestinian groups which reject his leadership. These divide into two types, the secularist organizations based in Damascus constituting the Palestine National Salvation Front; and the fundamentalist Muslims living mostly in Gaza where, according to some sources, they already outnumber PLO partisans.

Far from following Arafat's lead, rival Palestinian leaders persistently denounce and fight him. In a statement many Israelis would agree with, Abu Musa has called Arafat "a traitor, a cheat and a killer, a common criminal." George Habash has declared that "Yasir Arafat does not speak in the name of the masses of the Palestinian people." And Ahmad Jibril has likened Arafat to Pétain and threatened him with a death like Anwar Sadat's.

A hypothetical illustration brings home Arafat's weakness. Suppose, by some miracle, he and the Israelis came to a complete agreement on Palestinian self-government. What would change? Not much. Syrian missiles and Jordanian soldiers would remain in place, as would the cold peace with Egypt, while anti-Arafat elements of the PLO would continue to engage in terrorism. In contrast, suppose Hafez al-Assad signed a peace treaty with the Israelis. In that case, the interstate war would virtually end because Amman would im-

mediately follow Damascus's example. Some of the Syrian-backed Palestinian groups would come to terms with Israel, as would Arafat. Even though Palestinian extremists would continue to riot, the conflict would become much less dangerous.

In sum, Arafat does not make the vital decisions of war and peace. The fighter planes in Syria, missiles in Iraq, and tanks in Egypt count more than the rocks on the West Bank. In some ways, the military dimension is even more critical than ever, what with the introduction of ever-more sophisticated armaments and the weakening hold of taboos (such as against the use of chemical weapons).

For all these reasons, it is a mistake to focus on the Palestinians. As Max Singer of the Potomac Institute points out, "For Israel to make peace with the Palestinians while the Arab war against Israel continues would be like making peace with a hand while the rest of the body is trying to kill you." Only when peace has been attained at the state level will it become possible to deal with Palestinian aspirations.

ASSUMING, that is, that it will ever be possible for Israel to satisfy these aspirations safely. For there is a second major problem with Palestinianism: it postulates a Palestinian willingness to compromise and to coexist with Israel.

This postulate flies in the face of abundant evidence that most Palestinians always have sought and still seek to destroy Israel. In his review of their attitudes from 1918 to 1948, Joseph Nevo uses the terms "monolithic and uncompromising" to describe Palestinian opposition to the Jews. Decades later, a 1980 survey of Palestinian students in Kuwait found 100 percent (!) refusing to recognize Israel's existence. A 1987 poll conducted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip found 78 percent of the population supporting "a democratic Palestinian state in all of Palestine," whereas only 17 percent accepted "a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip" (a ratio of almost 5 to 1). Mohammed Shadid and Rick Seltzer, who conducted the poll, justifiably concluded that "the current leadership of the PLO is far more moderate than the Palestinian population residing in the West Bank and Gaza Strip."

This judgment was confirmed in November 1989 by the spectacular success of fundamentalist Muslims in the Jordanian elections. Not only did they win 32 out of 80 seats, but they did so in spite of extensive gerrymandering to weaken them. More to the point, the fundamentalists scored their largest margins of victory in the districts of Amman where Palestinians are concentrated; significantly, much of their appeal had to do with their call for a *jihad* to destroy Israel. And this is not just rhetoric, since Jordanian fundamentalists retain close links with their counterparts in the territories occupied by Israel, to whom they send money, arms, explosives, and commands.

Those counterparts, recently organized into Hamas and Islamic Jihad, are more extreme in their rejection of Israel even than anti-Arafat PLO leaders like George Habash, Nayif Hawatma, Ahmad Jibril, Abu Musa, and Abu Nidal. A Hamas leaflet dated March 14, 1988 declared "'No' to peace with the Zionist entity. . . . Where is there justice with them still possessing one inch on the coast of Haifa and Acre?" For his part, Sheikh Khalil Quqa of Gaza is opposed to "giving the Jews even one granule of sand." Were elections held, Hamas could win 40 percent of the vote in the West Bank and more in Gaza—which goes far toward explaining why the PLO has so many reservations about elections.

In the time-honored fashion of Palestinian politics, moderates are being silenced by systematic intimidation. During the first half of 1989, 710 of the attacks by Palestinians were aimed at Jews, but nearly as many, 670, were directed against Arabs. Favorite targets included village elders, reporters, policemen, and day laborers in Israel. In part, the killings resulted from the rivalry between Hamas and the PLO for leadership in the occupied territories.

No wonder, then, that when ABC's *Nightline* asked a group of Palestinians in early 1988 if they would accept Israel inside the pre-1967 borders, not one would unequivocally say yes. Mahmoud Darwish, a man widely regarded as "the standard-bearer of PLO doves," wrote a poem in early 1988 addressed to Israelis which included these lines:

So leave our country  
Our land, our sea,  
Our wheat, our salt, our wounds  
Everything, and leave  
The memories of memory . . .

Some Israelis inclined to Palestinianism despaired over this poem; others struggled to interpret away its unambiguous hostility.

If poetry can be ignored, acts of hair-raising barbarism cannot. It is bad enough that the *intifada* has inspired Palestinian brutality against both Jews (including the hijacking of a bus over a cliff) and "collaborators" (including many back-alley ax murders); worse is the fact that these deeds have been celebrated by the Palestinian leaders. For example, the official Voice of the PLO, broadcasting from Baghdad, described the bus operation as "heroic."

AS A final example of hostility, it is worth noting a debate that took place in late 1988 in the pages of *Ad-Dustur*, a Jordanian daily. Nimr Sirhan, a Palestinian historian, kicked it off with an article advocating recognition of Israel in return for an independent Palestinian state. Sirhan made it very clear that he saw this as a temporary expedient in anticipation of eliminating Israel:

Let us learn a lesson from what Saladin did during the era of the Crusades, when he accept-

ed a liberated part of Palestine and recognized a Crusader state on another part of Palestine, until a century later when [the Egyptian kings] al-Ashraf Khalil and al-Ashraf Qala'un unleashed their swords and wiped out the Crusader invasion. . . . I tell those demanding liberation from the river to the sea that the moment when their dictum will be achieved will come later.

Although Sirhan advocated a two-state solution only as a step on the way to the destruction of Israel, his article provoked an uproar. "We will not recognize Israel, no matter what the justifications," wrote Rawda al-Farkh al-Hudhud, an author of children's books. Isma'il al-Ma'mun added: "I say no to Israel, no to recognition, no to despair, no to defeat, and no to surrender." Badr Abd al-Haqq responded in *Ar-Ra'y*, another Jordanian newspaper:

I am one of those who believe that if established, the independent Palestinian state should be on the area that extends from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. . . .

I would go even further, transcending what is no longer acceptable, and say that I would like to throw the Jews into the sea, to be devoured by the hungry Mediterranean fish.

What weight do Arafat's half-hearted and ambiguous statements carry in the face of this avalanche of opinion?

The unhappy conclusion cannot be avoided: there can be either an Israel or a Palestine, but not both. To think that two states can stably and peacefully coexist in the small territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is to be either naive or duplicitous. If the last seventy years teach anything, it is that there can be only one state west of the Jordan River. Therefore, to those who ask why the Palestinians must be deprived of a state, the answer is simple: grant them one and a chain of events is set in motion that will lead either to its extinction or to the extinction of Israel.

SEVEN years ago, I wrote in these pages\* that the PLO is essentially a creature of the Arab states, and that "it will moderate only when its Arab patrons want it to; so long as the Arab consensus needs it to reject Israel, it must do so." I also implied, noting the quiescence of the West Bank and Gaza, that those Palestinians who had first-hand familiarity with Israel did not share the PLO's fantasies about eliminating the Jewish state.

In retrospect, it appears that I was right on the first point but not on the second. The Arab states have moderated their policies toward Israel and, as though on cue, Arafat has moved with them, moderating his stand, too. But I was wrong in expecting that the Palestinians living in the territories would remain more moderate than the Arab states.

Therefore, if it once appeared that progress in the Arab-Israeli conflict was contingent on getting the Palestinians involved, it now seems just as critical to keep them away, and to pay more attention to the Arab states. (The peace process does have one redeeming virtue, however: it provides Israelis and Palestinians with something other than sheer confrontation and is thus desirable as an end in itself. The implication is that the slower the course of negotiation, the better.)

Unfortunately, Washington is so imbued with Palestinianism that it no longer presses the Arab states to come to terms with Israel. Surely the authorities in Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq should be pushed to go at least as far as Arafat did in Geneva in saying that they accept the 1947 UN resolution partitioning Palestine; that they renounce terrorism in all its forms; and that they seek peace with Israel. The leaders of these states should then be pressured into calling off their economic boycott of Israel; into agreeing to rescind the "Zionism-is-racism" resolution at the United Nations; and into ceasing their efforts to expel Israel from the General Assembly. Most important of all, they should be prodded into ending their permanent state of war against Israel.

Washington's fixation on Palestinianism has also stood in the way of testing Moscow's claim to have applied "new thinking" to the Middle East. Yet a true shift in Soviet policies would mean a reduction in Moscow's military aid to Syria, as well as similar reductions in the supply of weaponry to Libya and South Yemen. Once this is done, Moscow might be persuaded to cooperate with the U.S. on reducing arms transfers to the Middle East (from China especially), stopping the spread of ballistic-missile and nuclear technology, and reasserting, by force if necessary, the ban on chemical warfare.

But the key is Syria. However much weakened, it remains Israel's single most formidable opponent.

In the aftermath of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty of 1979, the basic diplomatic question has been, "Who will be the second to make peace with Israel?" Many Israelis used to assume it would be Lebanon, until the fiasco of the May 1983 accords showed that the Lebanese were too weak. King Hussein of Jordan knows that he too lacks the strength to make peace with Israel by himself. And I hold that the Palestinians are also deficient. But if the first Arab party to make peace was the strongest, then it follows that the second must be the second strongest—Syria. And given the "new thinking" in Moscow and Syria's dire economic situation, that country, as Patrick Clawson concludes in his recent pathbreaking study of its economy, is now "vulnerable to outside pressure." The time has come for such pressure to be applied.

\* "How Important is the PLO?," COMMENTARY, April 1983.