

Reality-Guided Imagination: The “Angel of History” Considers the Palestinian Issue

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Thirty years after the Oslo Accords and more than twenty years after the Arab Peace Initiative, the consistency of the official Palestinian and Arab position, on the need for a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on two states, should be emphasized. The alternatives frequently presented in Israel as “managing the conflict” and “limiting the conflict” are mere euphemisms for aggravating the existing situation. These alternatives are presented by one side only, since clearly they will earn no Palestinian or Arab response. Contrary to the common assumption in Israel, the Arab Peace Initiative leaves space for interpretive maneuvering, and a resulting political agreement would yield multiple benefits. The Palestinian Authority, whose very existence depends on the success of its political strategy, would prove to the Palestinian public that its approach bears fruit, and would earn the support of the majority. An agreement on the basis of the Initiative would pave the way for a strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia as the keystone of the Arab arena. Moreover, it would enable the formation of a political and military coalition with the entire Sunni Islam Arab world against Iran and its proxies.

The relationship between an idea and its embodiment in an institution (which later becomes the establishment) is coiled and multi-dimensional. This generalization also applies to the subject at hand – the Palestinian issue. The origin of Fatah, the PLO, and the ruling body of the Palestinian Authority (PA) lies in the idea of Palestinian nationhood, but their establishment in organizational frameworks on the one hand gives the idea factual validity due to its realization, and on the other hand throws it to the test of historical reality, with all its constraints and complications.

The annals of Fatah and the PLO are strewn with examples of the gaps created by the clash between the abstract principle and the constraints of historical reality. Any effort to realize an idea generally requires adjustment of the idea in order to narrow these gaps. What is most striking in the history of Fatah and the PLO is the transition from denying any political settlement with Israel to the acceptance of an arrangement that grants a state and sovereignty to the Palestinian side. When

the abstract principle crashed into reality, or in Jabotinsky's terms, into the "iron wall" of reality, the Palestinians accepted the need for change.

There is no doubt that by morphing into an organizational framework, the Palestinian national idea took roots and grew among its target audience. But for that very reason the survival and urgency of this idea no longer depend on the status of the organizational frameworks that champion it. Undermining these frameworks (Fatah, the PLO and its organizations, and the PA) among the Palestinian public in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has not translated into less loyalty to Palestinian national identity (on this dual trend, see the Palestinian public opinion poll (No. 86) of December 7-10, 2022 from the [Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research](#), headed by Dr. Khalil Shkaki; this trend matches the findings of previous polls over the last two years). In other words, the Palestinian national identity that in its early days was assisted by various organizations, has become an independent living entity. It no longer depends on the fate of the formal frameworks chafing under Israeli occupation, which tries to repel Palestinian nationalism, and is able to bolster the viability of the aspiration.

The strongest evidence for this is that while one generation has succeeded another, Palestinian national identity has not faltered. Today it is heralded by people who were in diapers during the second intifada (the early 2000s) or were born afterwards. They experienced the decline of the organizations that embodied the Palestinian national identity, but nonetheless herald their identity, which is nourished by the force of their opposition to Israeli control – epitomized by the army and the settlements. This younger generation is dominant in Palestinian demography, which is generally young (about 75 percent are under the age of 35). The large majority of this generation do not follow the orders of the organizations and are not deterred by the painful stamp of the second intifada. The activities of the Lion's Den group in Nablus ("Arin al-Usud") and the Jenin Battalion ("Khatibat al-Jenin") in the Jenin refugee camp are only the external symptoms of this phenomenon among the majority of the younger generation. It is seared in their souls, and does not rely on any formal organization. Over 90 percent of attacks in the last year were individual initiatives, not driven by external organizations. Thus, the suppression of these individuals and groups will not suppress the idea, which will only grow stronger, and in the absence of a political settlement, will assume a more militant character. Moreover, many of the individual attacks demonstrated readiness to aim for close contact, even assimilation among their targets, making their chances of survival extremely small. This type of action is called *inghimas* in Arabic (literally: assimilation), and it has become common over the last decade in the actions of global jihad organizations, particularly Islamic State. This is not a suicide attack as such, in which the attacker blows himself up, but *inghimas* is very

close to it, because the attacker knows in advance that his chances of survival, particularly in highly populated locations, are close to zero. It is very hard for Israel to have any early warning of such individual initiatives or to deter would-be attackers and gangs. Israeli expectations that the Palestinians would “get used to” their subjugation under Israel has created a bitter illusion.

Contrary to the first generation of Fatah and the PLO, the Palestinian national identity of today's younger generation is natural, innate, spontaneous, and not acquired – “banal nationalism” in the language of political science. A concrete expression of how the Palestinian identity has taken root can be seen in the way the tables have turned on the organizations and movements that waved the banner of supreme loyalty to other collective identities, such as Hamas (pan-Islamic identity) and the Popular Front (pan-Arab identity), and they have been compelled to give overall priority to the Palestinian national identity. They live among their people and in their homeland, so they have adjusted to the collective mood (see, for example, the canonical “political document” published by Hamas in 2017; the official Hamas site includes only this basic document, and not the Hamas Charter).

From this emerges that the exhausting preoccupation with the sinking status of the PA and the question of who will succeed Abu Mazen as leader is a classic case of missing the point. Sometimes it seems as if this is just a distraction so that responsibility for the deterioration of the situation can be thrown onto the Palestinian side. The decline of the PA and Abu Mazen is due first and foremost to the complete failure of their political strategy over the past generation – their willingness to accept the partition into two states based on the main points of the Arab Peace Initiative, now twenty years old. Ever since then, Israeli governments (except under Olmert) have chosen to ignore or object to both the Arab Initiative and the 2003 Roadmap of the Quartet (United States, Russia, European Union and the United Nations), which sought to translate the language of the Arab Initiative into practical action (with the decided agreement of the PLO, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation).

The Arab Initiative explicitly mentions the need to end the conflict with Israel, to establish “normal relations” (normalization), and to achieve a solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees that is acceptable to all parties, including Israel (which thereby gives it de facto veto power on the matter of a Palestinian right of return to Israeli territory). All this in return for the establishment of a Palestinian state “based on the 1967 lines.” The Arab Initiative does not include a demand to evacuate all the settlements, and it therefore leaves room to maneuver on this issue. In general, the Arab Initiative is a kind of opening position before

negotiations and not the last word, and it therefore embodies Arab readiness to barter over its implementation (an approach labeled “proactive”). There is a reason why the Quartet Roadmap emphasizes that the Arab Initiative is a source of authority for a comprehensive agreement equal in value to basic UN resolutions such as 242 and 338. The response of the Israeli government led by Sharon to the Roadmap (May 2003) was officially labeled “remarks” (fourteen in number), but its wording ranges from claims to conditions, although the term “condition” does not appear in the official response. These “remarks” created a precedent of including the condition of recognizing the Jewishness of the State of Israel, a condition that was not demanded by Israel in its agreements with Egypt and Jordan, nor later in the normalization agreements signed by the Netanyahu government with Arab countries such as Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. Moreover, Israel’s tenth comment on the Roadmap asks for the elimination of all references to “the Saudi initiative and the Arab initiative adopted in Beirut” (even though the Saudi initiative did not originally refer to the Palestinian refugee issue at all).

As soon as the main Palestinian faction led by Fatah showed official willingness to adopt the template of a political settlement (the starting point for this paradigm shift can be identified in the acceptance of Security Council Resolution 242 in November 1967), its position and its very status among the Palestinian public became exclusively conditional on Israel’s willingness to respond, or at least starting to respond to this. The chances of the settlement were therefore conditional on mutual willingness to adopt it. Without that – and one party alone can foil it by not participating – it will collapse.

Israel has derived its attitude to the Palestinian leaders and institutions from this main principle – the refusal to pay the price of a political settlement. Israel has always striven to clip the wings of any independent Palestinian leadership that supports national self-determination, and to shape it in the image of a “useful idiot,” where Israel’s whole purpose is to absolve itself from responsibility for the growing Palestinian population, while at the same time retaining absolute control of the space, including for settlement purposes. One example is Israel’s failed attempt to set up the “village associations” to work for it in the mid-1970s as a reaction to growing support in the West Bank for the PLO as the Palestinian national representative. Once identified as Israeli fabrications, the heads of the “associations,” who sought to rely on the rural sector in the West Bank, had their fate sealed, and they disappeared.

Let me dwell on a later example. Israel put all the blame on Yasir Arafat (although he was the one who led the Palestinians to accept partition into two states and to willingly adopt the Arab Initiative and the Roadmap, and even before that, in official letters to Prime Minister Peres in May 1996 and to US President Clinton in 1998, he publicly canceled the clauses in the Palestinian Charter that conflicted with a settlement with Israel and recognition of Israel). Moreover, contrary to Israel's 14 "remarks" (euphemism for "objections" or at least "reservations"), the Roadmap was adopted by the PLO Executive Committee under Arafat as it stood, with an official announcement that stressed "the necessity of implementing all its elements, with readiness to implement the Palestinian commitments in parallel with the implementation of Israel's commitments" (see "Declaration of the PLO Executive Committee regarding Implementation of the Roadmap Plan," May 30, 2003).

Arafat was succeeded by Abu Mazen, who objected strongly and vocally to the Palestinians' exercise of terror in the second intifada. Abu Mazen was elected President in early 2005 with a decisive majority (62 percent, out of the 75 percent of all eligible voters in the West Bank and Gaza Strip). Following Arafat's footsteps, he consistently supported a political settlement with Israel based on the Arab Initiative, but this did not improve his fate in the eyes of Israel. While Arafat was denounced by Israel as its most extreme opponent, Abu Mazen's sin, right from the start, when he was at the peak of his power, was his political moderation. He was punished by the decision of the Sharon government to withdraw unilaterally from Gaza (September 2005), instead of doing so by the agreement with Abu Mazen, who implored Israel to do this.

Hamas, which rejects any settlement or recognition of Israel (even based on the Arab Initiative), therefore gained a great deal from the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, at no cost to itself, while Abu Mazen and his political strategy were exposed as empty vessels. This was the start of paving the way to a Hamas victory in the elections to the PA Legislative Council (2006) and later to its violent takeover of the Gaza Strip.

The common denominator in these two examples is that Israel used both of them to avoid any political agreement that would naturally exact a price: by means of coercion in the village associations, and by means of Hamas, whose religious interpretation rejects any political agreement. So Israel and Hamas found themselves on the same side: identical results in spite of opposing intentions (in the language of international relations, "antagonistic collaboration").

Pursuant to this approach of supporting any party that wants no part of a settlement with Israel, the Israeli government imposed fines and sanctions, such as deducting tax money intended for the PA under Abu Mazen, because it was funding the families of prisoners and shaheeds, while at the same time, Israel allowed Qatar to inject some \$2 billion into Gaza over a decade to support the civilian system that funds all the Strip's needs, including the families of prisoners and shaheeds. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh publicly [mentioned](#) this sum on July 27, 2020, in an interview to the Qatari site *Lusail*, and the total has swelled since then. Moreover, in principle, every dollar allocated for the civilian needs of the Hamas regime in Gaza releases another dollar for Hamas to channel toward terror activities in the Strip and in the West Bank. This "protection money" paid to Hamas reflects Israel's preferential treatment of the party that does not constitute a "threat" because of its political moderation (i.e., Hamas).

This approach could be understood if it amounted to the lesser of two or more evils. But in fact it is definitely the worst approach of all. In the absence of a political settlement and partition into two states, which would be supported not only by the Palestinian majority but also by most Arab and Islamic countries (except Iran), Israel is condemned to sink more deeply into the reality of "one unequal and unconstitutional state," in which it imposes itself by force onto the Palestinian population. The consequential breakdown of the PA would turn Israeli control (and responsibility) in the populous Area A into direct rule by force. The resulting close friction would presumably deteriorate into major violence, and meanwhile the International Court in The Hague would be discussing the Palestinian issue, empowered by the UN General Assembly to determine whether the situation in the West Bank and Jerusalem amounts to an occupation for all intents and purposes. The normalization agreements with the Gulf states and the older peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan would be severely affected. This would in particular affect relations with Jordan, which sees itself as under existential threat in the West Bank in the absence of a political settlement with the Palestinians, particularly when Israel has a clearly right wing government, including senior ministers who state that Jordan is Palestine and are even looking forward to implement this when the time comes. Without real progress toward a settlement, there is no chance that Saudi Arabia will join the Abraham Accords, and this is repeatedly stated by its senior spokesmen (see, for example, the declaration by King Salman before the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia on October 18, 2022; the closing announcement of the Saudi-Chinese summit headed by Crown Prince Bin Salman and President Xi Jinping, December 9, 2022; and all the declarations of the Saudi Foreign Minister Bin Farhan over the past year, such as in al-Jazeera, January 18, 2023). Saudi Arabia, which seeks to lead the Arab and Islamic world, will not

renounce its own initiative (i.e., the Saudi initiative), which forms the basis of the Arab Initiative. Indeed, the Palestinians never had a veto with respect to other Arab states, and this was already shown by the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. But they certainly have a veto in the context of their own Palestinian living space. No Arab country can or wants to impose on them a solution they do not accept. It is a fact that the Trump plan for the Palestinian issue never even appeared on the agenda, even in those Arab countries that have normalization agreements with Israel. They all adopted the principles of the Arab Initiative regarding the Palestinian issue as a formula for a binding agreement, and continue to do so twenty years later.

In the absence of a comprehensive agreement, Iran and Hezbollah will have greater ability to intervene in the Palestinian issue by means of Islamic Jihad and Hamas. They will also try to take full advantage of the clear attractions of militancy for the younger Palestinian generation, as a result of the current political stagnation. Indeed, over the past two years, with five rounds of elections and internal imbroglios in Israel, the concept of Israel as “a temporary entity” (*alkiyan almwaqat*) has found a foothold in Iranian and Arab-Palestinian discourse. In spite of its clear military and technological advantages, Israel is presented as an entity whose existence is temporary, mainly because of the unresolved conflict on the Palestinian issue. The term is used widely by Iran and its proxies – Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas – and is spreading among the Palestinian public (for example, the [lengthy article](#) published on the website of the establishment Palestinian newspaper *al-Quds* on October 25, 2022). In their view, Israel is gradually collapsing under the burden of its internal contradictions. This collective mood could intensify the militancy of the younger Palestinian generation, and in order to survive – with their aspirations to lead – the older Palestinian organizations will have to keep up with the majority of the public.

Thirty years after the Oslo Accords and more than twenty years after the Arab Initiative, it is important to recognize the consistency of the official Palestinian and Arab position, which insists on a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on two states. Their perseverance over such a long period shows the importance of this position, although the failure to implement it casts a heavy shadow over the principle on which it is based. The Arab and Palestinian public has also been relatively consistent, although here too the absence of implementation over the years is eroding their attachment to the principle. The alternatives frequently presented in Israel as “managing the conflict” and “limiting the conflict” are mere euphemisms for intensifying the existing situation. They are presented by one side only, since clearly they will earn no Palestinian or Arab

response. Those who are prepared to support them are those who reject any Palestinian settlement – Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with Iranian backing.

In principle, there is a way out of this entanglement. Many years ago, Confucius said: “The way out is through the door. Why not use this exit?” The fact that this way out has been offered to Israel for many years by the Palestinians and the Arab and Sunni-Islamic world does not make it irrelevant for them. By its refusal to accept it, Israel makes it irrelevant. This does not mean that Israel should accept the Arab Initiative in terms of obeying it without question. The Arab Initiative leaves space for interpretive maneuver. It uses mathematical terms to present algebraic principles that can be converted into various numerical values. A political settlement on this basis would enable the formation of a political and military coalition with the whole of the Arab and Sunni Islam world against Iran and its proxies. In any case it would pave the way for a strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia as the keystone of the Arab arena. The Palestinian Authority, whose very existence depends on the success of its political strategy, would prove to the Palestinian public that its approach brings results, and it would win the support of the majority, both in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. Its opponents would be pushed to the margins, even in Gaza where they have control. Confederation arrangements with the Palestinians are possible, but only when there is Palestinian sovereign entity alongside Israel. There is only one option: either a political settlement based on partition, or one space in which two hawkish parties grip each other’s throats.

Sometimes the nature of the desired decision becomes clearer through the effort of trying to foresee the future. We must not reach a situation in which we are destined to look back at the settled facts from the viewpoint of “the angel of history” of the Jewish-German philosopher Walter Benjamin: “He [the angel of history] turns his face to the past. Where we see a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which constantly piles up waves of destruction, one on top of the other, and places them at his feet” (the ninth thesis, from *Theses on the Philosophy of History*).