

The Palestinian-Israeli War: Where It Came From, and How to End It

Diplomacy in a time of war is destined to fail, Pipes says. Israel should abandon the idea of compromise – because Palestinians still have not accepted Israel's right to exist.

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A Palestinian-Israeli war probably is not the way most of you think of it. In the definition of the problem lies both an understanding of the Arab-Israeli theater and its potential solution. The consensus view is that this is not a war. This is diplomacy that hasn't quite worked right.

In 1993, on a sunny, late summer day, on the White House lawn, the prime minister of Israel and the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization shook hands – the Oslo accords. In that was seen not just potential for achieving a breakthrough in Palestinian-Israeli relations, but a whole new era: After decades of wanting to destroy, undermine or overtake the state of Israel, the Palestinians had formally, officially and apparently permanently come to the conclusion that they could not defeat Israel – and accepted the existence of Israel. With the signing of the Oslo accords, with President Clinton as its sponsor, the Palestinians and Israelis began years of intense negotiations about important but secondary issues: the borders of Israel, the natural resources that would be divided between them, the sanctities and who would control them, patterns of residence, weapons – who would control what.

In that agreement lay the seeds of what was thought to be a brilliant solution, whereby each side achieved what it

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most wanted – dignity and autonomy for the Palestinians; recognition and security for the Israelis. Mr. Arafat referred to it as a historic event inaugurating a new epoch. Shimon Peres, the foreign minister of Israel, discerned in it the outline of peace in the Middle East. President Clinton called it a great occasion of history. But in reality we saw that in subsequent years the Oslo Accords brought the Palestinians poverty, corruption, suicide factories, a cult of death, 3,500 dead and a surge of militant Islamic radicalization. For the Israelis it brought over 1,000 dead and 6,000 serious injuries, economic decline and diplomatic isolation.

Today the term *Oslo* is mud. Everybody agrees that there was no new or better epoch. There's disagreement as to why it went wrong. My thesis is we misunderstood what took place that day and circumstances since then. The consensus view – found in governmental, media, academic and other knowing circles – is that the conflict changed. I would submit that that conflict did not change, and that in fact the Palestinian drive to destroy Israel remains no less a factor than it was before September 1993. There is a war taking place now. Overwhelmingly, the Palestinians want to destroy the state of Israel, the Jewish state; and the Israelis are fighting for acceptance of this Jewish state. In this war, there must be a winner and there must be a loser, as in all wars. The compromise solutions, such as we tried in the 1990s in Oslo, will not work – and indeed may exacerbate the problem.

What went wrong with Oslo?

There was an assumption that the Palestinians would follow the leadership: If Yasser Arafat signed a document, others in the Palestinian leadership – the Palestinian body-politic more broadly – would likewise accept Israel's existence. Trouble was, first, that the leadership didn't really accept Israel. Look at areas where the leadership had control – television stations, political rhetoric, schoolbooks; while they were on the one hand shaking hands and making deals with Israelis, they on the other hand continued the message that Israel must be destroyed. Symbolic of this would be the maps. Every map produced showed a Palestine instead of an Israel, not alongside it.

Second mistake was to believe that governments or authorities can deliver their populations. If one looks at not just the Palestinian-Israeli accord but the Egyptian and Jordanian accords as well, we see a population – Egyptian, Jordanian or Palestinian – fairly passive and inclined to allow its leadership to take steps on its behalf. Once an agreement has been signed with Israel, the population becomes far more engaged, far more fervently anti-Zionist. It's as though the

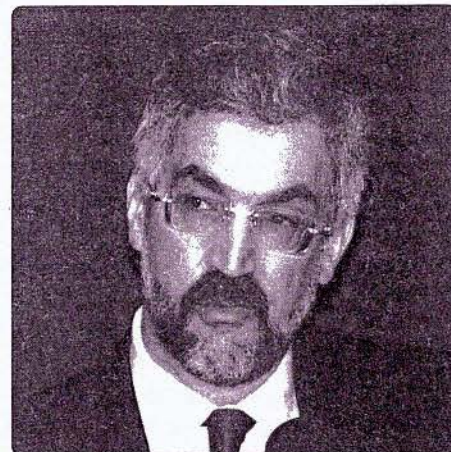


Photo by Paul Eric Felder

populations were saying to the leadership, You have our proxy – but when the leadership signed an agreement with Israel, that proxy was taken back.

I lived in Egypt in the 1970s. Before the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, Egyptians were not that engaged in this problem. After it, they became far more engaged. Songs like “I Hate Israel” became blockbuster hits. Giving money to organizations that would engage in activities – violent and otherwise – against Israel became far more common.

The net result of the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 was to produce a population of Palestinians that was more vehemently anti-Israel than before. The hope of destroying Israel acquired more traction, seen in words and in actions, in text and in maps. The muted Palestinian mood of 1993 turned into the enraged ambition of 2000. A population not so confident about its prospects – the Iraqis had just lost their war, the Soviet Union had collapsed, the Palestinians were in a precarious situation; they wanted to destroy Israel, but they could see no means of achieving it. By the year 2000, due to the diplomacy, to Israeli concessions, one found a Palestinian population that was truly inspired, that saw within its grasp the destruction of Israel.

What we might do better in the future

To look to the future requires us to acknowledge the faulty presumptions that underlay Oslo. First, that the Palestinians did in fact accept Israel; and second, that the elites could take a softer line and have this accepted more broadly. We must resolve not to make the same mistakes. Instead – and this is my key point – we must make popular Palestinian acceptance of Israel’s existence the primary goal. We must work, in other words, for what is now assumed.

The consensus view is that Palestinians have accepted Israel. That lies in the future. Survey research consistently shows that somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of Palestinians, both within the Palestinian Authority and elsewhere, have come to the conclusion that Israel’s there and permanent. Interestingly, 15 to 20 percent of Israeli Jews believe that Palestinians have accepted Israel. Americans, when asked if the Palestinians have accepted Israel, about 20 percent say that Arafat sought a small state living alongside Israel. How might this be resolved?

I’m a historian, so I look at the historical record – how conflicts have been resolved in the 20th century. Over and over again, international conflicts are resolved not through mediation and compromise and good will, but through one side coming to the conclusion that it can no longer achieve its goals. The Germans lost in World War I, but they lost without being convinced that they had. They turned to Hitler and tried a second time. In the Second World War, the Allies made clear to the Germans that they had lost. The Korean War ended 50 years ago, but neither the North nor

the South came to the conclusion that they could not prevail, and as a result, it could start up again at any time. The Arabs and Israelis fought time after time, yet neither side came to the conclusion it had lost. Iraq and Iran fought for eight years; neither side came to the conclusion it had lost.

Defeat can be military, but it can also be more subtle. In 1991 the Soviet Union shuddered to an end, without a war. That same year the apartheid regime in South Africa collapsed. In 1975 the United States was defeated in Vietnam not because we’d run out of bullets, because our economy had collapsed, because we didn’t have more soldiers; we were defeated because we came to the conclusion that we couldn’t go on. Likewise, the Soviets in Afghanistan

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in 1989 concluded they couldn’t go on. It is the way in which this conflict will end: either because the Israelis come to the conclusion that the Zionist experiment is impossible, Arab rejection is so intense and protracted that the Israeli state as it’s now constituted cannot survive and it will be destroyed or succumb in some fashion to Palestinian or Arab or Muslim takeover, or the Palestinians will come to the conclusion that their goal of destroying Israel is unattainable, and they give up using violence against it. Those are the only two long-term solutions; those are both forms of peace. If there’s no Israel, there’s peace; if Israel’s accepted, it’s peace. You must make your choice: Do you want the Israelis to prevail? Do you want the Palestinians, and behind them the Arabs and Muslims, to prevail?

It would be nice if there could be a division of land, a coming to terms, a compromise. But the lesson of 1993 and forward is that is not possible. What happened during the seven years of the Oslo Accords is that the Palestinians who began that era somewhat muted ended up enraged. They saw the Israeli concessions as weakness, and they saw themselves as getting closer to attaining the goal – and not unreasonably so.

American policy as it should be

I will present to you the case for the Palestinians giving up. That is in fact American policy as it should be. How do we get the Palestinians to give up? Instead of, as we are today, trying to bring the Israelis and Palestinians back to the bargaining table to recommence the negotiations that in effect started in 1993, we should be focusing on the Palestinians and figuring out how can we bring our strengths to the table to convince them to give up their war on Israel. We should look at the entire Arab-Israeli conflict through the prism of what helps induce the Palestinians to give up in their goal of destroying Israel. This is a simple but profound measure.

Diplomacy in time of war must fail. Not just Oslo, but the many other initiatives of the U.S. government in recent

years such as the Zinni, Mitchell, Abdullah plans, the road map, the Geneva Accords; all of these will fail. Diplomacy can work only when the Palestinians have given up their anti-Zionist ambitions or have given up their attempt to destroy Israel; we must pressure the Palestinians to abandon their goal of exterminating their enemy.

How do we know this has happened? Many small signs can show it: maps that show an Israel next to a Palestine; a Jewish population living in Hebron that has no more security problems than the Arab population living in Nazareth; when it becomes clear that the Arabs are no longer using violence. Palestinians must prove their acceptance of Israel. This is a process that will take years;

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it's not something that can be done overnight. At that point, when they have established that they are no longer trying to destroy Israel, then an accord such as was signed in 1993 makes sense.

The problem of that accord was less its contents than timing. Eventually, negotiations can be reopened and the issues of the past decade can be taken up anew. But for now there should be no American financial aid or arms to the Palestinians, no diplomacy, no speculations about final status, no recognition of a Palestinian state, no quick fixes, no troops; none of these ideas are going to work, all of them will put back the date of when the Palestinians finally come to terms with existence of Israel.

We should urge Israel not just to defend itself, but to impress on the Palestinians the hopelessness of their cause. The situation is tragic for all sides today in the Arab-Israeli theater. The Israelis are seeing their people murdered on a regular basis. This is the only modern Western country that is forced to assert its own existence through military force on a regular basis. Ironically, it is the Palestinians who are even more harmed by the war underway. A skilled and dignified people are obstructed from modernizing because they are obsessed with destroying their enemy; their own polity, economy, society and culture are neglected. Only when they give that up can they prosper and achieve great things. At this time they suffer from dictatorship, poverty and backwardness. These are the wretched results of their own hideous ambitions. Palestinians must first accept Israel, and then benefits will accrue to all involved.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Q: You say the Palestinian ambition is basically to eliminate the state of Israel. Has not President Abbas essentially given up the idea?

A: What Mahmoud Abbas did that was so different from Yasser Arafat was that back in 2002 he came to the conclusion that terrorism versus Israelis was not working. He called for the end of terrorism not because it was immoral – and he did not call for it forever to be put aside – but rather he saw it as ineffectual, even counterproductive. That's to his credit. But that was a minor step, relatively speaking. He wasn't calling for the acceptance of Israel.

Second point about Mahmoud Abbas: He's a weak figure. Insofar as he himself has accepted Israel (which is arguable, but let's assume he has), it doesn't make a lot of difference; he is not in control of the Palestinian Authority. There is Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, security services that are not answerable to him, criminal gangs, anarchic groups of various sorts that have led in the last two years to a situation in Gaza and the West Bank that has largely made it ungovernable. He is a factor, but he is not the determining factor.

Q: You said that behind the Palestinians is the larger Arab world, which also does not recognize Israel's right to exist – or would like not to recognize it; but aren't there movements from various parts of the Arab world not only to diplomatically recognize Israel, but to start to open up trade, especially from Persian Gulf countries? If Saudi Arabia joins the World Trade Organization, the WTO has certain rules about not boycotting fellow members; will the Saudis simply ignore that, or will they go along with that?

A: No question there are elements in the Arab and Muslim worlds that seek to end this conflict. President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan a couple months ago indicated that he would like to see an end to this conflict. King Abdullah of Jordan has done likewise. There are groups, individuals – no question. I'm not speaking of entire populations, but I'm speaking roughly of 80 percent versus 20 percent. The predominant power is still in the hands of the groups that do want to destroy Israel, and that is where the energy is – where the Islamists, for example, can be seen very potently.

As for Saudi Arabia, it has had to say that it will not boycott Israel to join the WTO. The Egyptian and Jordanian examples suggest that even when you have a peace treaty with Israel, it doesn't mean you actually have to trade with it. So you can formally end the boycott, but still in many other ways discourage trade or other active relations.

Q: Who needs to be convinced that they have been defeated – the Palestinians, or militant Islam? Defeating the Palestinians may or may not be possible, but is a defeat of militant Islam possible?

A: These are two rather different topics. Militant Islam is a phenomenon that is worldwide, including in the

Palestinian population. The Palestinian drive to destroy Israel has taken many different forms over the past century. It began as a greater Syrian movement in which the Palestine – what is now called Palestine or Israel – was seen as Southern Syria. It then became a pan-Arab movement, bringing together Arabic speakers from Morocco to Iraq, for which Palestinians were one group. It then became Palestinian nationalists, with an emphasis on a Palestinian flag and membership in international organizations. Increasingly these days, it is taking on an Islamist tone, with Hamas growing in power steadily over the last two decades. The tone and specifics of the Palestinian-Arab-Muslim side might vary from one generation to another, but the goal of destroying Israel has been the common element and that is a separate distinct goal from the general radical Islamic goal internationally.

Q: Has Israel itself and its behavior and actions towards Palestinians contributed in any way to your view of the radicalization of Palestinians? A number of people, Palestinians in particular, feel they've been treated rather badly in the past 50 years.

A: The Israelis have certainly made their share of mistakes, but I'd be reluctant to see Israel as the cause of Palestinian irredentism. I would also have a hard time second-guessing the Israelis and suggesting what course they might have taken that would not have led to where we are today. One could argue that in 1967 they should not have occupied the territories they did, but it is hard to see how they would have made that decision, because the borders they took were, from a strategic point of view, so much more advantageous than the ones they had before.

The one thing I could say, ironically, is that they should have avoided the Oslo accords. If Israelis made any single great mistake, it was not in putting up road blocks and not in the treatment of the Palestinians, but rather in having this leap of faith that by making gestures to the Palestinians, the Palestinians would reciprocate by accepting Israel. Had there not been Oslo, I think Palestinian acceptance of Israel would be much greater now than it is today.

Q: Does Palestinian acceptance of Israel imply the existence of a Palestinian state?

A: There's a war taking place, and in times of war, it's not good to work out what the post-war arrangements will be. First, it's necessary to win the war. I am not opposed in principle to a Palestinian state, but I don't want to give any assurances that the Palestinians will get anything until they stop the violence and give up the irredentist attack on Israel.

Q: How do you see Bush administration policy regarding your two possible outcomes?

A: The Bush administration learned from the mistakes of the Clinton administration, and has made its own mistakes. The president has a very personal approach to this topic, has his own ideas, and they're radically different from what has preceded. No prior president had ever gotten involved in setting out the goals of a Palestinian state, or any other goals. The others said, Let the Israelis and the Palestinians work it out, and we will be hopeful. President Bush has said, I have a vision of how it's going to look and you must implement it. He has also become engaged in the diplomacy at a very early stage. It's different from what's come before. I wouldn't necessarily say it's better.

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Q: You've come into criticism for some of the things that you've written and said. Some have said that there's a certain amount of hostile rhetoric in your writings, especially with regards to Islam and Muslim people. Is that a fair characterization?

A: No, it's not. There's a great deal of hostility towards radical Islam and the Islamists. I do not have opinions on religions, including Islam. I'm not for or against Islam; I'm not a Muslim. I am a historian of Islam – I understand its strengths and its weaknesses insofar as I've studied it for 36 years. What I do have strong feelings about is the ideology that is variously called fundamentalist Islam, Islamism, radical Islam, militant Islam – the phenomenon that has led to mass murders in Algeria and the Sudan – to terrorism around the world. I see in this a third totalitarian movement, comparable to the fascist and Marxist-Leninist antecedents, and I spend a great deal of time being very hostile to it.

It's important to note that there are many Muslims who are likewise hostile to it. It is not a function of being pro- or anti-Islam, Muslim or non-Muslim; it's a political vision: Do you want a totalitarian order in which the state determines everything, as it did in Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia or the Taliban Afghanistan? Or do you want a different, liberal, open democratic order? That's what this is about – not religion but politics.

Q: Did you once say "Muslim customs are more troublesome than most," or were you misquoted? What did you mean?

A: I have written a fair amount, so I can't quite say if I wrote that or not, but I know the context, which is to say that in the last five centuries, the rest of the world has basically responded to Western ways. The Muslim world has found

it more difficult to do that than, say, China and Japan. There are two main reasons: One, the historical antagonism between Muslims and Christians that, for example, did not exist between Muslims and Chinese. Two, what you are more or less quoting, is that Muslim customs, habits, regulations, ideals, were in many ways contradictory to Western ones – and therefore made the process of incorporating Western ways more difficult. A simple example would be nationalism.

The European idea that a people forms a nation, as exemplified by countries like Portugal or Poland, which are almost purely one religion, one language, one set of customs – that notion traveled rather well to East Asia, Korea, Japan, China. In the Muslim world, where allegiance is to one's fellow believers, this proved to be very difficult.

Q: Did you at one time say that “We may have to be a little bit more careful here about Muslims joining the police force and Muslims joining the Army, and perhaps partly because of some of the things that have happened in the past five years, perhaps more security checks need to be made on Muslims than on other people”? Is that fair?

A: Absolutely. Given the record that we have of penetration of military forces, law enforcement, translators – there is no other body of people who are as likely to engage in Islamist

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terrorism other than Muslims. It is only common sense to look at Muslims with added scrutiny to make sure that in that number – in that mosque, community center, institution – one does not have people who potentially will become lethal weapons. Yeah, it goes against the tenor of our times, but if we're going to be serious about counterterrorism, we have no choice.

Q: The notion of political correctness aside, is it not incumbent to be doubly careful in terms of the rhetoric used? Is it not possible that even Muslims who might agree with a great deal of what you're saying feel targeted and identified by some of the things you're saying – and that, perhaps, you tend to drive away some of the people who perhaps you need to support this moderation?

A: It's not for me to say whether my words are driving people away or not. But it is far more difficult to deal with the situation we have now, where there are pious statements made that No, there's no discrimination, there's no special attention paid to Muslims, there's no profiling – whereas in fact, everyone knows there is. That is more insidious than having

a situation where one is forthright and says, Well, reluctantly, painfully, we must take these steps. It is in the interest of us all, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Let us take these steps sensibly, intelligently, politely and knowledgeably, but let's take these steps because these steps are being taken in any case.

Many of the Muslim organizations protest that Muslims are being singled out and the authorities invariably say, No, no, no. I say, Yes, yes, yes. Let's not lie.

Q: Explain the concept of Campus Watch. Critics have said that it creates something of a chilling effect regarding academic freedom.

A: Campus Watch, a project I initiated a little over three years ago, is a critique of Middle East studies. Our project looks at other specialists on the Middle East, people with a Ph.D. in such fields as economics, history, politics, anthropology and literature, and critiques when we don't think they're doing a good job. Politicians and journalists are subject to this kind of scrutiny on a regular basis. I think they would agree that, while it's not always pleasant, it is useful to be critiqued from the outside.

The professors of Middle East studies disagreed. They thought themselves superior to such criticism, and have said that what we're doing is, if not illegal, at least is immoral. They have called us bad names. But I am happy to say that, in the course of three years, they have taken note and become less inclined to force their politics on students or penalize students who disagree with them, less inclined to make wild statements in the media. I think when the specialists on the Middle East look back, they will agree that it was beneficial to have criticism.

Q: How do you see the situation playing out over the next months and years? What is your view of the disengagement in Gaza, of the Rafah crossing point – is there any sign of progress? The World Bank getting involved in Gaza – are there genuine attempts to revive a Palestinian economy?

A: Anything that induces the Palestinians to give up their goal of destroying Israel is positive. Anything that reinforces Palestinian belief that they can destroy Israel is negative. I look at the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in that light. Is it possible that the Palestinians will look at the Israeli withdrawal and say, “Israel's really tough, here to stay; terrorism has no impact on them; we really better give this up.” Or is it likely they will say, “Terrorism works – we attacked them in Lebanon, they left; we attacked them in Gaza, they left; let's attack them in Jerusalem, let's attack them in West Bank, let's attack them in Haifa and Tel Aviv.” I have

no doubt in my mind that the message sent in 2000, when the Israelis withdrew from Lebanon, and a few months ago, when they withdrew from Gaza, is that violence works.

Q: That would be a reaction of supporters of Hamas. Is it possible some Palestinians will say, “We have a vested interest in building a society and economy for ourselves”?

A: Yes, some will say that here’s an opportunity. But this is not a predominant reaction. Look at the response to the Israeli withdrawal – leaving behind houses, fields and agriculture infrastructure with the intent that this could be used by the Palestinians. This was destroyed within hours. There was no interest in building the economy; there was interest in stamping the Palestinian victory over the Israelis, burning synagogues, desecrating synagogues. Was that about fixing the economy and the society and the polity and the culture? No, it’s about winning.

The Israelis are fooling themselves if they think that they can finesse the Palestinians into forgetting that the Palestinians want to destroy Israel. They are intent on destroying Israel, and if that means giving up their children as suicide bombers, having a lower standard of living, living under autocracy, they will take it. What they need to be convinced is: You’re going to achieve nothing by it. This is where the United States and its allies can be so helpful, to send a signal that is steady and unremitting to the Palestinians: Forget it, you can’t win this. Then the Palestinians might have second thoughts more quickly than they will if the outside world doesn’t send that signal.

Q: Is it fair to say that a majority of Israelis would like to give this particular process a shot?

A: Absolutely. I don’t claim to represent majority Israeli opinion. The Israelis are tired of conflict. They want out. The Palestinians want victory. The Israelis want resolution. Israelis have lost sight, as have many Westerners, of the fact that war ends only when one side ends up being defeated. There’s hope that paying money, giving over land and other concessions will cause the Palestinians to say, Fine, we’re happy. I can tell you what the results would look like.

Q: The various actions taken against Hamas and Islamic Jihad by Israel – do you see them as weakening the ability of these terrorist groups?

A: Yes, I do. There are two different ways of analyzing this. One is to say that it makes the Palestinians enraged. The other is to say that makes them weak. I have flipped what one might call the consensus view on its head. It is not Israeli assertiveness that makes the Palestinians violent or aggressive. It is Israeli weakness or perceptions of weakness such as the Oslo Accords. It does not hurt Israel

to defeat its enemies. Logically, how can it? You kill Ahmed Yassin, who formed an organization that engages purely in terrorism against the Israelis; how can you be weaker for it? The goal of war is to win, and the Israelis, when they take out their enemies, are taking steps to win. Ω

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