**On Arab rejectionism**   
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**Abstract:**  
Appraisals that the desire to destroy Israel has become a minority position in the Arab world are assessed.

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IN THE two decades since President Anwar Sadat of Egypt made his famous trip to Jerusalem to address Israel’s parliament, a consensus has emerged that the Arab effort to destroy Israel is a thing of the past. Even Fouad Ajami, a hard-headed student of Arab affairs, wrote a year after Sadat’s journey that the Middle East conflict was “no longer about Israel’s existence, but about its boundaries.” And ever since September 1993, when Yasir Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin shook hands on the White House lawn, the idea that much of the Arab world is now truly interested in achieving peace has become conventional wisdom, echoed and amplified in countless variations by politicians, diplomats, journalists, and intellectuals alike.

Thus, to Israel’s then-Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, the peace agreement secured at Oslo represented a “revolution” in Arab thinking that would usher in a “new Middle East.” In the view of M. Z. Diab, a former high-ranking Syrian official, the “majority of the Arabs, particularly those who are directly concerned-Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Palestinians-have accepted Israel as a reality to coexist with.” In Vice President Al Gore’s judgment, the “vast majority of leaders and peoples [in the region] are committed to the peace process.” To the Christian Science Monitor, the Oslo accords “changed forever the relationship between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East.” According to Barry Rubin, a leading Israeli analyst, the desire to destroy Israel has become a “minority position” in the Arab world.

Are such appraisals accurate?

Without a doubt, over recent decades the Arab disposition toward Israel has changed in significant ways. Some former enemies have clearly reconciled themselves to the existence of the Jewish state. Sadat’s actions speak for themselves, and King Hussein of Jordan has also demonstrated his desire for peaceful coexistence. Many Kuwaitis, traumatized by the Iraqi occupation of their country in 1990-91, have developed a personal understanding of and sympathy for Israel’s predicament, as have more than a few Lebanese who have experienced the tender mercies of Syrian occupation. Throughout the Arab world, a good number of business leaders seem eager to end an antagonism that diverts attention and resources from more pressing concerns, and military officers would clearly prefer to avoid a rematch with Israel any time soon.

But encouraging as such sentiments are, in other quarters hatred of Israel has not ceased. On the contrary, Arab rejectionism-the intent to destroy Israel-continues to flourish, taking a host of forms. Rejectionist Arabs harbor conflicting designs for the territory where the Jewish state lies. Palestinians seek to form a new country that will extend from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean; pan-Syrian nationalists want to turn “Palestine” into a component of Greater Syria; Arab nationalists envision Israel’s land as a province of a huge Arab state; fundamentalist Muslims pray for the establishment of a panIslamic republic; and so forth. All, however, concur that Israel must vanish from the map.

Some rejectionist leaders speak openly of their purposes, with the fundamentalists usually being the most explicit. Iran’s leader, Ali Akbar Khamenei, flatly asserts that “Israel should disappear.” A spokesman for the radical Islamic organization Hamas says, “True peace can only be attained by returning the Palestinians to their homeland and returning the Zionist aggressors to the countries from where they have come.” Others, more subtly, talk of two stages-accepting Israel now and destroying it later, when the wheel of fate turns and Arabs are mighty once again. Yasir Arafat balances his promises to accept Israel with violent language about jihad, that is, holy war.\*

Westerners, and some Israelis, tend to discount the anti-Israel vitriol of Arab leaders as so much rhetoric. “These are only words,” is how Shimon Peres puts it: “Let them talk.” Others take refuge in the belief that the populations over which demagogues preside are rather more pacifically disposed. As Jimmy Carter has remarked, “the Arab people need and want peace.” But if anything, the opposite appears to be the case: quite a few Arab dictators show greater flexibility in their thinking than do their subjects.

Egypt and Jordan are cases in point. Sadat may have journeyed to Jerusalem, but public opinion in Egypt never followed him there. Four years later, Sadat was dead-murdered, in no small measure, for the reconciliation with Israel he had sought and won; his legacy was repudiated, and he himself remains unmourned. In the twenty years since Camp David, Egyptian sentiment against Israel has gone from bad to worse. In overwhelming numbers, politicians, intellectuals, journalists, and religious figures continue to reject Sadat’s legacy and to malign and revile the Jewish state.

Jordan’s story is similar, and even somewhat grimmer. King Hussein-civilized, Western-oriented, amicably inclined-represents all that Israelis could hope for in the leader of a neighboring state. He not only signed a treaty that went far beyond the Camp David agreement in its warmth, but he has invested his own emotions in his country’s tie with Israel. When one of his soldiers murdered seven Israeli schoolgirls earlier this year, the king traveled to Israel to pay a personal condolence visit to each of the bereaved families. But the Jordanian populace has hardly rallied around its monarch. Professional associations prohibit their members from having contact with Israelis. Businesses maintain an unofficial boycott of Israeli goods. Religious leaders spread vicious calumnies about Zionists and Jews. The soldier who killed the schoolgirls has been hailed as a hero, and not just in narrow circles of extremism.

GIVEN THE popular mood in Jordan and Egypt, over the long term Israel cannot rely on these two neighbors’ remaining at peace, any more than it could before signing treaties and accords with them. And what is true of Jordan and Egypt is even more true elsewhere: the inescapable fact is that rejectionism remains widespread on the Arab street. A Lebanese fundamentalist, Ayatollah Fadlallah, is correct to note that there has been no genuine reconciliation between Israel and its former enemies, but “only a peace between Israel and these unelected Arab and Muslim regimes that do not represent their people.” In the topsy-turvy world of Middle East politics, peace depends largely on Arab despots who keep popular passions in check; but even in this region of autocracy, populations ultimately have their way.

What accounts for this seemingly permanent enmity? Historical memory is one source, fed by the belief that once a land has been conquered and settled by Muslims, it becomes part of an inalienable Islamic patrimony, its loss a robbery that one day must be made good. Three full centuries after the whole of Spain fell to Christians in 1492, Muslims continued actively to dream of a restoration; in Muslim eyes, writes the distinguished scholar Bernard Lewis, this was Islamic ground, “wrongfully taken . . . and destined to be returned.” Where Israel is concerned, there are two further insults: not only the possession by an alien people of sacred Islamic places in Jerusalem, but their possession by Jews, a historically impotent group now insufferably powerful.

The intensity with which this particular humiliation is felt may be explained in part by another quality of Arab political culture with few parallels in the modern world, namely, the disproportionate role played by visions, loves, and hatreds. Arabic listeners thrill to the promises of leaders like Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser or Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, who vow to create an awe-inspiring new order through acts of wholesale destruction. Among Palestinians, this kind of radicalism appears to have a special hold. “When you believe in what you are doing, you don’t think about the consequences,” explained one Palestinian activist during the Persian Gulf war as he predicted that Saddam Hussein would crush the United States. “We are not in the mood for rational discussion,” added another in speaking of the need for continual struggle against Israel.

Together, the role of historical memory and the passionate intensity of Arab political feeling may account for the special volatility of the Arab political sphere, in which even the most drastic actionsannihilating a state and scattering or killing its people-have long been accepted as commonplaces. The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, established by the medieval Crusaders, was destroyed in the 12th century and its subjects were dispersed, an accomplishment that still serves as a model for modern Arabs. In the words of an Arab historian writing in 1957: “The struggle waged today by the leaders of the Arab movement of liberation [against Israel] is the very same conducted by the Ayyubids and the Mamelukes in order to beat off the Crusaders.” Saddam Hussein followed this same model during Iraq’s seven-month occupation of Kuwait in 1990-91: Kuwait’s name disappeared along with its history, flag, and currency, while its people were hounded from their homes. Syria’s Assad has emasculated Lebanon and extruded much of its population. Other states stand in danger of the same fate: Bahrain could be invaded at any time and transformed into the fourteenth province of Iran, while Jordan could fall into the maw of Syria, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia. In this limited but real sense, at least, Israel is not alone.

OVER ITS 50 years, Israel has relied on two instruments to cope with deep-seated Arab rejectionism: the ability to achieve crushing victory in war, and the willingness to demonstrate unstinting magnanimity in peace. Though the primary purpose of military supremacy has been to defend the country against attack, it has also been meant to establish Israel as an unmovable and permanent presence, a presence so strong and secure that the dream of eliminating it cannot succeed. Magnanimity, the other side of the coin, has been Israel’s way of proving itself an acceptable neighbor, one from whom the Arabs have much to gain and, in peace, nothing to fear.

But neither strength nor magnanimity nor the combination of the two has solved Israel’s basic problem. True, Israel’s brilliant victories on the battlefield have resulted in gains in regional diplomacy.

But these gains remain modest, and have been painfully slow in coming. The Six-Day War of 1967, one of the most decisive military triumphs in history, led in the first instance not to acceptance but to the famous “Three No’s” of the Khartoum conference (“no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it”). After Israel crushed the PLO in Lebanon, scattering it to the far reaches of the Middle East, that organization continued to exist and to plan Israel’s destruction.

Magnanimity, though liberally applied throughout Israel’s history, has been even less successful than toughness. Returning the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt three times-under British pressure in 1949, under U.S. pressure in 1957, and of its own volition in 1979-has not ended Israel’s pariah status in the eyes of Egyptians, nor has it deterred highranking Egyptian officials from continuing to issue dire threats, like a recent one invoking a second “Holocaust of the Jewish people” if Israeli occupation of land claimed by Palestinians should persist. Embracing the PLO as a “peace partner” has not even achieved the elimination from its charter of clauses calling for Israel’s destruction.

The psychology underpinning Israel’s policy of generosity and compromise runs counter to the ingrained assumptions of the surrounding political world. Instead of conveying good faith, concessions communicate a sense of vulnerability and weakness, either whetting the appetite for more concessions or abetting a paranoid fantasy that Israel’s efforts at reconciliation are part of a plot; after all, for what honest reason would a strong power behave as if it were weak? According to one survey of Arab public opinion taken in 1994-95, at the height of optimism about the prospect of a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, 87 percent believed that Israel was pursuing peace out of sinister ulterior motives, like establishing regional economic hegemony or seizing control of water resources. The notion that what Israel “has failed to achieve by war it will achieve by peace” is a frequent refrain in Egyptian newspapers these days.

IF THE currents that feed and sustain hatred of Israel are firmly entrenched in the Arab mind, why are so many Westerners, for their part, persuaded that Arab rejectionism has waned? Why are so many unwilling to face facts?\* For some, the answer may lie in a general unfamiliarity with the Middle East and a consequent inability to accept the profound nature of the passions and antagonisms at work in Arab life. For others, a kind of intellectual projection may be to blame: as we ourselves value such things as prosperity and peace over nationalist longings or religious missions, so, we assume, must everyone else.

Shimon Peres’s vision of a “Benelux-style” relationship between Israel and its Arab neighbors is one example of this mindset. Along similar lines, Caio Koch-Weser, a vice president of the World Bank with responsibility for the Middle East, explained in 1994 that for the peace process to succeed, “the Palestinians need to see improvements in their living conditions very quickly.” But were Palestinians interested in the good life alone, they would long ago have settled into a comfortable synergy with Israel’s dynamic economy. Instead, they have repeatedly shown that they are quite prepared to sacrifice the prospect of better living conditions if doing so will further the cause of obliterating Israel.

Whatever its sources, the incapacity or refusal of many in Israel and the West to credit Arab intentions enormously complicates the dilemma in which Israel finds itself today. Unfortunately, even clear-sightedness, though it has the advantages of illuminating the terrain, suggests no truly attractive path forward.

ENGAGING IN a “peace process” with partners who reject one’s very existence, or whose leaders can strike a deal only by thwarting the popular will, is fraught with danger. If Israel conveys a sense of war-weariness, negotiations will not lead to the compromises and accommodations it needs to gain from its neighbors. On the contrary, such a posture will encourage aggressiveness and cause adversaries to dig in their heels, secure in the belief that a strategy of patience and pressure will enable them, in the end, to prevail. This can be seen very vividly in the response of Palestinians to Israeli concessions: an escalation rather than a moderation of demands, and suicide bombing attacks that weaken Israeli resolve.

That leaves Israel with only one alternativeholding fast, and waiting for the policy of firmness to do its slow work with Arab leaders and, perhaps eventually, with Arab populaces. Firmness is not the same thing as passivity. Rather, it is a policy calling for a clear shift in the focus of diplomatic activity, both for Israel and for its principal ally, the United States. Thus, instead of concentrating on the by-products of Arab recognition, like the attendance of governments at an economic conference-something that boosts Israel’s standing only microscopically-a policy of firmness would require both Jerusalem and Washington to insist day and night on the essentials of recognition, starting with an unequivocal end to Arab rejectionism. Instead of assuming that the way to peace lies through open-ended Israeli accommodationsclosing down settlements, splitting Jerusalem-a policy of firmness would place both the moral and the political onus where it truly belongs: on the need for Arabs to demonstrate their acceptance of Israel to Israel’s reasonable satisfaction.

One could specify other elements, too. In a policy of firmness, much stronger efforts would be made, for example, to prevent the Arab states and Iran from acquiring operational weapons of mass destruction, a new means by which to threaten the existence of Israel. And serious consideration would be given to prudent initiatives for encouraging the development of civil society and democratic habits in the Arab world (a policy admittedly not without risks of its own).

This whole line of thinking clearly holds little appeal for an Israeli citizenry that has, indeed, grown weary of war and impatient for peace, and that believes firmness has failed to “work.” The weariness is certainly understandable, but the analysis is nevertheless flawed. In 1987, it would have been rational to despair of the American policy of containment: the Soviet Union remained a powerful competitor, and showed few signs of giving up its global rivalry with the United States. Yet vigilance, in the end, was the precondition of eventual victory, just as surely as the prior American policy of detente had opened the door to Soviet aggression and exploitation. Mutatis mutandis, firmness, which has already produced a number of cracks in the Berlin Wall of Arab rejectionism, ultimately offers the only means of demonstrating to Israel’s neighbors that the country is here to stay.

True acceptance, however, the kind Israelis dream of, will come only when the Arabs are finally convinced they cannot destroy the Jewish state, today or ever. Painful as it may be for Israelis, as for many others, to acknowledge, it is the Arabs alone who will decide when a new Middle East can be born.

**[Footnote]**  
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\* For an examination of this dual approach, see “Arafat and the Uses of Terror” by Jonathan Torop in COMMENTARY, May 1997.   
  
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\* It is noteworthy that Fouad Ajami, for one, has had second thoughts on this matter. See his column, “The Peace of Kings and Pharaohs” (U.S. News and World Report, February 17, 1997), where he writes that “there has been no discernible change in the Arab attitudes toward Israel.... The great refusal persists.”

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