

Conference Paper

## **The Palestinians, the Arab States and Israel**

By Zachary Lockman

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As an historian rather than a political scientist or an international relations specialist, I feel compelled to begin with some history, to set the stage for a look at the current situation and to try to think about what may lie ahead.

The struggle for Palestine first emerged as a significant issue in the neighboring Arab countries and the wider Arab world in the second half of the 1930s, largely as a consequence of the 1936-1939 Palestinian Arab revolt against the Zionist project and British colonial rule which protected and fostered it. There was by that time widespread sympathy in the Arab world for the Palestinian cause, especially as other Arab peoples were in that same period engaged in their own anticolonial struggles and regarded the project to achieve a Jewish majority and Jewish state in Palestine – and British support for that project – as a gross injustice. During the revolt several Arab governments sought to mediate between the Palestinian Arab nationalist leadership and the British authorities, with no great success, and ultimately the British crushed the revolt by military means (assisted by divisions among the Palestinians themselves). At that point, in 1939, with war looming in Europe, Britain felt it necessary to conciliate Arab opinion within Palestine and outside it by declaring that it had now fulfilled its commitment (set forth in the Balfour Declaration and the mandate) to foster the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish “national home” and that an undivided Palestine would be granted independence in ten years, with a government in which Arabs and Jews would share power. Restrictions were also imposed on Jewish land purchases and Jewish immigration (so that Jews would not exceed one-third of Palestine’s population).

When the struggle for control of Palestine resumed toward the end of the Second World War, the Arab states again became involved with the Palestine issue, initially on the diplomatic front. However, neither the Arab states nor the Palestinian nationalist leadership were effective at combating the campaign launched by the Zionist movement to open Palestine to large-scale Jewish immigration (by Holocaust survivors) and, ultimately, to make Palestine ungovernable unless Zionist demands were met. Nor were they able to block the adoption by the UN General Assembly, in November 1947, of a resolution endorsing the plan to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. Though they vehemently rejected partition as a violation of the right of Palestine’s Arab majority to self-determination in an undivided Palestine, the Arab states largely stayed out of the fighting that ensued within Palestine between Zionist and Palestinian militias (with some aid from Arab volunteer forces), from the end of November 1947 to mid-May 1948. By the end of that period the Palestinian militias were increasingly on the defensive and Jewish military forces were expanding ever more deeply into parts of Palestine that the UN partition plan had assigned to the future Arab state; the defeat of the Palestinians seemed imminent, and waves of refugees and expellees were already streaming out of the conflict zones. The Arab League prepared for military intervention, and on May 15, 1948 – a day after the Zionist leadership had proclaimed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine – regular Arab military forces, nominally operating under Arab League auspices, entered Palestine to prevent partition and rescue the Palestinians.

In a series of brief but intense campaigns, the new Israeli army defeated the Arab forces, which were outnumbered, largely uncoordinated, and often poorly led and badly equipped. It was already evident that at least some of the Arab states that intervened in Palestine had conflicting political agendas, which undermined their military efforts and contributed to their defeat. The armistice agreements that ended the fighting in early 1949 left Israel in control of some 77% of mandatory Palestine, instead of the 55% assigned to the Jewish state by the UN partition plan. Transjordan (soon renamed Jordan) proceeded to annex the central hill country of Palestine, which it had occupied during the war and which now came to be called the West Bank, along with the eastern half of Jerusalem; the coastal strip from a bit north of the town of Gaza south to the Egyptian border, occupied during the war by Egyptian forces, remained under Egyptian administration, though Egypt always insisted that this new “Gaza Strip” was still part of Palestine.

The humiliating defeat in Palestine sent shock waves through the Arab East and played an important role in discrediting the regimes deemed responsible for this failure. In the aftermath of the war the Arab governments refused to negotiate peace with Israel unless Israel agreed, at a minimum, to allow the 750,000 Palestinians who in 1947-49 had fled or been driven from their homes in the parts of Palestine that became Israel to return; this Israel refused to do. (King Abdullah of Jordan, whose longstanding tacit alliance with the Zionist movement and then Israel had enabled him to add the West Bank to his domain, had no such qualms; but his effort to secretly negotiate a peace treaty with Israel was cut short by his assassination in 1951.) Yet while the Arab governments continued to insist that the dispossession of the Palestinians was an intolerable injustice that must be reversed, they did little about it. For the most part they were preoccupied with issues closer to home. Even the Free Officers who seized power in Egypt in 1952 – a good number of whom had actually fought in Palestine in 1948-1949 – sought at first to keep the Palestine issue on the back burner as they focused on consolidating their power, getting the British out of Egypt at long last, and carrying out their program of political and socioeconomic reform.

Then as later, however, the Palestine issue had a way of persistently resurfacing on the Arab agenda, as evidenced by the rising tensions along the borders of Gaza and a series of Israeli military raids that in 1955 finally led the Nasser government to reverse course and embrace (rather than try to suppress) the Palestinian *fida'iyyin*. This (along with Nasser's turn to the Soviet bloc for weapons and Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal) set the stage of the Israeli-British-French attack on Egypt in October-November 1956. U.S. and Soviet intervention forced the British and French, and later the Israelis, to withdraw, and Nasser was thus able to snatch political victory from the jaws of military defeat. However, in the aftermath of 1956, even though Nasser's regime was increasingly pan-Arab in its orientation and called for the eventual liberation of Palestine through Arab unity and social transformation (“Arab socialism”), Egypt's borders with Israel remained quiet.

The emergence in the late 1950s and early 1960s of groups (most importantly Fatah) that would coalesce into a new independent Palestinian nationalist movement threatened to undermine the post-1956 status quo, especially as the new wave of Palestinian militants hoped to liberate Palestine by waging a protracted guerrilla war against Israel. Some of these groups were at times supported by one or another Arab regime (especially Ba'thist-ruled Syria), out of pan-Arab solidarity but also to gain advantage in the often bitter (and sometimes bloody) rivalries and conflicts that deeply divided the Arab states in that period. For his part, Nasser feared that independent Palestinian action might drag Egypt and other Arab states into a military confrontation with Israel for which they were unprepared. The establishment under Arab League auspices of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964 was therefore widely perceived as a way of containing the new wave of Palestinian militancy by subordinating it to Nasser's political agenda. Then as later (and down to the present), there was thus a clear disjuncture between the official support which all Arab regimes voiced for the Palestinian cause, on the one hand, and on the other the priority each gave to what it perceived as its country's own national interests, which often meant sacrificing, subordinating or sidelining Palestinian interests, or exploiting the Palestine issue to enhance its position in relation to rival Arab states as well as its support and legitimacy at home.

The raids into Israel which Fatah and other groups launched, while militarily ineffective, did contribute to rising tensions, especially between Israel and Syria, and helped set the stage for the crisis that led to the June 1967 war. The outcome of that war – the conquest by Israel of the remainder of historic Palestine (along with Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Syria's Golan Heights) – was a humiliating defeat for Egypt, Syria and Jordan. In the aftermath of the war Fatah and the other Palestinian guerrilla groups seized control of the PLO and eventually secured Arab and international recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Recognition and support from Arab regimes often came at a price, however: for example, the PLO's reliance on funding from the governments of socially and politically conservative states (including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf principalities) that were closely aligned with the United States would have a significant impact on the PLO's own politics, agenda and goals. And the PLO frequently became involved in the conflicts that divided the Arab states (and their local allies and proxies) into mutually hostile camps, which further undermined its room for maneuver and ability to pursue its own agenda. It could also be argued that, even given the often adverse circumstances and limited options facing the Palestinians, the PLO leadership made more than its fair share of poor strategic and tactical decisions and failed to develop or implement a consistent and realistic strategy that had a reasonable chance of achieving its goals. It is also worth noting that in the 1990s, with the disappearance of the Soviet bloc and the decline of other international forces that in the 1970s and 1980s had somewhat offset US global hegemony, the Palestinians were deprived of a key source of political, moral and material support.

The PLO never posed a serious military threat to Israel, nor was it strong enough to secure a political settlement that fully recognized Palestinian rights; but the PLO was often able to deter the Arab regimes from reaching an accommodation with Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. The big exception to this was of course Anwar Sadat's separate peace treaty with Israel, signed in 1981, which provided only for meaningless talks (soon abandoned) about autonomy for the Palestinians under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza and which was therefore rejected by the PLO and the other Arab states. Widespread public solidarity with the Palestinians in the Arab world, and Arab ruling elites' fear of Israeli regional hegemony, meant that nearly all Arab governments (including even Egypt's) continued to voice support for the Palestinian cause; but as noted earlier, those governments consistently put their own interests first. And they were prepared to take on the PLO (often by funding and controlling unrepresentative splinter groups) and/or try to divide the Palestinians if they deemed it expedient; Syria's interventions in Lebanon and beyond in the 1970s and 1980s are a case in point. It is also noteworthy that the Arab states essentially stood by and did nothing in 1982 as the Israelis besieged an Arab capital (Beirut) and succeeded in forcing the PLO out of what had been its headquarters for more than a decade.

In the wake of the Oslo Accords, it has been clear that many Arab states are more than ready for a deal with Israel, assuming they can get what they want, even if that deal does not involve a settlement that secures some reasonable measure of Palestinian rights. After the Oslo Accords Jordan quickly signed a peace treaty with Israel, and it seems likely that Syria too would make a deal with Israel if it could thereby get back every square inch of its occupied territory (just as Sadat got back all of the Sinai), even if such a deal left the Palestinians in the lurch. Perhaps the most egregious current example of the cynical attitude of the Arab governments toward the Palestinians is the Mubarak regime's ongoing complicity with Israel in enforcing the blockade of Gaza, motivated by its hostility to Hamas (which has dominated Gaza since 2006) and its anxiety to thwart schemes to dump Gaza into Egypt's lap. There is widespread anger among Egyptians at this policy and much sympathy for the people of Gaza, especially after the devastating Israeli assault of December 2008-January 2009; but like nearly all the Arab states, Egypt is under the tight control of a highly repressive authoritarian regime, and its ruling elite apparently feels that it can ignore (and if necessary suppress) public opinion.

In general, the Arab governments have proven ineffective in helping the Palestinians pursue their national agenda, whether because of their own struggles for hegemony (or at least advantage) within the Arab state

system, their perception of their national interests, their links to (and often dependence on) the United States, their preoccupations with other issues (including remaining in power by any means necessary), their conservatism and sociopolitical stasis, and so on. It has long been clear that none of the Arab states, or even all of them combined, pose any significant military threat to Israel; their ability to deter Israel from doing more or less what it wishes is thus minimal. Moreover, even as the Arab states have adopted an increasingly conciliatory stance toward Israel and made clear their readiness for peace, Israel has adopted increasingly hard-line positions, leaving Saudi Arabia, Egypt and their allies looking toothless and irrelevant. Nor have the Arab clients of the United States had any success in weakening the US-Israeli “special relationship,” or in getting the United States to pressure Israel to negotiate in good faith or even to freeze settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem – the pathetically minimal fig-leaf that the Palestinian Authority now needs as cover for resuming negotiations with Israel.

This would seem to be, sadly, a record of near-total failure, one that suggests that the Palestinians should expect very little from the Arab states in terms of effective support. Nor do the policies historically and currently pursued by the Arab states toward the Palestinian refugees who live within them make that record look much better. The status and rights of the refugees has varied a great deal from country to country, but since the expulsion of the PLO from Jordan and later from Lebanon, the refugee communities outside of historic Palestine have been unable to play the vanguard role that Palestinian revolutionaries once envisioned for them and remain subordinated minorities, or worse.

People of Palestinian origin today make up close to one-half of Jordan’s population, and less than a fifth of them still live in refugee camps; but though they are legally full citizens of Jordan, the Hashemite regime has consistently foregrounded the East Bank dimension of the country’s identity and (in part to combat right-wing Israeli claims that “Jordan is Palestine”) has sought to downplay or suppress the “Palestinian-ness” of much of its population. The Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have generally been marginalized and excluded from the country’s economic, social and political life, and kept under tight control; those in Syria have enjoyed greater rights to participate in social and economic life but they too are under tight political control. The smaller Palestinian communities in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and elsewhere are often treated as unwelcome guests. Kuwait, which once hosted a large and thriving Palestinian community (Palestinians constituted almost a third of the country’s population), expelled most of its Palestinians after Yasir Arafat aligned the PLO with Iraq following Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait; Palestinians are now c. 3 percent of Kuwait’s population.

Given this, it is not surprising that from the late 1980s the focus of nationalist activism shifted to the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, who (as the first intifada dramatically demonstrated) still retained the capacity for sustained resistance at a moment when the PLO was weak and isolated. Yet in many respects the Oslo process and its aftermath have left the Palestinians in a worse position than they were in previously: the Palestinian people as a whole is more grievously fragmented than at any point in the last several decades; Gaza, under the control of Hamas, has been isolated, blockaded and bombarded, with horrific consequences for its people; and in the West Bank the Palestinian Authority exercises the kind of limited autonomy (over only part of that territory) that the PLO vehemently rejected in the 1970s and 1980s as an unacceptable neocolonial alternative to outright Israeli occupation. Negotiations brokered by Egypt to overcome the divisions between Fatah and Hamas have so far not succeeded; the Saudi-led Arab peace initiative seems to have fallen upon deaf ears in Israel and the United States; and the prospect of a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza recedes ever further into the distance, as the Israeli settlement project is implanted ever more broadly and deeply in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the Israeli policy of fragmenting the Palestinians and keeping them subordinated advances, and the philosophy embodied in the “separation wall” reigns supreme.

As a result the balance of forces in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are currently very much in Israel’s favor, at a time when that country’s government is one of the most hard-line in the country’s history. In this context it is difficult to understand why so much time and energy has been devoted to trying to restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations: given the stance of the Netanyahu government, there would not seem to be anything to negotiate

about. The Labor Party offers no serious political alternative to the Likud and its allies on the right; it seems doomed to fade away gradually because of its failures and inadequacies. Its current leader Ehud Barak, while not all that popular within Labor's ranks, is skilled at holding on to power and has no trouble working with Netanyahu and the right or with implementing their policies (which are largely his as well). The main opposition party, Kadima, has positioned itself as the party of peace and sanity, claiming the mantle that Labor once claimed; but when in power it too failed to reach an accommodation with the Palestinian Authority, and its military adventures against Hizbullah in the summer of 2006 and against Hamas in the winter of 2008-2009 suggest that its leadership lacks a sense of what actually needs to happen if negotiations are to have some chance of success. In any case, Kadima does not have much ability to influence the course of Israeli politics at the moment, nor is it clear that it has much political staying-power for the long run.

Many, perhaps most, Israelis may still in principle favor (or profess to be able to live with) some version of a two-state solution, though not necessarily a version that would be minimally acceptable to the Palestinians; but actually making that happen would require serious U.S. pressure on Israel as well as major struggles within the Israeli political system whose outcome is difficult to predict. The fact is that as long as the costs of the status quo are so low for Israelis, and as long as Israel enjoys the apparently unequivocal backing of the United States, there is little reason for or prospect of any significant change in Israeli-Jewish sentiment or policy.

Meanwhile, the efforts of the Obama administration to restart Israeli-Palestinian talks have so far been inadequate, even bungling; hard as it may be to believe, the Obama administration's diplomacy on this front thus far has made the Bush administration look competent and serious. Many Israelis – and the Netanyahu government – were nervous in the early months of the Obama administration, for fear that Obama would put pressure on Israel to agree to a serious settlement freeze and serious negotiations. But after a few feeble and poorly coordinated efforts the United States essentially gave up, allowing Netanyahu to engage in a game at which the Israelis are well-practiced: a partial and time-limited – indeed, purely cosmetic – “freeze” on new construction in the West Bank only (i.e. not including East Jerusalem, where an aggressive campaign of Judaization is under way, with government support). This abandonment of any serious effort to restart negotiations has left the Palestinian Authority looking pathetic and Obama looking weak. Some elements in the Israeli government now talk of a deal with Syria; but it seems doubtful that the political will exists to do what it would take to achieve that, i.e. a complete Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 Israeli-Syrian border.

It seems clear that only sustained, serious U.S. pressure on Israel to negotiate seriously is likely to yield results, and the prospect of that happening any time soon seems as far away as ever. The Obama administration seems to have concluded that it cannot waste much political capital on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which should now be relegated to the back burner. This stance strengthens those elements within Israel which reject a two-state solution (which the United States officially supports) – though in any case it is hard to imagine how such a solution could be realized at this late date, given the situation on the ground and the extreme fragmentation to which the Palestinians have been subjected. Palestinian fears that any West Bank “state” to which Israel is likely to agree would be in reality some kind of Bantustan seem well justified.

What does all this add up to? Sixty or so years after 1948, the Palestinians within historic Palestine and outside it face a very grim situation. The prospects for a two-state solution seem very dim for the foreseeable future, but various alternatives – for example, the “one-state” idea, a unitary Arab-Jewish state encompassing all of historic Palestine – are even less likely to be realized, or even to gain much traction. It is not impossible that some dramatic change in the region – for example, a change of regime in a key Arab country – might alter the regional balance of forces and compel the United States to seriously invest in promoting a negotiated settlement, which would require putting serious and sustained pressure on Israel; but no such change seems imminent, or even all that likely. It is perhaps more likely that there will be an explosion on the ground in the West Bank and/or East Jerusalem, over continuing Israeli repression and settler encroachment, and this too might affect the trajectory of the conflict. Ongoing popular struggles in West Bank villages like Bil'in and Ni'lin

against the separation wall have been seen by some as offering a potentially more effective new method of struggle against the occupation, but despite the sustained courage and determination of those engaged in these struggles, it is important to remember that they are locally focused – i.e., against the routing of the separation wall and its impact on their communities – and it is not clear how their example might be scaled up into a model for widespread popular mobilization against the occupation and for a Palestinian state, especially given the lack of a unified national leadership with a coherent strategy.

Neither the Arab states nor the United States nor the European Union nor the UN have the need or the capacity to break out of the current impasse, at least as things stand now; and for most Israelis the status quo is just fine. If something is to change, it may well have to be the Palestinians within historic Palestine – in the West Bank and Gaza, obviously, but also (perhaps especially?) those within Israel, who occupy a potentially strategic (and complex) location that merits much more attention and analysis – who, somehow, find a way to move beyond the current conjuncture and change the contours and trajectory of this conflict.