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Is the Cat out of the Bag? The Palestinian Refusal to Recognize the Right of the Jewish People to Self-Determination

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For the past five years, a debate has been underway between those who support Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's demand for Palestinian recognition of Israel's right to exist as the nation state of the Jewish people and those who oppose it – whether on the grounds that Israel does not need the Palestinians to recognize its right to exist as the state of the Jewish people, or that it is a provocative and unnecessary demand that reduces the chances of renewing the political process and advancing toward an agreement.

The right to self-determination is a natural right possessed by all nations. Recognition of the State of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people is the ultimate expression of the Jewish people's right to self-determination. The international community has recognized this right on more than one occasion, assigning the British a mandate to establish a Jewish state in Palestine and confirming this recognition with UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of November 29, 1947. Despite the many circuitous explanations offered by Palestinian leaders on the subject, the Palestinian refusal to recognize the right to self-determination when it comes to Israel as the state of the Jewish people constitutes a denial of the Jewish people's existence. The roots of this denial lie in the conception of Judaism as no more than a religion and of the State of Israel as a state of all its citizens – Jews and non-Jews alike – devoid of all national identity.

When the Palestinian leadership is pushed into a corner but finds it uncomfortable to openly deny the existence of the Jewish people, it argues that it is not a Palestinian responsibility to ratify the State of Israel's Declaration of Independence or decisions of the international community. Its spokespeople also add that Israel can define itself however it likes, but that it is not the Palestinians' job to confirm its declarations.

Over the past few years, Israel's demand for recognition of the State of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people has been backed by American presidents and other leaders within the international community. Such support, however, has not been accompanied by substantive pressure on the Palestinian leadership to modify its position. Indeed, international leaders have at times even intimated that the Israeli demand is

confrontational, and Palestinian leaders and public diplomacy figures have managed to rebuff the Israeli demand and cast it as an obstacle. When required to explain its resolute opposition to such recognition, the Palestinian leadership – from Mahmoud Abbas to the last spokesperson – has used a single voice to articulate a uniform explanation based on the following fundamental principles:

- a. Recognition of the State of Israel as a Jewish state is tantamount to forfeiting the Palestinian right of return.
- b. Recognition of the State of Israel as a Jewish state is tantamount to denial of the native rights of Israel's Palestinian citizens.
- c. Recognition of the State of Israel as a Jewish state means changing the Palestinian narrative and accepting the Israeli narrative – in other words, coming to terms with what has consistently been derided as the historic sin and injustice of the establishment of the Jewish state.

On September 30, 2014, the Palestinians presented their “Palestinian draft resolution on the time frame to end Israeli occupation.” In this draft, the Palestinians demand an end to the Israeli occupation and the recognition of an independent Palestinian state within 1967 borders, with its capital in East Jerusalem. The Palestinians base their demands on a series of UN resolutions, international conferences, and principles of justice and international law.

Of particular significance in this draft is section 3a, which calls for “the full withdrawal of Israel, the occupying Power, from all of the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967 including East Jerusalem, as rapidly as possible and to be fully completed within a specified timeframe, not to exceed November 2016, and the achievement of the independence and sovereignty of the State of Palestine and the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people.”¹

The proposed resolution invites the following question: If the Palestinians regard the right to self-determination as a critical condition and a natural right, how can they deny the same natural right to the Jewish people? It is surprising (or perhaps not) that no other party within the UN or the international community has posed this question to the Palestinians. The Palestinian demand to actualize their right to self-determination has been accepted as self-evident, and no one has thought to question the need of such recognition. After all, this right has already been granted by UN Resolution 181 and as a state, the Palestinians will be free to define themselves however they like. No one has related to it as a confrontational demand designed to make it more difficult to reach an agreement.

¹ For the sake of historical accuracy, it should be noted that in 1967 these territories were conquered from Jordan and Egypt, not from a Palestinian sovereign.

When taken with the uncompromising refusal to recognize the right to determination of the Jewish people, is not the Palestinian demand for recognition of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people extremely meaningful? What are the implications of this statement for the chances of achieving true peace between Israel and the Palestinians? The time has come to pose this fundamental question to the Palestinians and hear their reasons for the lack of reciprocity. The Palestinian leadership bears a moral, public, and political obligation to clarify why the right to self-determination is a natural right with regard to the Palestinians, which they define as a condition and justification for the proposed resolution regarding a complete Israeli withdrawal and recognition of the Palestinian state within 1967 borders, but not with regard to the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

In fact, the Palestinian demand for the right to self-determination of the Palestinian People, lodged alongside their refusal to recognize the same right for the Jewish people, contravenes the very essence of the Palestinian explanations. It will be difficult to counter the argument of those who regard the Palestinian refusal to recognize the right to self-determination of the Jewish people as a manifestation of a lack of the readiness and the maturity required to conclude a true peace treaty, or, in other words, as a sophisticated, toned-down formulation of the "strategy of phases" and the historical yearning for the destruction of the Jewish national entity in the western land of Israel, to facilitate the establishment of a Palestinian state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Little effort is necessary to identify the statements of senior Palestinian officials regarding this intention. The Palestinian national vision is emphasized in Palestinian textbooks, in the Palestinian media, and in Palestinian public discourse, as well as in the Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) charters. The Palestinian charter was never changed in practice, despite commitments to do so (the full text can be found on the official websites of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority).

As the Palestinian leadership is still formally committed to the Oslo Agreements and as it repeatedly declares its sincere intention of reaching a peace agreement with Israel, it must explain the meaning of its demand for recognition of the right to Palestinian self-determination alongside its resolute denial of the same right for the Jewish people and the State of Israel.