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Mirror Image

How the PLO Mimics Zionism

Daniel Pipes

WHATEVER ITS GOAL—be it to destroy Israel or only reduce its size—the Palestine Liberation Organization is Israel’s most intimate and permanent enemy. This makes it especially paradoxical to realize just how deeply the PLO has been shaped by Zionism, the Jewish national movement.

To start with, the very delineation of a territory called “Palestine” in 1918 was a Zionist achievement; had Jews not pressed the British government to create such a unit, Arabic-speakers of the area would have continued to see themselves living in a Greater Syria or in an Arab or Muslim nation; there simply would have been no Arab feeling for *Filastin*. The PLO exists, in other words, only because Israel exists.

Second, had the PLO’s enemy not been Israel, it would not have enjoyed the extraordinary international prominence that it actually does. Imagine that Yasir Arafat headed an organization fighting for the liberation of East Timor from Indonesia; would you ever have heard of him? Israel’s renown provided celebrity, money, and political support for its enemy too.

Third, Palestinian nationalists—my subject here—have time and again modeled

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their institutions, ideas, and practices on the Zionist movement.¹ This ironic tribute means that the peculiar nature of the PLO can be understood only with reference to its Zionist inspiration. More: imitation offers important insights into the PLO’s future course.

Carbon Copies...

LIKE THE WORLD Zionist Organization (founded in 1897), the Palestine Liberation Organization (founded in 1964) is an umbrella organization under which factions simultaneously cooperate and compete. Like the WZO, the PLO comprises affiliated institutions such as labor unions, health organizations, and vocational training schools.

Palestinian agencies copy their Zionist precursors so closely that Sadik J. Al-Azm, a Syrian analyst, calls them “carbon copies.”² The Arab lobby in the United States (the National Association of Arab-Americans), for example, has tried to replicate the form and function of its Jewish precursor (the American Israel Public

¹The observations that follow apply to Palestinian nationalists, not to their ideological foes such as fundamentalist Muslims, communists, Pan-Arab nationalists, pan-Syrian nationalists, or pro-Jordanians.

²Sadik J. Al-Azm, “Palestinian Zionism,” *Die Welt des Islams* 28 (1988) p. 93.

Affairs Committee). Other Palestinian groups even mimic the names of Jewish organizations: the Arabs' Anti-Defamation Committee (which gets its name from the Anti-Defamation League), the Holy Land Fund (the Jewish National Fund), and the United Palestinian Appeal (the United Jewish Appeal).

Al-Azm makes an interesting case for seeing Yasir Arafat as a latter-day version of one of the great figures of early Zionism. Arafat, he writes

...with his paternalistic attitude towards the whole Palestinian Resistance Movement, his constant traveling between international and Arab capitals, his unceasing dealings with a curious assortment of heads of state, Prime Ministers et al., his constantly open channels with each and every party with some interest in the Palestinian problem, plus his renowned political flexibility, diplomatic expertise and pragmatic tactics, is a kind of Palestinian Chaim Weizmann.³

(Weizmann, the Zionists' long-time representative in London, served as the itinerant spokesman of his movement, its chief interlocutor with the outside world, and the main arbiter of its factions.)

When the PLO declared the establishment of a Palestinian state in November 1988, its words brought Israel's 1948 Proclamation of Independence to mind. The PLO statement echoed the Israeli prototype in its subject matter, organization, and even in specific phrasing. For example, both appealed to their ethnic brethren and proclaimed equal rights for all in the new state. The words of Israel's Proclamation echo throughout the PLO document of forty years later. David Ben-Gurion called on "the Jewish people all over the world to rally to our side" and Arafat called on "Arab compatriots to consolidate and enhance the emergence and reality of our state." Both called for immigration, with Ben-Gurion announcing

that "The State of Israel will be open to the immigration of Jews from all countries of their dispersion," and Arafat declaring the same: "The State of Palestine is the state of Palestinians wherever they may be."⁴

...*And Mirror Images.*

PALESTINIANS HAVE adopted a vision of their own history that in many ways recapitulates the Jewish experience. Calling themselves the "Jews of the Middle East," they often point to their diaspora as a parallel and a successor to the Jewish one. Like the Jews, they note, Palestinians are more educated and mobile than the majority populations among which they live, yet they suffer prejudice, dispossession, and expulsion. In particular, just as medieval Jews got thrown out of one country after another, the Palestinians had to leave three countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait) in only twenty years.

The PLO takes this analogy yet further: Just as Jews suffered a holocaust at Nazi hands, it says, Palestinians suffered a holocaust at Israeli hands. However outrageous, this has captured the imagination of many Arabs, for in one stroke it both elevates the moral stature of Palestinians and reduces that of the Israelis. Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi analyst, observes that "the hallowed status of Palestinian dispossession in 1948...has become for Arab politics what the Holocaust is for Israeli politics: mirror images of one another."⁵

The Palestinians closely emulate other Zionist concepts. The "Law of Return,"

³Ibid, p. 97.

⁴For a comparison of the two texts, see Daniel Pipes, "Declaring Statehood: Israel and the PLO." *Orbis* 33 (1989) pp. 247-59.

⁵Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), p. 260.

the notion that every Jew has an inalienable right to live in Israel, underpins the whole venture of colonizing Palestine and creating a Jewish national home there. Similarly, Palestinian nationalists proclaim the "Right of Return," which asserts that every Palestinian refugee, or his descendants, has the prerogative to repossess lands left in 1948-49.

The pattern of imitation extends even to the smallest particulars: Zionists famously tried to land the *Exodus*, a ship with 4,500 desperate displaced persons seeking refuge from Germany, on the beaches of Palestine in 1947. When British authorities forbade the Jews to disembark, the ship returned its miserable passengers to Germany, thereby dramatizing the need for a Jewish state. In 1988, the PLO self-consciously attempted to stage a repeat version of this event to publicize the Palestinian plight. It hired a Greek ship and worked out the plans for a landing of exiled Palestinians on the beaches of Israel. The scheme might have worked but for the fact that someone, presumably the Israelis, blew up the ship before it took on any passengers.

Looking to the future, the PLO portrays the creation of a Palestinian state much as Zionists saw the establishment of Israel—as a quasi-messianic event imbued with world-historical importance. Palestine's sovereignty, it holds, will mark the resurgence of Arab dignity and the rebirth of Muslim power. It will also signal the re-establishment of Third World power and the ending of hegemonic imperialism. These are not modest movements.

Sacred Geography

JERUSALEM IS THE only capital of a Jewish state, as well as a unique city in Jewish history, religion, and emotions. In contrast, the city is so minor in Islam, it is not even once mentioned in the Koran. Nor did it ever serve as a political capital or cul-

tural center. Through its first six centuries of Muslim rule, S. D. Goitein writes:

Jerusalem mostly lived the life of an out-of-the-way provincial town, delivered to the exactions of rapacious officials and notables, often also to tribulations at the hands of seditious *fellahin* [peasants] or nomads.... Jerusalem certainly could not boast of excellence in the sciences of Islam or any other fields.⁶

Because the centrality of Jerusalem in Judaism boosts the Zionist claim to that city, Palestinians in the twentieth century have retroactively enhanced Jerusalem's religious and historic stature in Islam. They came up with the by-now universally accepted notion of Jerusalem being the third most holy city of Islam (after Mecca and Medina) and they deemed it the Palestinians' "eternal capital."

Palestine has undergone an even more dramatic transformation. While Jews have the concept of *Eretz Yisrael* ("the Land of Israel") and Christians have *Terra Sancta* ("Holy Land"), Muslims have no parallel concept, for Palestine historically had no special status in the Islamic tradition. Further, it did not even exist as a political or cultural unit during their centuries of rule over the area. The only time Palestine existed as a polity was either under the rule of Christians (Crusader kingdoms, the British empire) or Jews (Judea, Israel). As Bernard Lewis writes, for Muslims the name *Filastin* "had never meant more than an administrative sub-district and [after the Crusades] it had been forgotten even in that limited sense."⁷ As late as the beginning of 1920, "Palestine" had no resonance among Muslims.

From these inauspicious beginnings, the romance of Palestine grew into what it is today, an extremely powerful nationalist

⁶S.D. Goitein, "Al-Kuds," *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, vol. 5, pp. 322, 329.

⁷Bernard Lewis, "Palestine: On the History and Geography of a Name," *The International History Review* (January 1980), p. 6.

force that now rivals its Jewish precursor. To build up such feelings, Palestinian nationalists drew heavily on the Zionist storehouse of longing for the Land of Israel. For example, Arafat adopted such Zionist terminology as referring to Palestine as “the promised land.”⁸ Palestinians have in effect inherited the unrequited Jewish longing for *Eretz Yisrael*. At the very moment that establishing the State of Israel achieved the Jews’ two-millennia old dream of returning to the land of milk and honey, Palestinians initiated their parallel longing for the lost gardens of Jaffa and Ramla.

The Zionist venture sees itself reestablishing Jewish sovereignty after an interregnum of two thousand years. Palestinians can’t claim quite such a long period, but they do insist that they too are rebuilding: “after one hundred years we are again on the geographical map” was how Arafat put it.⁹ (In fact, the only thing on the map back then was an administrative unit, the Mutasarrifiya of Jerusalem, but never mind).¹⁰

So far has the process of Zionizing Islam’s notions of holy space progressed, that Arafat sometimes looks to the Bible for authentication of Palestinian nationalism. One interesting example dates from 1991, when an assertive Brazilian journalist, Jordan Jose Arbex, told him: “You are struggling for an entity—the Palestine state—that, from a historic and geographical viewpoint, has never existed because Palestine historically corresponds to a region in southern Syria.” To this (completely accurate) statement, Arafat replied by pointing to a Zionist authentication: “You must read the Bible, because it contains abundant historic references that demonstrate the existence of a cultural and geopolitical Palestinian identity for many thousands of years.”¹¹ A Muslim politician justifying his ideology with references to Jewish scripture? Only if he is a Palestinian Zionist.

When Palestinians have reached the point that they justify their anti-Israel ideology with reference to the Bible, they have

truly become the Zionists’ double, or what the Germans call a *Doppelgänger*—a twin and nemesis. Indeed, Palestinians sometimes take an odd delight in the similarity of their politics with those of Israel. Yasir Arafat likes to declare, “We are like our cousins, the Jews.” Bassam Abu Sharif says that sometimes, when he reads or listens to Israeli officials’ reactions, he laughs, “because they are exactly like us, the way they react, the way they stick to things.”¹²

Dependence on Great Powers

BOOTH THE JEWISH and Palestinian national movements have to a highly unusual extent looked to international backing in general and to the United Nations in particular. Israel came into existence as the result of a UN General Assembly vote. As for Yasir Arafat, Harris Shoenberg writes that his “long-term success derived from his ability to use the UN to elevate the PLO, and himself as Chairman, to a level of significance they might otherwise not deserve.”¹³ Israeli governments bound themselves to a great power patron, the United States, by faithfully serving its interests abroad; the PLO tried to do likewise for the

⁸For example, on ORF Television (Vienna), June 18, 1991.

⁹Middle East News Agency, May 31, 1994.

¹⁰Abd al-‘Aziz Muhammad ‘Awwad, *Al-Idara al-‘Uthmaniya fi Wilayat Suriya, 1864-1914* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 1969), pp. 71-72.

¹¹*Folha de Sao Paulo* (Sao Paulo), 18 February 1991. At other times, Arafat posits the Covenant of ‘Umar, written at the time of the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 637 AD., as the Muslim equivalent of the Torah (e.g., *Al-Quds*, June 8, 1994).

¹²Quoted in Janet Wallach and John Wallach, *Arafat: In the Eyes of the Beholder* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), pp. 34-35.

¹³Harris Okun Shoenberg, *Mandate for Terror: The United Nations and the PLO* (New York: Shapolsky, 1989), p. 449.

Soviet Union. Non-Palestinian Arabs took on a role for the PLO akin to that of non-Israeli Jews for Israel.

Palestinians, like Zionists, rely heavily on foreign funds. Zionists looked initially to fellow Jews for support, then to states for larger amounts (West Germany for reparations, the United States for aid). Palestinians also began by depending on co-religionists (Arab authorities), then expanded to foreign governments (the Soviet Union, now the European Union and others). Palestinian dependence on foreign sources became so deep, Arafat recently announced that "if no one pays for this peace [with Israel]...it cannot be achieved."¹⁴

Strangely too, leaders of both movements openly express resentment of their donors. An Israeli minister of finance some years ago railed against U.S. economic advice even as his country accepted three billion dollars in aid: "The High Commissioner sent us a note from Washington and gave us a negative term report!"¹⁵ In a similar spirit, Yasir Arafat recently addressed a meeting of Palestinian contractors and (according to an Egyptian news account) "criticized the donor nations because they allocated just \$2.2 billion for the West Bank and Gaza Strip over five years at the rate of \$440 million a year."¹⁶ He later became even more annoyed, denouncing World Bank and Western government conditions for aid: "We didn't finish military occupation to get economic occupation!"¹⁷

Origins of the Imitation

ALTHOUGH SOME aspects of Palestinian Zionism (such as the notion of Jerusalem as the third most holy site of Islam) go back earlier in the twentieth century, most of them date from after 1967. Before that year, not only did Palestinians not know much about Israel, but to show too much interest in the Jewish state made one suspect, and even vulnerable to charges of treason. Only after Israel's astounding victo-

ry in June 1967 did two processes begin.

First, residents of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip came under Israel's direct control. Despite rhetorical insistence about the ugliness of military occupation, Palestinians in these areas learned a great deal from Israelis about politics, and especially democracy and human rights. In some ways, Palestinians have become more like Israelis than like their fellow Arabs. For example, Hanan Ashrawi this spring turned down a position in Arafat's Palestine Authority in favor of setting up the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights, an organization she hopes will acquire the powers of ombudsman and state controller. Ashrawi herself termed the creation of such an institution "an unusual precedent in the Arab world;"¹⁸ she did not point out, however, that it derives directly from Israeli, not Arab political culture.

Second, the 1967 war caused Palestinians to give up on the Arab states as their saviors. The destruction of three conventional armies in six days made them realize that only Palestinian self-help could destroy Israel and lead to the creation of an independent state. This led to the further recognition that they would have to put together the nuts and bolts of administration well before attaining sovereign power. The PLO made a first attempt at this in Jordan (1968-70) and a second in Lebanon (1970-82) before finally trying it in the West Bank and Gaza in 1988. During the third of these efforts, it recognized that it was recapitulating the Zionist enterprise during the Mandatory period, 1918-48. Accordingly, Palestinians belatedly took the Zionist "state in the making" as their model.

The Jewish accomplishment during the Mandatory period was indeed impressive: by

¹⁴*The New York Times*, July 7, 1994.

¹⁵Gad Ya'acobi, *Ma'ariv*, December 26, 1984.

¹⁶Middle East News Agency, May 31, 1994.

¹⁷*The Washington Post*, July 3, 1994.

¹⁸*The Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 1994.

developing the Jewish Agency into a proto-state institution, Zionists created the bases for the full-fledged government that emerged in 1948. They already had a political authority, a military wing, an educational system, a mechanism to distribute welfare, and so forth. In contrast, Palestinians failed to match these institutions, and so found themselves disorganized when the British withdrew from Palestine in 1948. One historian, Benny Morris, describes the Palestinian Arabs of the late 1940s as “backward, disunited, and often apathetic, a community only just entering the modern age politically and administratively.” Another, Ilan Pappé, dismisses the Palestinian leadership as “an élite in confusion” and argues that it failed to use the Mandatory period to prepare for the war that came in 1948.¹⁹ In effect, the Palestinians are trying half a century later to make up for their mistakes of the Mandatory period.

Emulating the Zionists means learning from them, and a hunger for information has spawned many studies about the enemy. Palestinians now research the Zionist experience in minute detail, hoping to glean ideas on ways to repeat the Israeli accomplishment. Books appear in Arabic bearing titles such as *Israel from the Inside* and *The Political System in Israel*.²⁰ Even radicals take up this study. Luyis `Abduh, a terrorist in his twenties, learned Hebrew in an Israeli jail and went on to translate books on Zionist history and politics from that language into Arabic. He became a leading advocate of building institutions along the lines of the Jewish Agency.²¹

The notion of a state in the making distinguishes these two movements from virtually all other anti-colonial efforts. With the rarest of exceptions (the Americans who founded the United States, the Muslims in India who founded Pakistan), liberation movements inherit the colonial state. From the Canadians in 1867 to Nelson Mandela in 1994, they wait for existing institutions to fall into their hands. Zionists and Palestinians are set apart by having had to build their institutions from scratch.

Sensing this similarity, even some Israelis have come explicitly to see the Palestinian future in terms of the Zionist past. Discussing the prospect of Palestinian autonomy, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in April 1993 foresaw that “a Palestinian entity, which is not a state, will come into being. It will be an entity similar to the Jewish community here at the time of the British Mandate, which ran its own affairs.”²² A Palestinian *yishuv*?

The Coat-tail Effect

OF COURSE, NOT everything about the PLO and its Zionist precursor is similar. Jewish nationalism derives from a millennial-old love of Zion, whereas its Palestinian counterpart dates back no further than the second half of 1920. Zionists had only intermittent help from foreign states and basically had to create Israel on their own; the PLO benefited from state aid more than any other irredentist group in history. Zionists sought to create an island of Western civilization, the PLO has a thoroughly Middle Eastern outlook. And while mainstream Zionist groups rejected the terrorist instrument, the PLO wholeheartedly embraced it over a period of decades. Still, one expects the differences; it's

¹⁹Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 17; Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-51* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1992), p. 56. For an opposing interpretation, see Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, *Palestinians: The Making of a People* (New York: Free Press, 1993), pp. 136-37.

²⁰Diya Hajri, *Isra'il min ad-Dakhil* (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Sina', 1992); Fawzi Muhammad Tayil, *An-Nizam as-Siyasi fi Isra'il* (Cairo: Ma'had al-Buhuth wa'd-Dirasat al-'Arabiya, 1989).

²¹Barry Rubin, *Revolution Until Victory? The Politics and History of the PLO* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 94.

²²*Yedi'ot Aharonot*, April 25, 1993.

the similarities that surprise.

Do those similarities have significance? For some Zionists, the weirdly imitative pattern of the PLO renders suspect the very claim of a Palestinian nation. Ruth Wisse sums up this outlook:

For some time now, and with ever greater forcefulness, Palestinian Arabs have been representing themselves as the real “Jews,” systematically usurping all the symbols and terms of Jewish history and national consciousness....It may not be for us to question the Palestinian Arabs’ claim that they are a distinct Arab people, but if they are a people, why do they represent themselves as Jews?²³

To answer Wisse’s question: like a child imitates its parents, so do Palestinians imitate Israelis—to learn from their closest role model. From the Palestinian viewpoint, it is a merely practical way to find methods and ideas that work. Copying does not in itself obviate the validity of Palestinian nationhood. The remarkable thing is not that Palestinians copy, but that they do it so thoroughly.

The real question is, rather, how copying affects the Palestinian enterprise. In the short run, the Zionist model has clearly propelled the Palestinians ahead by providing institutions, ideas, and practices. The latter hardly had to invent, for copying proved easier and more expedient. “On the coattails of the vic-

tors the Palestinians hitched a heady ride,” as Fouad Ajami puts it.²⁴

But coat-tails are in the back; and imitation is likely to keep Palestinians always trailing Israel. Just as the Soviet dependence on technology stolen from the West condemned the USSR perpetually to lag behind the West, so following the Zionist example handicaps the PLO. How can it defeat the Jews at their own game? Zionists have mastered the practices they first invented and implemented, so Palestinian nationalists are facing the wrong enemy. In the near term, borrowing from Zion strengthens the Palestinian movement, but ultimately it limits their capabilities.

This limitation has become especially evident in the year since Israel and the PLO signed a Declaration of Principles on the White House lawn, during which time the PLO has tried to put together the essential elements of a government. As the Palestinian Authority reveals a weak institutional development, ruinous finances, and a strong inclination toward authoritarianism, its imitation of the Zionist experience begins to look increasingly shallow. □

²³Ruth Wisse, “The Big Lie: Reinventing the Middle East,” in *The Middle East: Uncovering the Myths*, edited by Cynthia Ozick (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1991), p. 19.

²⁴*U.S. News & World Report*, September 11, 1993.

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