

# AU REVOIR, PALESTINE

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Eric Rozenman

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**W**ho killed Palestine? The answer to this question, asked by journalists, analysts and Palestinian Arabs after Hamas purged Fatah from the Gaza Strip this past June, is “no one.” If by “Palestine” one meant an Arab state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with eastern Jerusalem as its capital, democratic and at peace with Israel—the vision articulated by President George W. Bush back in 2002—it was already dead.

A strong case can be made that Arab rejection of successive proposals to partition the land west of the Jordan River into two states, one Arab, one Jewish, meant “Palestine” was stillborn in 1937, when Arab leaders first dismissed a British “two-state solution.” The region’s Arab states (and the leadership of the Palestinians) would reject subsequent United Nations, American, Israeli, European and Jordanian initiatives either offering a “two-state” settlement (like the 1947 UN partition plan) or processes with the potential to lead to two states (like the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli treaty and its Palestinian autonomy provisions). Diplomatic apparitions, variations on this “solution”—including West Bank and Gaza federation or confederation with Jordan, and even an Israeli-Jordanian condominium occupied by autonomous Palestinians—were conjured up in 1985, 1993, 2000, 2001 and 2003, as part of repeated efforts to secure that most illusive of Middle Eastern mirages: an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

ERIC ROZENMAN has written for *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, *Middle East Quarterly*, *Policy Review*, and other publications. He is Washington director of CAMERA—the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America. CAMERA is a news media watchdog; it does not advocate policy and is politically non-partisan. Opinions expressed above are solely those of the author.



But no more. *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bret Stephens, writing in the aftermath of Hamas' hostile takeover, put it this way: "Nothing has so soured the world on the idea of Palestine as experience with it."<sup>1</sup> Though Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Jordanian King Abdullah II and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met and "threw rose petals at [Palestinian Authority President and Fatah leader Mahmoud] Abbas' feet," Stephens wrote, "the potentates of the Middle East will not midwife into existence a state the chief political movement of which has claims to both democratic and Islamist legitimacy. The United States and Israel will never bless Hamastan (even if the EU and the UN come around to it) and they can only do so much for the feckless Abbas." This means, according to Stephens, that "'Palestine' as we know it today, will revert to what it was—shadow land between Israel and its neighbors—and Palestinians, as we know them today, will revert to who they were: Arabs."

Some Palestinian Arabs themselves seem to concur. "What has come to pass in Gaza is embarrassing and shameful," says Rashid Khalidi, director of Columbia University's Middle East Institute. "You may be seeing the collapse of the Palestinian national movement. It might take us back an entire generation."<sup>2</sup>

Or even farther. After all, the most conspicuous thing about the "Palestinian national movement" throughout the years has been the glaring lack of one. PLO executive committee member Zahir Muhsein once told an interviewer for a Dutch newspaper that "the creation of a Palestinian state is only a means for continuing our struggle against the state of Israel for our Arab unity. In reality today there is no difference between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese."<sup>3</sup>

Muhsein's point was not original. The First Congress of Muslim-Christian Associations in Jerusalem in 1919, convened to choose delegates to the Paris Peace Conference, had declared that "we consider Palestine as part of Arab Syria, as it has never been separated from it at any time. We are connected with it by national, religious, linguistic, natural, economic, and geographic bonds."<sup>4</sup>

In 1947, when the UN was discussing the second partition of Mandatory Palestine, the Arab Higher Committee informed the General Assembly that "Palestine was part of the province of Syria" and "politically, the Arabs of Palestine were not independent in the sense of forming a separate political identity."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, if "Palestine" was dead, or never really animate, long before the Hamas-Fatah struggle, it was because Palestinian Arab elites did not want it. As *The New Republic's* Martin Peretz has observed, from the Palestinian aristocracy "that sold off its lands for Jewish settlement from the very beginning of the Zionist experiment" to the post-disengagement destruction of productive Gaza Strip greenhouses built by Israeli settlers, "though almost no Arab wanted Jewish sovereignty in any of Palestine, virtually no Arab seemed to crave Arab sovereignty, either."<sup>6</sup> Certainly not Arab leadership between 1948 and 1967, when Jordan occupied Judea and Samaria and renamed it the West Bank, and Egypt controlled the Gaza Strip, and barely a word was heard about a "two-state solution" including "Palestine."

## Ends and means

Truth be told, although the usual news media, academic and diplomatic suspects were surprised by Hamas' purge and the blow it dealt

to the idea of a two-state “Palestine,” President Bush’s vision already had been fading fast. In his precedent-setting June 24, 2002 speech, the president anticipated the establishment of a West Bank and Gaza Strip polity—democratic and at peace with Israel, with leaders untainted by terrorism—by the end of 2005. Later, 2007 became the target. After his reelection in 2004, Bush forecast “Palestine” in 2009. But after meeting with Palestinian Authority President Abbas at the White House in October 2005, the president said only that he still advocated such a solution and would work for it in office or out. In his July 16, 2007, speech returning to the “two-state solution,” Bush did not specify a timeline for establishing “Palestine.” As Israeli commentator Nahum Barnea noted, “Comparison of the [2002 and 2007] speeches shows that peace in the Middle East is similar to the horizon: The closer we come to it the more it slips away.”<sup>7</sup>

In backing off a date, Bush tacitly confirmed what German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer had said in condemning a Palestinian terrorist attack in Netanya on July 12, 2005. Back then, the dovish Fischer—himself certainly no friend of Israel—had declared that “terrorism will have no positive results, and there will be no chance to establish an independent Palestinian state as long as violence and terrorism continue.”<sup>8</sup>

Abbas, for his part, hardly sounded like one who saw Palestine looming. In a televised speech in November 2005, he said, “A free and independent state is not beyond the realms of possibility, even if it is late in seeing the light of day.” Sometimes late means never, and Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz had hinted as much a couple of years earlier. “The

period of time it will take until the Palestinians achieve statehood, if they ever do, is a long way off.”<sup>9</sup>

Though Hamas-Fatah fighting may have pushed the “two-state solution” over the precipice, none of the events upon which proponents of a Palestinian state had counted—the death of Yasser Arafat, Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, or even the endorsement by Olmert’s Kadima Party of a “two-state solution”—had actually brought “Palestine” closer. That is because such a state is not the *raison d’être* of Palestinian nationalism in either its secular or religious guise. Rather, the movement’s reason for being remains the destruction of the Jewish state.

The second *intifada* had begun in September 2000 after Arafat, with Abbas at his side, rejected an Israeli-U.S. offer of a West Bank and Gaza Strip with eastern Jerusalem as its capital, in exchange for peace. The Palestinian side refused to drop the “right of return” for millions of putative “refugees” and much-multiplied generations of descendants or to concede claims in Israel beyond eastern Jerusalem. This rejection disabused some Israelis sympathetic to Palestinian woes of the “new paradigm” invoked on behalf of the 1993-1998 Oslo process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

During the Oslo years, many Israelis, their U.S. backers and others had termed outmoded the inconvenient fact that the PLO was founded in 1964—three years before the Jewish state gained the territories—in order to “liberate” what was then Israel. Achieving and managing a West Bank and Gaza Strip state was supposed to blunt Palestinian nationalism’s anti-Israel motivation (just as Hamas’ legislative election victory and then the “unity govern-

ment” with Fatah were supposed to blunt the movement’s rejection of Israel on Islamic grounds). Thus, Israelis and Americans condescendingly described the Arabs’ multiple rejections of the “two-state solution” as examples of the late Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban’s famous adage that the Arabs “never miss[ed] an opportunity to miss an opportunity.” But these alleged missed opportunities were such only if the Palestinians’ goal was a West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestine coexisting with Israel.

If their strategic objective was and remains the elimination of the Jewish state, however, then those “opportunities” were traps. By rejecting them, even at the cost of short- and mid-term economic losses and significant casualties, Palestinian Arabs were upholding the central tenet of their national movement, of their Palestinian identity. That is, “Judaea delenda est,” to borrow from Cato’s perennial pledge against Carthage—Israel must be destroyed. In that case, Arafat was not being foolish and shortsighted, but principled and consistent. As he once told a Venezuelan newspaper, “Peace for us means the destruction of Israel. We are preparing for an all-out war which will last for generations.... We shall not rest until the day we return to our home, and until we destroy Israel....”<sup>10</sup> Twenty-five years later, the Palestinian leadership—now the head of what many believed was a Palestinian state-in-waiting, had not changed its views significantly. In his 2005 presidential campaign, Arafat’s successor, Mahmoud Abbas, criticized the “militarization” of the second *intifada* not as illegal or immoral but as ineffective under current circumstances. And he, like Arafat before him, pledged not to waver on the “right of return.”

Today, for all their apparent dif-

ferences in style, Hamas and Fatah don’t differ that much in substance. The latter recognizes Israel as a negotiating partner from whom serial concessions are demanded. Hamas spokesmen have conceded that the Jewish state currently exists, and some intimate that a long-term truce might be possible. But neither accepts Israel’s legitimacy.

All of which goes a long way toward explaining the current, sorry state of the Palestinian Authority—a disarray for which both groups bear responsibility. If the end goal is not cohabitation but confrontation, then building civic institutions, economic prosperity and the foundation of civil society holds little intrinsic appeal. Raising and arming various militias with which to battle each other and Israel, conducting anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic incitement among the Palestinian population, and psychological warfare against Israel next door and throughout the West, however, does.

### **Provocative weakness**

For Israel, and by extension for the United States, these realities have real consequences. Moshe Ya’alon, the former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces, has emphasized that the steady handover of territory to an adversary committed to Israel’s eradication is not a sustainable strategy. Rather, Ya’alon says, as paraphrased by an American Jewish newspaper, that “the Palestinian leadership, whether Hamas or Fatah, still strives to destroy Israel. Only when Palestinians give up the dream of reclaiming their pre-1948 communities inside Israel and recognize Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state will peace be possible. Until then, Israel must show strength... not reward terrorists or expose the country’s volatile eastern border to attacks by withdrawing. It

will take at least a generation—probably more—for the Palestinian society to ripen for peace negotiations.”<sup>11</sup>

Last summer’s Israeli-Hezbollah war reinforced Ya’alon’s thesis. Largely inaccurate rocket fire nevertheless rendered normal daily life in much of northern Israel temporarily impossible. More recently, smaller barrages from Gaza have caused one-third of the population of the southern Israeli town of Sderot (24,000) to leave. A massive barrage easily overflying Israel’s West Bank security barrier into greater Tel Aviv, in synchronization with attacks from Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and perhaps across the Golan from Syria, might provoke a general Middle East war.

Forty years may have passed since the Six-Day War, but certain fundamental things remain the same:

1. The strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River rarely exceeds 45 miles in width. So too the airspace above it, meaning Israeli military aircraft must train by flying north and south, then banking westward over the Mediterranean to turn around, to avoid crossing into Syrian or Jordanian airspace.
2. Both the Jewish and Arab population is distributed largely on the western half, the seaward-facing slopes of the Samaritan hills and coastal plain. So are important groundwater aquifers.
3. The Jordan rift valley, with only a few roads leading up and west through choke points toward Israel’s population centers, puts the Jewish state’s natural defense barrier on the far side of the Palestinians.

That is why, when the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff examined Israel’s requirements for minimum strategic defense in the absence of peace, shortly after the Six-Day War, they recommended to the Johnson administration that Israel retain the western slopes of the hill country of Samaria and Judea, not to mention the Golan Heights, Gaza Strip, and Sinai Peninsula.<sup>12</sup> After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the U.S. Army reviewed Israel’s minimum defense in depth requirements, and Col. Irving Kett, the head of the study, came to the same conclusion the Joint Chiefs had reached six years earlier.

Retaining Gaza and as much of the West Bank as the U.S. recommended precluded a separate Palestinian state. To square the circle of attaining minimum strategic depth without annexing large numbers of Arabs, Israeli strategic thinking coalesced around the ideas of former chief of staff, then foreign minister, Yigal Allon. The “Allon plan” appeared in English in a 1976 *Foreign Affairs* essay. It proposed, among other things:

1. Annexing the Jordan Valley;
2. “thickening” Israel’s 9-mile-wide coastal waist north of Tel Aviv and likewise broadening the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem corridor, only five miles wide just west of the capital;
3. annexing the Gush Etzion bloc adjacent south and west of Jerusalem; and
4. separating Gaza from Egypt with a strip of new Israeli territory.

Instead of becoming a Palestinian state—which no leaders in Washington, Jerusalem, Cairo or Amman were



calling for—the majority of the West Bank and most of its Arab residents would be returned to Jordan, the majority of the Gaza Strip to Egypt.

Allon's vision was meant to end Israel's topographic/demographic nightmare. Abba Eban, like Allon a Labor Party luminary and leading dove, put it this way in a 1969 interview with a West German magazine: "We have openly said that the map will never again be the same as on June 4, 1967. For us, this is a matter of security and of principles. The June map is for us equivalent to insecurity and danger."<sup>13</sup>

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Until the advent of the "peace process," this principle was enshrined in Israeli policy. During his 1974–1977 term as Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin—like Eban—insisted that Israel would never retreat to the vulnerable June 1967 lines. Competing against Shimon Peres for Labor Party leadership in 1980, Rabin repeated that vow. In 1992, he campaigned

successfully on Allon plan essentials regarding the Golan Heights, Jordan Valley, Gush Etzion and Jerusalem.

Oslo, however, changed everything. In a 1992 Knesset address, Rabin stressed that with the Cold War over, Israel's American ally triumphant and the Arabs' Soviet patron gone, the Israelis and Palestinians had to jump on the international peace train before it left the station. In short, there was among Israelis and their U.S. backers, in Prof. Ruth Wisse's diagnosis—made in a Washington, D.C., talk attended by this author not long after the 1993 Rabin-Arafat handshake at the White House—"an epidemic of hope." Those stricken did not so much update the old security consensus as declare it passé. Surely Francis Fukuyama's "end of history," with Western-style democracy soon to be triumphant everywhere, or everywhere that counted, would include the West Bank and Gaza.

Over the past decade-and-a-half, in their self-destructive rejection of Israel (or what they saw as principled "resistance" to it), the Palestinian leadership, Hamas or Fatah, has done much to vindicate another view. It is that of Samuel Huntington, whose *Clash of Civilizations* noted about the same time as Fukuyama's *The End of History* the worldwide resurgence of religion as a prime factor of identity, and of the ability of "indigenous" leaders to use "modernization" to defeat "Westernization." Hamas and Hezbollah chiefs, among others, use this ability to gain democratic legitimacy while obstructing Western visions of democracy and peace growing hand-in-hand.

Gone too is the faulty assumption made by security-minded proponents of a two-state solution, who in their day asserted that even if a West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestine remained anti-Zionist, it would be demilitarized.

That illusion died quickly; by early in this decade, the Palestinian Authority hosted an estimated 85,000 armed men—40,000 lightly armed police, plus criminal gangs, terrorists, and those who moved between two or all three categories. Things only have gotten worse, as Hamas' ability to import money from Saudi Arabia, know-how from Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, and weaponry through Egypt, has demonstrated.

### **Reviving the “Jordanian option”**

Where does all this leave Israel? With the failure of Oslo, the crumbling of Fatah, the rise of Hamas, Middle Eastern Sunni leaders increasingly concerned about growing Shi'ite power, and America tied down in Iraq, Jerusalem finds itself at a pivotal moment.

The longer Israel hesitates in defeating the Palestinian nationalism of Fatah, and that of its theocratic half-brother, Hamas, the more Israel's legitimacy may be undermined, and not only in Western Europe and American faculty clubs, but also through the slow demoralization of Israelis, Diaspora Jews, and Israel's supporters in Congress. Just as suppressing Arafat's *al-Aqsa intifada* was a necessary tactical victory, preventing Hamas from consolidating authority in Gaza and extending it to the West Bank will not be sufficient strategically.

Post-Oslo, many Israeli Arabs (now 20 percent of the population, up from 13 percent in 1967) came to identify themselves as “Israelis by citizenship, Palestinian by nationality.” Unlike in the days before the first *intifada* (1987-1992) it is no longer unusual for Israeli Arabs to be arrested for aiding Palestinian terrorists. It is not that Israeli Arabs will want to go to

“Palestine”; rather, many may expect “Palestine” to come to them.

The closer Israel retreats to the pre-'67 “green line”—the 1949 armistice lines—the more it yields minimum strategic depth, the more unified for purposes of morale, mobilization, and deterrence as well as national identity its population must become. Otherwise, it may finally, in effect, have lost the Six-Day War. When he was mayor of Jerusalem, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert referred to his city's two-thirds/one-third Jewish/Arab balance (down from three-fourths/one-fourth in 1967) and worried publicly about the capital's Jewish future. As deputy prime minister, he told the daily *Yediot Aharonot* that new borders different from the pre-'67 lines “will be based on a maximization of the number of Jews and a minimization of the number of Arabs inside the state of Israel.”<sup>14</sup>

Two states for two people, as it turns out, is necessary but insufficient. “Two people in two states,” commentator Sever Plotzker wrote, appears a more realistic aspiration than the “two-state solution.”<sup>15</sup> Suppressed by the long-stale conventional wisdom about Israel and “Palestine,” the two states already exist—albeit in unfinished form.

It's not that “Jordan is Palestine,” as Ariel Sharon and Jordan's late King Hussein both used to say. Rather, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Jordan *were* Palestine. After its 1948 War of Independence, Israel held 17.5 percent of the original territory of Britain's Palestine Mandate. Jordan constituted 77.5 percent. The West Bank and Gaza together accounted for the remaining 5 percent. If a majority of that territory and its Arab population were allotted to Jordan, and a strategically, religiously and socially important minority retained by Israel,

the resulting enlarged Arab Palestine would be capable of absorbing a significant number of Palestinian “refugees” from Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere, assuming they would want to come. Enlarged Jewish Palestine, for its part, ought to re-attract a good number of the 760,000 Israelis estimated to be living permanently abroad—more than half of whom emigrated after the breakdown of the Oslo accords. It also might draw more than a trickle of Western Diaspora Jews.

Such a vision is not fantasy. “Many Palestinian, Jordanian and foreign intellectuals say that the current weakened prospects for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has forced them to revisit the possibility of unity between the two sides of the river under one political system,” writes commentator Samer Abu Libdeh. “The possibility is enhanced by several political and economic signals [from Jordan].”<sup>16</sup>

Jordanian officials are cognizant of this reality as well. Post-Oslo, former Jordanian Prime Minister Abdul Salam al-Majali floated a trial balloon about establishing a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation with joint and separate government institutions for the two banks of the Jordan.<sup>17</sup> More important than the details was the old/new idea: confederation.

Like war and the generals, “Palestine” is simply too important to be left to the Palestinians. Not Israel, Jordan or the United States can allow the Gaza Strip and West Bank to become a Near Eastern version of Waziristan, the barely-governable Pakistani border region in which al-Qaeda and the Taliban reportedly hide among sympathetic tribes. Rather, Israel and Jordan, with tacit U.S. approval and similar support, are likely to find that they have a common interest in a different kind of two-state solution: a cohabitation in which their previously

unruly third-party boarder keeps most of his room but not the explosives, literal and ideological, that he’d stored there.



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