

WHERE IS THE PALESTINIAN BEN-GURION?

by Efraim Karsh *The Jerusalem Post* September 15, 2011

Sixty-four years after partitioning Palestine into two independent states – one Jewish, the other Arab – the UN General Assembly is set again to vote on the same issue. While this time around Palestinian leaders appear to be preaching compromise, closer scrutiny reveals this to be a tactical rather than a strategic change of heart, stemming from the different circumstances of the two votes and aimed at disguising their lingering unwillingness (or perhaps inability) to live with a two-state solution.

In 1947, prior to the first UN General Assembly vote, Palestinian leaders rejected any form of Jewish self-determination in Palestine. Hajj Amin Husseini, their most prominent leader from the early 1920s to the late 1940s, upheld that "there is no place in Palestine for two races." All areas conquered by the Arabs during the 1948 war were cleansed of Jews.

These days the Palestinians can hardly ask the UN to dismantle one of its longest standing member states and to expel its citizens.

Yet by seeking international recognition of their statehood and pressure for a complete Israeli withdrawal without a peace agreement, or, indeed, any quid pro quo, they are continuing their predecessors' rejection of a negotiated settlement and laying the diplomatic groundwork for the renewal of the assault on the Jewish state.

The PLO's hallowed National Covenant envisages the permanent departure of most Jews from Israel. PLO chairman Yasser Arafat's phased strategy of June 1974, which was never disowned, stipulates that any territory gained through diplomacy would merely be a springboard for the "complete liberation of Palestine." At the negotiating table during the Oslo years, the PLO's most adamant demand was for the subversion of Israel's demographic composition by forcing it to accept the so-called "right of return" and allow refugees of the 1948 war, and their descendants, to return to territory that is now part of the state of Israel. At the moment Jews presently constitute about 80 percent of Israel's seven million strong population; by 2020, nearly one in four Israelis will be Arab, owing to this sector's far higher birth rate. Were millions of Palestinians to be resettled within Israel, it would soon cease to be a majority Jewish state and everybody knows it.

TO PRESENT the "right of return" as a nonnegotiable demand is not to negotiate at all, particularly when Palestinian leaders themselves refuse to accept alien minorities as part of a peace settlement: In June, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas told the Arab League that the future Palestinian state should be free of Israelis (that is Jews, since virtually no other Israelis live in the West Bank). He reiterated this vision of a Judenrein Palestine last month, telling a delegation of visiting members of Congress that "I am seeking a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with Jerusalem as its capital, empty of settlements."

Like Husseini, Arafat was far more interested in destroying the Jewish national cause than in leading his own people to statehood. As far back as 1978, he told his close friend and collaborator, Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, that the Palestinians lacked the traditions, unity and discipline to have a successful state.

He was right. It was the Palestinians' lack of communal solidarity – the willingness to subordinate personal interest to the collective good – that accounted for their collapse and dispersion during the 1948 war. The subsequent physical separation of the various parts of the Palestinian Diaspora and longstanding cleavages between West Bankers and Gazans prevented the crystallization of a cohesive national identity.

Sadly, Arafat had no intention of redressing this predicament. Given control of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza as part of the Oslo process, he made his bleak prognosis a self-fulfilling prophecy, establishing an oppressive and corrupt regime in the worst tradition of Arab dictatorships, while launching the most destructive confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians since the 1948 war.

In the process, he destroyed the fragile civil society and relatively productive economy that had developed in the interim.

Two years ago, in a bold departure from this destructive path, PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad embarked on the first state-building effort in Palestinian history, one that has had some successes. However, while he recently pronounced his initiative a mission accomplished amid the diplomatic buildup to the UN vote, he knows better. Abbas's presidency, and by extension Fayyad's own premiership, remain unconstitutional. Not only because Abbas defied Hamas's landslide victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections by establishing an alternative government headed by Fayyad, but also because his own presidency expired in January 2009.

Fayyad barely challenged the corrupt and dysfunctional system established by Arafat.

The two groups dominating Palestinian life, the PLO and Hamas, remain armed groups (and active practitioners of terrorism) rather than political parties – an assured recipe for a failed state. (The Oslo Accords charged the PA with dismantling all armed groups in the West Bank and Gaza, but Arafat never bothered to comply.) Even if Abbas were to genuinely commit himself to reform after the attainment of statehood, his tenuous authority would continue to be defied by Hamas, which has not only transformed the Gaza Strip into an Islamist micro-state but also wields considerable power and influence in the West Bank.

WHATEVER THE UN vote may achieve, it will not be a step toward Palestinian statehood.

Contrary to the received wisdom, Israel was established not by a UN General Assembly resolution but through the unwavering determination of the Zionist leadership, or rather David Ben-Gurion, shortly to become Israel's first prime minister, in the face of mounting international skepticism regarding partition (in March 1948 the US administration effectively backed down from the idea) and doubts about the new state's ability to fend off both Palestinian violence and a pan-Arab attempt to abort it at birth.

In doing so, Ben-Gurion could rely on an extraordinarily resilient and vibrant national community, armed with an unwavering sense of purpose and an extensive network of political, social and economic institutions built over decades of pre-state national development.

In this respect, eighteen years after being given the chance to establish their own state free of Israel's occupation, and despite the billions of dollars in international aid poured into this effort, the Palestinians have barely made it out of the gate. One can only hope that the international community will at long last pressure Palestinian leaders to own up to their obligations and opt for a true build-up of civil society that will ensure their constituents a decent and peaceful existence, rather than seek illusionary shortcuts and intensified conflict with Israel.

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