

Explaining 'Palestine' ... and the lack thereof

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Article 16: ...the people of Palestine, desiring to befriend all nations which love freedom, justice, and peace, look forward to their support in restoring the legitimate situation to Palestine, ... and [in] enabling its people to exercise national sovereignty and freedom.

Article 24: This Organization does not exercise any territorial sovereignty over the West Bank in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, [or] on the Gaza Strip ...

Article 26: The Liberation Organization ... does not interfere in the internal affairs of any Arab states.

These excerpts from the Palestinian National Charter, as it was formulated in 1964 by the inaugural convention of the Palestinian National Council in Cairo (where the Palestinian Liberation Organization was founded) are of significant consequence, for they point to a fundamental fallacy in the authenticity of the Palestinian claims for national self-determination. As can be seen, they explicitly eschew any claims of sovereignty in the territories of Judea and Samaria (the "West Bank") and the Gaza Strip, which they openly concede to the jurisdiction of the Jordanians and the Egyptians respectively.

This seriously cuts away the ground from under any claim that the "West Bank" and Gaza constitute the Palestinians' ancient and long-yearned-for motherland, and to which they have unalienable and inexorable rights. On the one hand, this submissive concession of sovereignty over these territories to non-Palestinian rule indicates a remarkable malleability in the national aspirations of the Palestinians that seems to fly in the face of conventional wisdom.

On the other hand, it is entirely consistent with the position taken by the late Zuheir Muhsin, formerly the head of the PLO's Military Department and member of its Executive Council.

Almost a decade and a half after the first public endorsement of the Palestinian Charter, on March 31, 1977, Muhsin made the following declaration in an interview with the Dutch daily Trouw: "There are no differences between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese. We are all part of one nation. It is only for political reasons that we carefully underline our Palestinian identity, because it is in

the interest of the Arabs to encourage a separate Palestinian identity. Yes, the existence of a separate Palestinian identity serves only tactical purposes. The founding of a Palestinian state is a new tool in the continuing battle against Israel."

It thus appears that there is room for the "heretical" postulation that the true Palestinian desire is not really a state. Indeed, perhaps the time has come to suggest most of the prevailing conventional wisdom regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is totally unfounded, even misguided. For according to this wisdom, the fuel of the conflict is the lack of Palestinian self-determination, and that the goal of the Palestinians' struggle is to establish a state for themselves.

The competing explanation, which seems to emerge from the words and deeds of the Palestinians themselves, is quite the opposite. According to this explanation, the fuel of the conflict is not the lack of Palestinian self-determination but the existence of Jewish self-determination and as long as Jewish self-determination persists, so will the conflict.

Moreover, according to the alternative explanation, the goal of the Palestinians is not to establish a state for themselves but to dismantle a state for others the Jews.

THE QUESTION that now arises is: Which of these two alternative versions has the greater explanatory power? The answer seems to be unequivocally the latter. For it offers eminently plausible explanations for a range of events, which the former is powerless to account for. For example:

It explains why every territorial proposal, which would have allowed them to create a state of their own (from the 1947 partition plan to Barak's offer at Camp David in 2000), never satisfied them.

It explains why only the total negation of Jewish independence would appear acceptable to the Palestinians as evidenced not only by their rejection of any viable offer for statehood, but by much of their rhetoric and symbolism in which they invariably portray the whole the Land of Israel, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, as constituting part of Arab Palestine.

It explains not only why the Palestinians refrained from attempting to exert their national sovereignty in the pre-1967 "West Bank" (as evidenced by their original National Charter); but why today the Palestinians, as an overwhelming majority in Jordan, resign themselves to the rule by a Hashemite Beduin despot, who represents the minority in the land.

It explains not only why they rejected the far-reaching generosity of the Barak proposal, but also the violent manner in which they rejected it.

It explains why the Palestinians stubbornly insist on the "right of return," which would imply placing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians now living in Arab lands under Israeli jurisdiction hardly consistent with an alleged desire to be free of oppressive Israeli control... or with an equitable two-state solution.

By contrast, none of the above phenomena can be reconciled with the explanation propounded by the advocates of conventional wisdom. For in reality the Palestinians appear to have little motivation in expressing their national sovereignty in territories under non-Palestinian Arab rule.

Strangely, this desire only manifests itself in these territories when they fall under Jewish rule. Indeed, Palestinian efforts seem far more comprehensible if seen as directed toward the elimination and the undermining of Jewish sovereignty (by demanding either Israeli withdrawals where possible or Arab repatriation where not), than in the realization of their own independence.

If this is true, then making ever more generous proposals regarding Palestinian statehood will be totally unproductive indeed counterproductive for these will induce no peaceable response whatsoever. After all, as Muhsin said: "The founding of a Palestinian state is a new tool in the continuing battle against Israel."

It will be of great interest to see which explanation the next Israeli government adopts as the foundation of its policy toward the Palestinians that which has considerable power to account for Palestinian behavior, or that which has none.

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