Arab vs. Arab Over Palestine

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As we have once again been reminded by the great debate over the desirability of an international conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict, that conflict is generally assumed to be about the competing claims of the Jews and the Palestinians to the same piece of land. Yet the truth is that the Arabs disagree, sometimes violently, among themselves as to who should rule Palestine and even where its rightful boundaries lie.

Thus President Hafez al-Assad of Syria maintains that he has the right to rule Palestine because it is "an essential part of Southern Syria." Yasir Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) turns the relationship around, claiming rights not only to Palestine but to Syria as well. A similar disagreement exists between King Hussein of Jordan and the PLO. The king believes Palestine is his: "Jordan is Palestine, and Palestine is Jordan." Yasir Arafat stakes an opposite claim: "Jordan is ours, Palestine is ours, and we shall build our national entity on the whole of this land after having freed it of both the Zionist presence and the reactionary-traitor presence" (of King Hussein).

The Arab disagreement goes further, as the PLO contains many factions, each of which aspires to ultimate control over land taken from Israel. In addition, other Middle East heads of state—including Muammar al-Qaddafi of Libya and Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran—seek the decisive voice in any Arab polity to be established in Palestine.

These competing ambitions are not momentary breaches in the otherwise unified Arab position, but deep and abiding divisions that, more than the Arab confrontation with Israel itself, constitute the center of gravity in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The fact that so many Arab parties lay claim to Israel's territory renders accommodation unlikely, and prolongs a conflict that otherwise might be settled. Indeed, differences among the Arab states determine the future course of that conflict far more than do actions by Israel, the United States, or the Soviet Union.

government, and the Syrian government. Actors of secondary importance include fundamentalist Muslims and West Bank notables. Finally, Egypt, too, has had a special place.

Palestinian Separatists

The standard of this group, often known as Palestinian nationalists, has been carried since 1964 by the PLO. Palestinian separatists envisage, in the area that Israel now controls, an independent state possessing all the conventional signs of sovereignty—borders, customs, embassies, a flag, an army, and membership in the United Nations. The Palestinian separatist claim dominated Arab efforts to control Palestine during two periods: from late 1920 to the declaration of Israel's statehood in 1948, and from the Six-Day War of June 1967 to the battle for Beirut in 1982.

Palestine as a distinct political entity did not exist in the period of Muslim rule, from 634 to 1917. During these centuries, which saw ten changes of Muslim dynasties, Palestine was submerged within larger political units; it simply did not appear on the political map.

Even the name "Palestine" itself initially aroused hostility among Muslims, since it had long been associated with Judaism and Christianity and was introduced into the modern Middle Eastern political vocabulary as a by-product of British conquest in 1917, and then only to designate the site of the "national home for the Jewish people" promised by the Balfour Declaration. When in late 1920 the local Arabs adopted the Palestinian identity, they saw it as a tool with which to combat the British rulers and Zionist colonizers; otherwise it had little appeal for them. With the passage of time, however, the Muslims of Palestine grew attached to this identity, and it became a powerful source of allegiance. From 1920 until 1948, led by the Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, Palestinian separatists dominated the Arab claim to Palestine.

In drawing up plans for Palestine, the British and the UN expected the local Arabs to form an independent nation. But with the proclamation of Jewish statehood in 1948, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt invaded Palestine and occupied portions of it. Settlements made after the

During this period the conflict with Israel was dominated by the Arab states. It was the Egyptian government, indeed, that revived the Palestinian separatist ideology in 1959 and five years later sponsored the PLO's establishment. Cairo's intent was to control and use the Palestinians, and it did so for some time. During this same period Palestinian separatists had to portray victory over Israel not as an end in itself but as a means toward achieving Arab unity. When the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242 in November 1967 it called for "a just settlement of the refugee problem" without mentioning the Palestinians as a political unit.

It was only in the aftermath of the 1967 war that Palestinian separatism reemerged as a significant force in its own right. The terrible military defeat suffered by Syria, Jordan, and Egypt prompted many Arabs, especially Arab nationalists, to seek an alternative approach to the struggle with Israel. In a supremely romantic move ("If we all die except for one pregnant woman, her child will liberate Palestine"), they turned away from the established states and placed their faith in the unproven and undermanned Palestinian separatist guerrilla organization, the PLO.

The PLO enjoyed fifteen years of unique prominence. No other irredentist movement has had such financial, military, and diplomatic backing. With an annual budget of several hundreds of millions of dollars, quasi-state authority in Beirut and south Lebanon, and wide international support, the PLO acted as though it were the major opponent of Israel. Its claim to Palestine grew so strong that many observers, especially in the West, forgot that other Arab factions had different plans for Palestine. Politically, the Arab-Israeli conflict turned in those years into a Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

PLO strength, however, was always precarious. Although the organization enjoyed a salient place in world politics, it suffered from the lack of a secure base. Finally the PLO came crashing down in the summer of 1982, when Israel eliminated it from Beirut and south Lebanon. Syria finished the job when it drove the PLO from its remaining strongholds in north Lebanon in December 1983. With these developments, the PLO lost its hold on the Arab claim for Palestine. As Jordan and Syria have become stronger, the PLO has had to cooperate with one or the other of them.

Over a period of seven decades certain patterns have characterized the behavior of Palestinian separatists. Most important are their extremism and their factionalism. First the Mufti's Supreme Muslim Council and then the PLO have rejected every compromise—partition plans in the former case, negotiations in the latter. Palestinian separatists refused the Peel Plan of 1937 and the United Nations plan of 1947. They failed to amend the Palestine National Charter with its call for the destruction of Israel and they let negotiations with King Hussein fall through in 1983 and 1986. Intransigence has left the separatists without concrete achievements or a territory of their own.

Palestinian separatists also tend to splinter. Although the outside world knows the PLO as a single body, it is in fact made up of almost a dozen fractious groupings advocating contrary programs. One Palestinian group is pro-Syrian, another pro-Iraqi, and so forth. They disagree on ideology (Marxist or fundamentalist Islamic?) and on personnel (who should lead—the Nashashibi or Husayni family, al-Fatah or the PFLP, As-Sa'iqa or Abu Nidal, the West Bank notables or yet others?).

From the late 1930's to the present, financial, diplomatic, and military backing for the Palestinian separatists has come mostly from non-Palestinians. Kings and presidents of Arabic-speaking states have been the primary donors; in recent years the Soviet bloc has also contributed heavily. This dependence on outside benefactors goes far to explain the movement's extremism and factionalism. Because the Arab governments most hostile to Israel—Syria, Iraq, Libya—have provided most of the PLO's support, their influence has made it impossible for the PLO to adopt tactics sufficiently pragmatic to achieve its goals.

The Arab governments' influence also works against the unity of Palestinian separatists. As early as the 1930's, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq backed opposing Palestinian factions; other states, such as Libya and Saudi Arabia, joined the fray later. Each government pressures the Palestinian separatists to act according to its interests. Thus it is that inter-Arab and international politics, not the interests of Palestinians, drive the actions of the PLO.

The Palestinian separatist movement in general flourishes to the extent that inter-Arab harmony prevails, while inter-Arab conflict tears the Palestinian groups apart, as fighting among PLO sponsors spills over to the PLO itself. (In 1976-77, for example, Palestian

or refuse it and be weak.

Still, despite all these drawbacks, Arab residents of Palestine are these days increasingly attracted to Palestinian separatism—which in practice means the PLO. In part, this is due to the inability of other claimants—Arab nationalists, Jordan, Syria—to provide a fixed and clear alternative to the Palestinian identity. In part, too, it results from the fact that the others have recognized Palestinian separatism as the most legitimate claimant and, rhetorically at least, have subsumed their own claims to it.

Palestinian separatism is tied to the PLO; without it, observes Akram Haniya, chairman of the Arab Journalists Association of the Occupied Territories, "we will be orphans." Even those Palestinians who support the Arab nationalist, Jordanian, or Syrian claim to Palestine feel obliged to express allegiance to Yasir Arafat. Indeed, Arafat has personally come to symbolize the Palestinians' effort to gain control over their lives, and that means that his strength is to some degree independent of the PLO itself, and unrelated to his failures as a leader. One specialist, Matti Steinberg, has gone so far as to say that "the more [the PLO] is enfeebled as a body, the stronger Arafat becomes."

Arab Nationalists

Palestinian separatism is often confused with Arab nationalism, though the goals of the two are incompatible. The former aspires to make Palestine a fully independent country, while the latter would integrate it into a much larger entity, the Arab nation. Arab nationalists—also called Pan-Arab nationalists or Pan-Arabists—hope to build a state that will eventually comprise all Arabic-speakers between the Atlantic Ocean and the Persian Gulf, from Morocco to Oman, of which Palestine will be a small province.

For Arab nationalists, the liberation of Palestine will occur only when the Arabs are unified—at the least closely allied, at best joined in a single state. Their slogan, "Arab Unity —The Way to Palestine," contrasts with the Palestinian separatists' slogan, "Palestine—The Way to Arab Unity." Conveniently for the Arab nationalists, their outlook justifies an indefinite postponement of the conflict against Israel.

occasion, insisting that it motivates everything else. At other times, when more pressing business is at hand—as in the decade between Suez and the Six-Day War—they ignore the issue, arguing that Arab unity must come first.

As Palestinian separatism faltered in the 1940's, Arab nationalists inherited some of the claim to Palestine. They emerged as a dominant force, however, only in the mid-1950's, when the president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, mesmerized Arabic speakers with his vision of the grandeur and power of a united Arab people. Victory against Israel was to demonstrate that power; for Nasser, Palestine would be the nucleus of a Pan-Arab state. But Nasser went to war against Israel too soon, and in June 1967 suffered the repudiation of his dreams. Military defeat provided an opening for all those, such as the Saudi royal family, who had been threatened by Nasser's radical ideas and political ambitions; they turned to the Palestinian movement, which seemed to offer less direct danger to their authority. In Egypt, too, Nasser's successors virtually abandoned the Arab stage to remedy the domestic ills he had left behind.

Arab nationalism continues to have its proponents, but none so popular or powerful as Nasser. His most vocal heir is Colonel Qaddafi of Libya, who, far more than Nasser himself, sees Palestine as central to the drive for Arab unity. To a lesser degree, Iraq and Saudi Arabia also propound Arab nationalist ideas, but their ideolgies are diluted by parochial concerns. Today, Arab nationalism is in deep eclipse.

Jordan

The kingdom of Jordan occupies a part of the historic region which before 1918 included the territory of the present states of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, and which is known as Greater Syria (to distinguish it from the modern Syrian state). Pan-Syrian nationalism is the ideology calling for the realization of Greater Syria, and the rulers of Jordan have been attracted to its goals. Amman no less than Damascus has seen itself from time to time as the rightful claimant to Greater Syria—if not to all of it, then most especially to that part of it called Palestine.

aimed to rule it from the moment that Jordan (then called Transjordan) came into existence in March 1921. He claimed the religious and political leadership of Palestine in 1934; in 1938, he presented a memorandum to the British government calling for Palestine's unity with Transjordan under his rule.

An opportunity to seize Palestinian territory came in 1948 when Great Britain gave up its Mandate. With British cooperation, the Transjordanian army had already occupied parts of Palestine by the time imperial troops evacuated in May 1948. It subsequently attacked the fledgling state of Israel and captured the territory that came to be known as the West Bank. Transjordan was renamed Jordan in June 1949 and the West Bank became part of Jordan in April 1950. Only Great Britain and Pakistan recognized this incorporation of the West Bank; the Arab states, unwilling to accept the Jordanian claim to Palestine, refused to sanction Abdullah's land grab.

Acting under pressure from Arab rivals, Abdullah's grandson Hussein attacked Israel in June 1967. But his army failed, and instead of winning more of Palestine, he lost the West Bank. Subsequent efforts by Hussein to maintain his claim to this territory were thwarted by the Arab states. At a meeting in October 1974, Jordan was compelled by the Arab rulers to accept the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in any Palestinian territory that is liberated." To make matters worse, King Hussein had to agree to cooperate with the PLO, Syria, and Egypt to ensure the implementation of this resolution.

The king's verbal assent did not, of course, mean he had actually given up the longstanding Jordanian claim. Hussein's opportunity to reassert that claim came after the PLO's 1982-83 losses in Lebanon. The Reagan Initiative of September 1982 called for "self-government by the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza in association with Jordan"—in effect, a statement of American preference for the return of the West Bank to Jordan. Buoyed by this support, Hussein publicly reentered West Bank diplomacy for the first time since 1974.

The king announced in February 1986 that he spoke "as one who feels he is a Palestinian." His government talked less of "Occupied Palestine" and more of the "Occupied West Bank." A Ministry of Occupied Territories was established in Amman. The ministry's May

As for the PLO, it acknowledged Jordan's new strength and its own decline when it agreed to discuss a joint negotiating position with Jordan. The PLO brought Arab legitimacy to Jordan; Jordan brought U.S. support and some Israeli favor to the PLO. Their joint effort faced only one obstacle: disagreement on the critical question of who would control any territories given up by Israel. This obstacle proved insuperable.

Certain characteristics have distinguished the Jordanian position over a period of sixty-six years: enmity toward the Palestinian separatists, friendship with the West, pragmatism, disagreement with the Arab consensus, and stable working relations with the Jews.

Jordan has been the premier rival of the Palestinian separatists. In the pre-1948 period, Abdullah's ambitions clashed with those of Mufti al-Husayni, leading to an undying hostility between the two. And what Barry Rubin has written of that earlier period—"the conflict between the Mufti's desire for an independent Arab state under his leadership and Abdullah's goal was as great as the gap between the Mufti and the Zionists"—applies equally well today to the Arafat-Hussein-Israel triangle. Asked in 1983 about the possibility of discussions among himself, the PLO, and Israel, King Hussein is said to have muttered, "The Israeli part will be easy."

To enhance their claim to the West Bank, Jordanian monarchs have repeatedly sought to demonstrate their popularity there. Just as Abdullah organized West Bankers in late 1948 to implore him to become their sovereign, so Hussein arranged in March 1986 for what his state-controlled press called "grateful" delegations from the West Bank to appear before him, offering support for his challenge to Yasir Arafat.

Both kings have positioned themselves as the favorite of the prevailing Western power of the time. Just as British authorities preferred Abdullah over the Mufti, the Americans prefer Hussein to the PLO. In contrast, the Mufti worked with Hitler and Arafat is closely tied to Moscow.

He signed a treaty with the British endorsing the Balfour Declaration, offered to sell or lease land to Zionists who would acknowledge his rule, and even used the Palestinian currency, with its Hebrew inscriptions, in his kingdom. His grandson Hussein no longer hopes to attract Jews to Jordan, but he does treat Israel in a realistic, nonideological manner and relies on diplomacy rather than force. Winning their Jewish neighbors' good will has been a constant goal of the Jordanian kings.

Israelis respond to Jordanian pragmatism. They saw Abdullah as the least hostile Arab leader and made efforts to come to terms with him. They helped save Hussein's throne from Iraqi troops in 1958 and from the PLO in 1970. More recently, Israel has acquiesced in some Jordanian arms purchases from the United States. Cooperation on the West Bank since 1967 has been quiet but far-reaching. In addition to maintaining open borders with Jordan, the Israelis have administered the West Bank, in Bernard Lewis's 1975 description, "as occupied Jordanian territory, using Jordanian currency, collecting Jordanian taxes, applying Jordanian law, and conducting local government, education, and public services in accordance with Jordanian practice. They even continued to refer many questions to Amman for approval or decision, thus moving toward a kind of condominium." Though this policy was followed less fully during the Begin years, it is again in effect.

Bilateral relations go far beyond the West Bank. Trade is considerable, foreign tourists travel from one country to the other, water is allotted according to quotas, anti-terrorist measures are implemented, and borders have been twice adjusted. But most revealing have been the many face-to-face discussions among leaders of the two sides. Repeated meetings between November 1947 and March 1950 constituted the first round of this relationship; the second took place between September 1963 and August 1977; the third appears to have begun in October 1985, when Hussein and Shimon Peres met; these two talked most recently in London in early April 1987.

Given Jordan's weaknesses—a small and divided population, limited military force, few resources, and Arab opposition to Amman's claim to Palestine—pragmatism makes good sense. Jordan's greatest strength vis-à-vis its Arab rivals lies in the fact that, should Israel decide to evacuate any part of the West Bank and Gaza, Amman can expect to be its negotiating partner of choice. In other words, the Jordanian hope to control parts of Palestine depends not on Arab support but on Israeli preference. In an exact reversal of the

Arab states disagree among themselves, Jordan tends to gain more scope to work with Israel. Thus, the current effort to convene an Israel-Jordan peace conference with wide Arab backing is inherently oxymoronic.

Syria

As I have argued previously in these pages, the custom of viewing Palestine as a part of Greater Syria has persisted in Damascus for decades.[2] After winning their own independence from France in 1946, the rulers of Syria, although weak and unstable, rejected their country's borders with vehemence. Syrian armies attacked the nascent Jewish state in 1948 and emerged from the war controlling the village of al-Hamma. Like Jordan, Syria annexed what it held in Palestine; although the territory was too small to have political import, it indicated the intentions of the Syrian regime. A Syrian delegate to the armistice conference between Syria and Israel made these intentions explicit, announcing that "there is no international border between Israel and Syria."

As the years passed, Syrian leaders continued to reassert their claim. Its own president in 1953 referred to Syria as "the current official name for that country which lies within the artificial borders drawn up by imperialism"—an extraordinary remark by a head of state. Syria's delegate to the UN Security Council observed in 1967 that it was Syria "from which Palestine was severed and from the territory of which Israel was created."

These assertions acquired additional force in 1974, when the regime of Hafez al-Assad made Greater Syria a central foreign-policy theme. Since then, Syrian officials have repeatedly argued that Palestine is Southern Syria. According to Assad, "There is no Palestinian people, there is no Palestinian entity, there is only Syria! . . . It is we, the Syrian authorities, who are the real representatives of the Palestinian people." Damascus Radio announced in June 1980 that "Syria views Palestine—according to historic, cultural, and geographic factors—as its own southern province."

Handicapped by a morally weak claim, Damascus must rely on a combination of dissimulation and military strength. In fact, the Syrian government usually downplays its Pan-Syrian goals by supporting one of the most acceptable claimants. When Arab nationalism predominated in the 1950's and 1960's, the Syrian government espoused a Pan-Arabist solution for Palestine and tried, without success, to dominate the Arab nationalist movement. When Palestinian separatism became the acceptable solution, Syrian leaders changed their tune and quickly tried to take over that movement.

Military strength is the second major theme of Syria's claim. Long after Israel's other neighbors have given up hope of taking on the Israelis, raw power remains a hallmark of the Damascus approach. In recent years, Syrian rulers have spoken repeatedly of achieving "strategic parity" with Israel, and indeed since 1982 an abundance of advanced matériel supplied by the Soviet Union has helped make Syrian forces far more formidable than ever before. Jordan can be flexible; Arab nationalists can ignore Israel; the PLO could some day renounce the military option; but Syria has to use force.

Other Claimants

In addition to the four main claimants discussed so far, two groups have emerged in recent years that may in the future become major actors: fundamentalist Muslims and local Palestinian residents.

The fundamentalist Muslim claim to Palestine resembles that of Arab nationalists in that both see Palestine as a part of something much larger and grander. But whereas Arab nationalists stress the community of Arabic-speakers, fundamentalists stress the community of Muslims. To them geography, language, and ethnic background pale in importance beside religion. They emphasize two points: that Palestine is a historic part of the Muslim patrimony; and that the almost two million Muslims at present living under Israeli control must win political sovereignty. Fundamentalist Muslims therefore call for *jihad* (war in accord with Islamic laws) against Israel.

Khomeini in 1979. Since then, the Iranian government claims an Islamic (rather than an Arab) basis for gaining a voice in the disposition of Palestine. Radio Teheran asserts that "Nobody has the right to claim the representation of the Palestinians except the religious commander of the Muslim nation" (i.e., Khomeini). To support this claim, Iranians were sent to Lebanon where, in addition to battling Israel, they spread Iranian ideas to the Shi'is, to inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza, and even to some elements of the PLO.

Although far weaker than the other factions, fundamentalist Islam is fresh, dynamic, and attractive to the young. It approaches Israel with an intransigence like that of the Palestinian separatists—but also with an opportunism that resembles that of the Arab nationalists. Thus, for the war against Iraq major deliveries of American weapons were acquired by Iran through Israel.

A second group with growing importance consists of the Arabs living in Palestine—the residents of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem, and Israel proper—with West Bankers usually leading the way. Increasingly educated, sophisticated, and connected to the outside world, they have made enormous gains in stature since 1967. West Bank notables differ from the PLO in many ways: they are not extremist, not deeply divided on methods, and do not demand Israel's destruction. Having a presence on the ground, they enjoy a legitimacy that may exceed the PLO's and a flexibility greater than Jordan's.

Despite these advantages, the West Bank leaders have until now almost always deferred to the PLO. More and more, however, they do so with impatience. For example, the Gazan leader, Rashad ash-Shawwa, recently told an interviewer that "the PLO should adopt the Palestinian people's opinions and not impose decisions on them." The time may soon come for resident Palestinians to take decisions on their own; when that happens, they will probably emerge as a potent rival to Jordan for Israel's favor.

Egypt

did not annex its Palestinian territory, the Gaza Strip, nor did it reclaim Gaza after losing it in 1967. Gaza did not even come up as an issue during the 1973-79 negotiations when Egypt won back the Sinai Peninsula.

Although it stakes no claim to Palestine, Egypt's leading role in the Arab-Israeli conflict nevertheless makes it worthy of special consideration. Precisely because the Egyptian government does not claim Palestine, it enjoys a freedom of action foreclosed to the PLO, Jordan, and Syria. In theory, it can support any claimant and advocate any ideology. In fact, since Cairo wants neither Jordan nor Syria to expand into Palestine, its choice is narrowed to Arab nationalism or Palestinian separatism. Each implies a particular course of action.

Hoisting the flag of Arab nationalism was a way for Gamal Abdel Nasser to crown himself the leading politician of the Middle East in the early 1950's. Although he devoted less energy to Israel than to inter-Arab matters, the conflict with Israel provided many benefits. It offered him a cause to mobilize Egypt's population, a justification to build up Egypt's military forces, and a pretext to become involved in the internal affairs of other Arab states. It also gave him a means to extract aid from outside powers and a stage on which to achieve personal self-aggrandizement. As a PLO spokesman candidly put it in 1969, Nasser "uses the Palestine cause to suit his own policies."

But the campaign against Israel became counterproductive—failing to arouse the Egyptian populace, exacerbating social tensions, creating large military forces that threatened the civilian politicians' control, driving the government into debt, causing tensions with other Arab states, and inviting intervention by the great powers. In the end, Egypt not only gave up leadership of the Arab nationalist claim, it withdrew from the conflict. Anwar al-Sadat negotiated for return of the Sinai Peninsula; except for a few nominal gestures, his successor Hosni Mubarak has avoided making any Egyptian sacrifices on behalf of the Palestinian issue.

To extricate themselves from an expensive and hopeless cause, Egyptian leaders turned from Arab nationalism to Palestinian separatism—which for them was really a mask for disengagement. As early as the late 60's the PLO realized that Egyptian support was aimed not at destroying Israel but at regaining the Sinai.

These, then, are the Arab claimants to Palestine. In order to see them in comparative perspective, perhaps the first thing to bear in mind is that each of them has a different plan for Palestine. Two of them rather exactly specify borders. For Palestinian separatists, the region at a minimum includes the whole of Palestine as it existed under the British Mandate; not just the West Bank and Gaza Strip but also all of Israel. Maximally, it includes the whole of the Palestine territory as it existed in 1920-21—that is, including Jordan too. The Jordanian government, which agrees with this maximalist view, differs only in calling the territory Jordan and intending to control it all by expanding westward rather than eastward.

Arab nationalists and the Syrian government pay little regard to exact boundaries; however defined, Palestine for them constitutes merely one province of a much larger state. Arab nationalists emphasize that the struggle for Palestine will help break down divisions among existing Arab states. Syrian authorities see the region as part of a Greater Syria.

Another point to remember in looking at the Arab rivals is that some of them derive support from a dream, others from a state apparatus. Palestinian separatists and Arab nationalists (and fundamentalist Muslims) possess ideologies whose appeal transcends geography; the Jordanian and Syrian claims, by contrast, are state-sponsored efforts. Each of these types shows a distinct pattern of political activity, and distinct advantages and disadvantages.

The first two carry a powerful moral weight which wins them support among all Arabs; just as Palestinian separatism appeals to many Jordanians and Syrians, Arab nationalism appeals to many Palestinians. The idealism of these visions attracts many of the brightest and most motivated Arabs; but the absence of reliable state support restricts their influence. No government consistently espouses their doctrines or can be counted on in time of crisis: *raison d'état* always prevails over dreams. The PLO has been abandoned by its sponsors in every crisis—in Jordan in 1970, in Lebanon in 1976, 1982, and 1983. As for Arab nationalism, except for a period under Nasser from 1956 to 1967, it too has lacked the force of arms. Its primary advocate today, Qaddafi of Libya, is a distant reed. In the end, this weakness is probably fatal.

and Damascus put forward the solution most favorable to themselves. But this too entails disadvantages, for *raison d'état* loses every test of popularity. Support for Jordanian and Syrian claims is therefore restricted to those who stand to gain from them. Hence Khalil Wazir, Arafat's deputy, could dismiss PLO members working for organizations under Syrian aegis: "We are not afraid of those people. Their voice does not go beyond the Syrian border." Nonetheless, the advantages of working with an existing state should not be underestimated. "Arafat may have the hearts and minds of the West Bank people," Thomas L. Friedman of the New York *Times* has written, "but King Hussein has their pocketbooks, passports, trade links with the Arab world, bank accounts, and many of their salaries." Assad, who today sponsors more armed Palestinians than does Arafat, also has considerable means at his disposal.

Because Jordanian and Syrian claims to Palestine are hardly recognized outside their own countries, the two governments rarely make their intentions publicly known, disguising them instead under the cover of humanitarian concern for the Palestinians. Jordan has some difficulty with this pretense, having ruled the West Bank in the past and transparently hoping to do so again. But Syrian rulers promote themselves with a great flourish as champions of the Palestinian cause. Damascus lauds the PLO on a daily basis.

The Jordanian and Syrian governments have historically compensated in different ways for the illegitimacy of their claims in Arab circles. Jordan challenges the Palestinian separatists on their own turf, competing for influence and votes on the West Bank and legitimacy in inter-Arab politics. Abdullah and the Mufti were direct rivals, as are Hussein and Arafat. Syria does not compete; it tries to control the Palestinian separatists and to use them for its own ends. The Syrian tactic has been much the smarter; while Hussein is impugned as an obstacle to Palestinian aspirations, Assad presents himself as their champion. (But Hussein may be learning; after his unsuccessful efforts to cooperate with Arafat, he adopted the Syrian practice of sponsoring his own pro-Jordanian Palestinian group in March 1986.)

These efforts by the Syrian and Jordanian governments to seize the mantle of Palestinian separatist legitimacy appear doomed to failure so long as Yasir Arafat heads the PLO. But his passing from the scene could open real opportunities for the two states. Accordingly,

As these differences suggest, the goals of the various Arab claimants are, in the final analysis, incompatible. And that is why competition among them, verbal or physical, has been much more common than cooperation. Palestinian separatists and Jordan have a history of intense rivalry; the Mufti and Abdullah battled through the 1930's and 1940's, and their descendants, Arafat and Hussein, went to war in 1970. Nasser's Pan-Arabism brought him into conflict with all three other contenders for Palestine. The Arab nationalist government of Iraq fought an undercover war to impose its views on the PLO in mid-1978.

But the main conflict of recent years has been between Syria and the Palestinian separatists. Syrian attempts to control Al-Fatah began in the mid-1960's and when Arafat succeeded in throwing of Syrian influence, Damascus responded by founding a new Palestinian organization, As-Sa'iqa. The struggle escalated in 1976, when Syrian forces went into Lebanon to prevent the PLO from dominating that country. In early 1983, Assad helped split the PLO and again sponsored his own Palestinian organizations, which were later grouped together as the Palestine National Salvation Front. With Libyan help, Syria eliminated the last independent PLO bases in Lebanon in late 1983. Since 1985, Syrian-backed Shi'i forces in Beirut have battered the PLO.

The Syrian challenge to the PLO displays many of the underlying themes in inter-Arab politics. It shows, first, the advantages of statehood. For example, in late June 1983, while on Syrian soil, Arafat publicly blamed the mutiny in Fatah on the Syrian government; the next day he was hustled to the Damascus airport and put on a regular scheduled flight to Tunis. Second, the Syrian-PLO dispute illustrates that cooperation among Arab claimants to Palestine is a function of one competitor's becoming unusually strong; at that point the others feel compelled to join together to resist him. Thus, the Success of Syria stimulated the PLO and Jordan, with Egypt's blessing, to initiate negotiations, and prompted the PLO to make common cause with fundamentalist Muslims opposed to the Assad regime. Third, the Syrian-PLO conflict provides a window on the high passions characterizing relations among the Arab claimants. Arafat, for instance, has accused the Syrians of committing a

"prostitute."

Such vituperation bears close attention, for it provides an unusual glimpse into what are probably the candid feelings of the Arab rivals toward each other, feelings normally disguised under professions of brotherhood.

To sum up: among the Arab rivals the PLO enjoys the greatest legitimacy and the widest Arab and international support; it suffers from the most fragile institutions, a lack of consensus, and an incapacity to resist extremism. Arab nationalists have the strength of a dream and the weakness that goes with the absence of state support. Jordan has the favor of Israel and the predominant Western power; but its claim lacks legitimacy among the Arabs. Syria has the same weakness; it tries to make up for it not by developing relations with Israel but by ideological extremism and military strength.

Major military defeats at the hands of Israel—1948-49, 1967, and 1982—have marked the great turning points, discrediting some claims and boosting others. The Palestinian separatist view dominated until Israel's establishment in 1948, after which Nasser's Arab nationalism held first place. The 1967 war propelled Palestinian separatism to the forefront. The PLO's evacuation from Lebanon in 1982 allowed the Syrians to push their claim forward in competition with Jordan.

It is now the Syrian era. Should Damascus fail, none of the traditional claimants is likely to emerge as its successor. Arab nationalism and Palestinian separatism are proven failures, and Jordan has no prospect of winning general Arab approval. This points to the emergence of new forces, the fundamentalist Muslims and the West Bank notables; if either acquires a leading voice, it will mark the first major structural change in the rivalry for Palestine since the 1920's.

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denunciations of Arab leaders who negotiate with Israel, terrorism against Arab diplomats, and the like drive the conflict far more than such factors as Israeli policy on the West Bank or U.S. willingness to sell arms to Saudi Arabia. Ironically, relations between Arab states and Jews have only secondary importance, Israeli-Palestinian relations only tertiary importance. Israel's lack of diplomatic relations with the Arab states matters less than Egypt's.

Inter-Arab rivalry sheds light on many vexing questions of Middle Eastern politics. To begin with, there is no single unit called "the Arabs," at least with reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The perpetual incapacity of the Arabs to unify is a problem not of fractious personalities but of irreconcilable goals. Short of several actors' withdrawing their claims to Palestine, Arab disunity over this issue will continue indefinitely.

Inter-Arab rivalries also help us understand the place of that most elusive institution, the PLO. Several points bear stressing here. As a rule, Arab leaders find it easier to mouth pieties about "Palestinian rights" than to dismiss the Palestinian claim in favor of their own. This is what the Egyptian journalist Muhammad Hasanayn Heikal calls "smothering the PLO with loving caresses." Similarly, the weaker an Arab leader, the more he tends to seek PLO legitimation. Finally, a state's support for Palestinian separatism tends to increase in proportion to the distance between its borders and Israel's.

If the Arab states have their own designs on Israel, it follows that "Palestinian rights" are much less important to the Arab-Israeli conflict than it might appear. Most Arab leaders use the Palestinian cause as a screen behind which to pursue their real aspirations. Not only does this apply to Pan-Arab, Jordanian, and Syrian leaders, but to some extent it even holds for PLO chieftains; they have often been accused, not without reason, of preferring the high life over concrete achievements. According to a Jordanian official, for example, "The PLO isn't a revolution. It's a corporation. After all these years, the paychecks keep coming and life is good. The PLO cares more about preserving its privilege than helping ordinary Palestinians."

This raises the matter of ultimate Arab intentions. The plain fact is that, on the whole, the Arab claimants to Palestine are not eager for the Arab-Israeli conflict to end quickly; each would rather see Israel than one of its rivals occupying the West Bank and Gaza. Israeli

better to sniff the dung of France for a while than to eat China's all our lives." Better, then, for the contest to go on: should one Arab claimant come to possess Palestine, three others would lose. At that point, the benefits of conflict—a means to mobilize populations, make demands on other Arab states, and play a world role—would be forfeited.

The rivalry fuels the conflict, the conflict provides a cover for the rivalry. The confrontation with Israel thus continues even despite the attempt of several Arab parties to end it by accommodating Israel's existence. Indeed, the sheer quantity of the participants acts to prolong the conflict and prohibits a lasting peace. (In this respect the conflict fits a recognized pattern. In Europe, too, as Geoffrey Blainey has shown, wars involving greater numbers of powers have historically lasted longer than those among only two or three nations.) The Arab nationalist claim weakened after 1967, only to have its mantle passed to the Palestinian separatists. Egypt pulled out in the 1970's, but its place was filled by Syria. Fundamentalist Muslims and West Bankers wait in the wings. When Arafat moves toward a political resolution, other Palestinian groups fill the void, and the level of violence does not diminish.

Resolution awaits a whittling-down of Arab positions. Although there is no prospect of this occurring soon, any reduction in the multiplicity of Arab claims to Palestine could signal a beginning of the end of the conflict with Israel. Needless to say, a solution would be much closer if Jordan or the West Bankers inherited the claim, and much further should it be the fundamentalists, the PLO, or the Syrian government.

The protracted inter-Arab struggle has momentous policy implications for non-Arab actors. For Israel, it questions the desirability of the traditional effort to promote discord among the Arabs. While tactically useful in the short term, this has the effect of preventing movement toward a resolution of the problem. It might usefully be replaced with an approach that reduces the number of Arab claimants by favoring moderate Arabs (Jordan and the residents of the West Bank) over extremists (the PLO, the Pan-Arabists, Syria, and the fundamentalists).

proper regard to the inter-Arab struggle. This points to a reversal of conventional thinking, focusing first on Arab-Arab relations and only then on Arab-Israeli relations. Resolution or diminution of the inter-Arab dispute is a necessary precondition to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict; to reverse the order is to begin with the end of the process.

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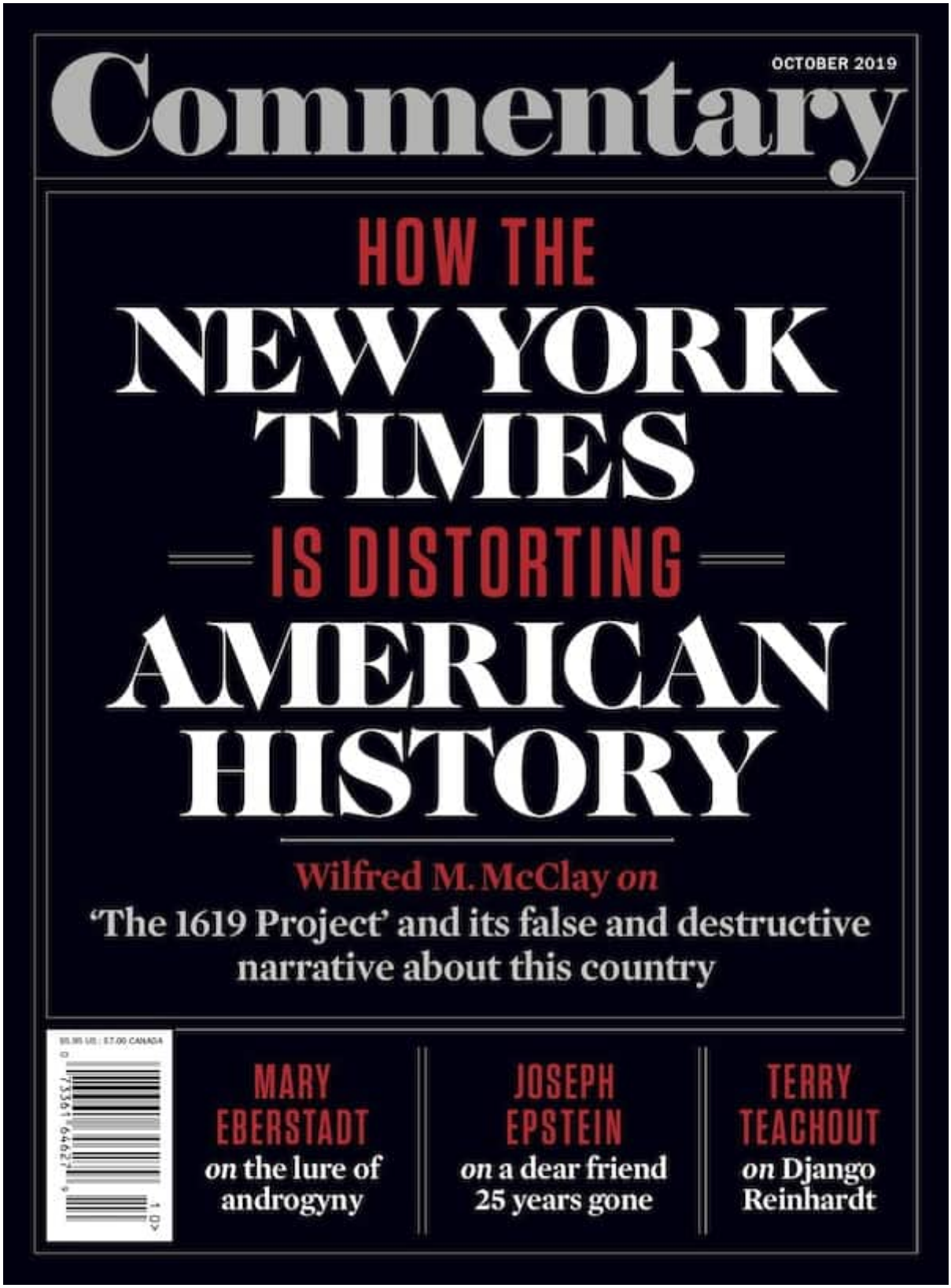
[1] Although usually unwilling to publicize its claim to Palestine, for fear of adverse Arab response, the Jordanian government does so when it feels particularly confident. Thus, in 1949 a Jordanian stamp was issued with a portrait of Abdullah next to the words "The Hashemite Kingdom of the Jordan" and "Palestine"; fifteen years later, Hussein even more audaciously pictured himself on a stamp and next to him a map showing Jordan stretched from its present borders to the Mediterranean Sea.

[2] "Palestine for the Syrians?" COMMENTARY, December 1986.

Daniel Pipes

Daniel Pipes (DanielPipes.org, @DanielPipes), president of the Middle East Forum, has researched immigration and Islam in ten European countries during the past year.



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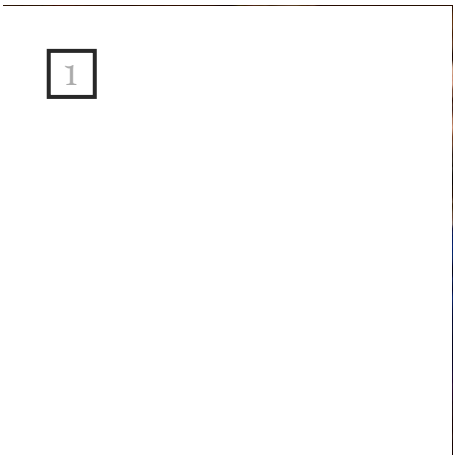

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