How Can Israel Win the Palestinian Conflict?
Historian Explains

Interviewed by Seth Frantzman. Slight differences from the *J.P.* version, including ellipsed parts. Interview conducted on Dec. 12, 2022.

With Israel's new government installed, the country stands at a crossroads. After a year and a half of a government that was rooted in the Center-Left, a right-wing coalition has come to power, led by Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu has led Israel in the past, so Israel may end up pursuing the same policies it has in the past. However, there is also a chance for Israel to take new steps that would shift its long-term trajectory and also that of the Palestinians.

Toward this end, American historian Daniel Pipes, who has been president of the Middle East Forum since its founding in 1994, is working on a book about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He recently visited Israel to meet with key people and also discuss his visions for Israel's victory in its current conflict.

Tell us why you're in Jerusalem?

I met a publisher half a year ago who suggested I write a book about ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. How could I say no? I started it in late September and hope to have it finished within the year. I am in Israel to ask questions of a range of people about Israeli perceptions of this topic.

What's your argument?

That a just resolution of the conflict requires the Palestinians to lose hope. Only when they give up their war goal of eliminating Israel will the conflict come to an end. Israel must win and the Palestinians must lose.

This argument may come as a surprise because it precisely contradicts the premise of the Oslo Accords which promoted not victory but a notion of Palestinian hope and compromise. It theorized that nice apartments, late-model cars, fine schools, and excellent medical care would vest the Palestinians in prosperity, deradicalize them, and make them true partners for peace.

But, nearly thirty years on, all polling and endless anecdotal evidence indicate that most Palestinians retain the fantasy of eliminating the Jewish state. That goal must be fought by making them abandon it, not by fueling it with hope. This fits a general pattern, as wars seek to make the enemy despair of his hopes.

Most Palestinians retain the fantasy of eliminating the Jewish state; Palestinians hurling stones against Israeli forces in 2022.

But isn't Oslo long defunct?

Yes, the 1993 Oslo accords are discredited and nearly forgotten, execrated by Palestinians and Israelis alike. Despite that, its core goal of enriching Palestinians remains very much alive. For example, the Trump "peace to prosperity" plan offers Palestinians $50 billion in return for their leaving Israel alone. I just met with [Avigdor Liberman](#) and even he spoke of wanting to "replace jihad with prosperity" and to turn Gaza into "the Singapore of the Middle East." The same approach also extends to Arab states, as shown by Israel's recently signing a wildly generous maritime boundary agreement with Lebanon.

What's wrong with that?

Generosity towards enemies runs counter to history and to common sense. Historically, enemies besieged and starved each other, cutting off food, water, and matériel; this tactic continues today in cutting economic ties with North Korea, Russia, and other rogue states. Common sense confirms this, for a schoolyard brawl continues until one side gives up. The traditional approach to warfare sensibly seeks to defeat, not coddle, the enemy.

But didn't Israel already defeat its enemies in the Six-Day War of 1967?

Some of them, yes. That extraordinary battlefield victory, perhaps the greatest in recorded human history, knocked the wind out of the Arab states, which soon after largely abandoned their conflict with Israel. But as they did so, Palestinians jumped in and replaced them. Although Palestinians are

objectively much weaker than the states, lacking military or economic power, they have proved far more determined and persistent; for them, eliminating Israel is a matter of identity.

Explain the Palestinian war on Israel.

It begins with rejectionism, the Palestinian refusal to accept any aspect of Judaism, Jews, Zionism, or Israel in Eretz Israel. This ideology began a century ago with the Palestinian leader Amin al-Husseini. While rejectionism has evolved and has somewhat fragmented, it remains the Palestinian consensus and the dominant strain of Palestinian politics. The Palestinian Authority and Hamas have different tactics and personnel but they share its goal, that of eliminating the Jewish state. This explains why Israel's many concessions have no effect.

Currently, rejectionism has two fronts: the violent battlefield of ramming, stabbing, shooting and bombing, and the political battlefield of delegitimization through education, lobbying, and the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement.

Israeli strategist Efraim Inbar, focused just on the violence, calls the Palestinians a "strategic nuisance." But that ignores their vast hinterland of support, primarily among Muslims and leftists. Think Iran, Turkey, Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders, and the U.N. General Assembly. Delegitimization is dangerous and growing; it is what I hope to address.

Jeremy Corbyn (L) and Bernie Sanders.

How do Muslim and leftist hostility differ?

Whereas Muslim hostility to Israel typically opposes the very existence of a Jewish state, leftist hostility is far more narrowly based on the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem. For leftists, the circumstances of residents in those three areas matters most – and not such issues as the Iranian nuclear buildup, Ashkenazi-Sephardi relations, the price of cottage cheese, or the status of Israel's

Muslim citizens. It's invariably the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem. The great Palestinian publicity machine turned a globally minor problem into a supremely prominent issue.

Israel faces a unique range of threats. These can be divided into six kinds: weapons of mass destruction, conventional warfare, low-intensity conflict (or terrorism), demographics, economics, and delegitimization. Remarkably, Israel has effectively dispatched the four middle threats, leaving it with just the duality of WMD and delegitimization. Delegitimization – and thus the Palestinians – threatens Israel not less than the Iranian nuclear buildup.

How should Israel respond to delegitimization?

By making it no less a priority than violence, by realizing that rejectionism will not fade away on its own but needs to be broken. Israel governments have spectacularly failed at this over the past 30 years. From 1993 to 2000, they followed a policy of appeasement, or "I'll give you what you want and you be quiet." Then followed, in 2000-07, an even more ruinous policy of unilateral withdrawals. After that, and until the present day, came the policy of no policy, of merely putting out brush-fires. Currently, there is no goal other than "mowing the grass," or hoping to put off fighting for a few years. That, obviously, does not suffice.

The proper policy is to convince West Bankers, Gazans, and Muslim Jerusalemites that Israel is tough and permanent, that they have lost and should give up the war on Israel. The goal, always, is to coerce them into abandoning their fantasy of eliminating the Jewish state of Israel.

Once the Palestinians accept this reality, they too will gain, perhaps even more than Israelis. Liberated from their irredentist obsession, they can escape their current poverty and oppression to build their polity, economy, society, and culture.

Can't both sides can be prosperous without defeat? I am thinking of Northern Ireland.
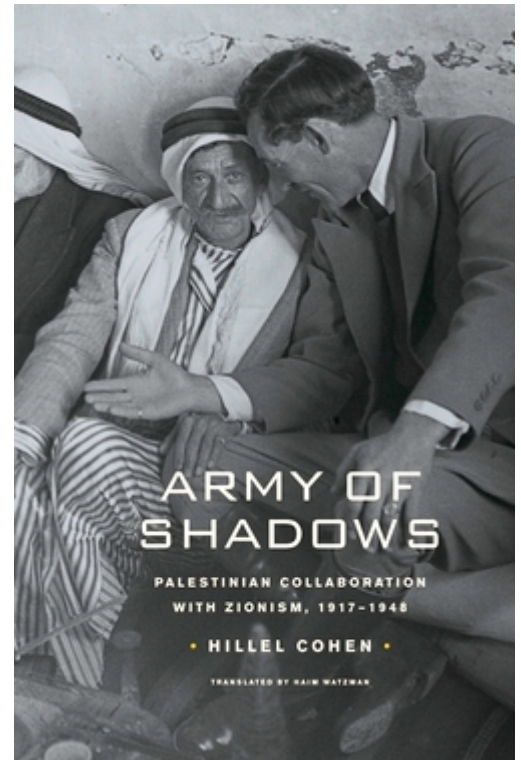
That's completely different because everyone in Northern Ireland is a British citizen. A democratic government may not defeat its own population. In parallel, Israel cannot defeat its Muslim citizens.

Weren't the Palestinians largely defeated in the Second Intifada?

Israel brought that surge in violence under control, yes. But doing so did not lead to a sense of defeat, just a change in tactics. Yasir Arafat relied on violence to batter Israelis' morale, cause them to emigrate, and end foreign investment; Mahmoud Abbas did not end the violence when he took over in 2004 but shifted the focus to delegitimizing Israel internationally; recall his obnoxious claim in Germany about the Palestinians suffering "fifty holocausts." This campaign is going well, spreading anti-Zionism.

Do all Palestinians subscribe to Amin al-Husseini's rejectionism?

No. Although it has dominated for a century, about one-fifth of Palestinians throughout that time have dissented and provided Israel with a range of services. In *Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917–1948*, Hillel Cohen shows the crucial importance of Palestinian help to the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish community in Eretz Israel); they provided labor, engaged in commerce, sold land, sold arms, handed over state assets, provided intelligence about enemy forces, spread rumors and dissension, convinced fellow Palestinians to surrender, fought the Yishuv's enemies, and even operated behind enemy lines. Cohen doesn't say this but I do: Israel would not have come into being without the help of cooperative Palestinians. But they always were and are a minority, always were and are under threat.

What about the new government; doesn't incoming Prime Minister Netanyahu believe in strength?

Yes, he does, but strength does not equal winning. I've spoken to him about Israel victory and he was supportive, without adopting the idea. I understand that; Israel comes under constant criticism; were Israel victory implemented, it would arouse more problems in the short term. So it is easier to kick it down the road and continue with the status quo of using security forces to maintain calm, deploying them like a police force more than a military force. The police do not aspire to victory but to calm, to no destruction of property nor harm to people.

What about others in the new government?

I'm learning about the new power brokers. From what I see, their focus is not on winning but on two terrible ideas: Bezalel Smotrich wants to annex the whole West Bank and Itamar Ben-Gvir wants to expel its Palestinian population.

Annexation either means adding a couple million Palestinian citizens of Israel or keeping them in a subordinate position, two recipes for disaster. The Kahanist impulse to push out Palestinians not only solves nothing but creates many new problems. The expulsees become more dedicated to destroying Israel. Fury arises within Israel, among diaspora Jews, and in the outside world at large. You don't win a war by annexing or displacing your enemies. You win by imposing your will on them.

Do you accept the two-state solution?

Yes, it is the least bad long-term solution. But I emphasize *long-term*. It can only happen after the Palestinians have given up their war on Israel, after a protracted period when Jews living in Hebron face no more dangers than Muslims living in Nazareth; and when Israel is just another member of

the United Nations. Until that happy but distant day arrives, I prefer for Jordan to run the West Bank and Egypt run Gaza.

Do the Abraham Accords and the focus on Ukraine and China change things?

Not really. The Abraham Accords are great, both in of themselves and because they got Netanyahu in 2020 to abandon his plan to annex parts of the West Bank. Ukraine and China reduce the spotlight on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, always a good thing. But Israel's thriving relations with the UAE and other states barely diminishes the Palestinian campaign of delegitimization. And whenever the Palestinian Authority or Hamas wish the spotlight to return, it will do so, instantly.
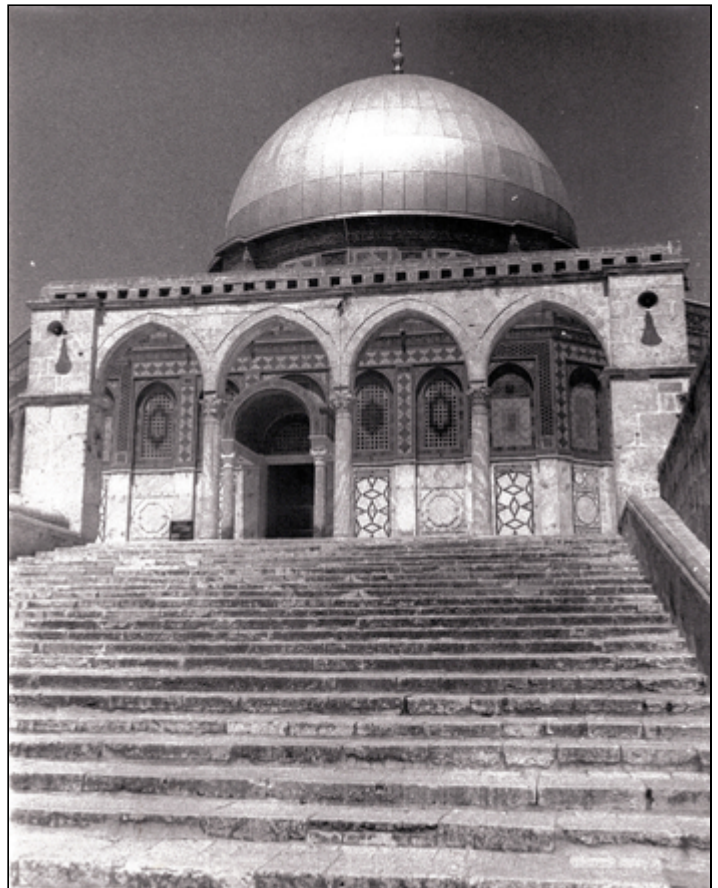
How should Israel handle the international spotlight?

By recognizing it as a fact of life and finding ways to deal with it. When Hamas decides to launch missiles into Israel, it knows it will get clobbered militarily but will gain international political support. Likewise, Israel knows it will get clobbered internationally, so it should take advantage of the crisis to send a very strong message to the Gazan population that it has lost the war. Ultimately, media coverage matters less than winning on the ground.

Practically speaking, how does Israel win?

I prefer to posit Israel victory as a policy goal, without going into detailed strategy and tactics. First, it's premature to get into specifics. Second, delving into these topics distracts from establishing the policy goal.

That said, Israel has an extraordinary range of levers due to its vastly greater power than the Palestinians – and not just military and economic. One creative example: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman would probably love to add Al-Aqsa to his collection of Islamic sanctities, especially at a time when Tehran challenges Saudi control of Mecca and Medina. How about Israel open negotiations on this topic with Riyadh, offering the jewel in the Palestinian Authority's crown in return for full diplomatic relations and a change in the status quo on the Temple Mount?

The Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, the oldest Islamic structure still in use, in summer 1969. © Daniel Pipes.

Can Israel defeat Hamas without re-occupying Gaza?

Again, I prefer not to discuss strategy and tactics, but, as you ask, here is one tactic: Israel announces that a single missile attack from Gaza means a one-day border closure: no water, food, medicine, or fuel crosses from it to Gaza. Two missiles means two days, and so forth. I guarantee this would rapidly improve Hamas' behavior.

Must Israel also defeat the Palestinians' leftists supporters?

Horrors, no. Plus, that would be impossible. But it is also not necessary, for they are mere followers. Imagine the Palestinians acknowledge their defeat and truly accept the Jewish state; this would pull the rug out from leftist anti-Zionism. Sustaining a more-Catholic-than-the-pope stance is tough to keep up. Israel is lucky that its principal enemy is so small and weak.

Over time, do Palestinians increasingly accept Israel?

Former minister Yuval Steinitz just told me that 75% of Palestinians have come to terms with the State of Israel and live normal lives, but I wonder. A recent [Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research](#) poll found that "72% of the public (84% in the Gaza Strip and 65% in the West Bank) say they are in favor of forming armed groups such as the "Lions' Den," which do not take orders from the PA and are not part of the PA security services; 22% are against that." Yes, there's a general calm; in the hotel where we are meeting, the Dan Jerusalem on Mount Scopus, the Palestinian staff goes quietly about its work and is not stabbing anyone. But at a time of crisis, say a Hamas rocket attack, I would avoid this or most other Jerusalem hotels.

Israel's previous leadership seems to accept Micah Goodman's idea of 'shrinking the conflict'; do you?

No, I see it as just another in a long line of attempts to finesse the difficult work of attaining victory. Prior ideas included expelling the Palestinians either by force or voluntarily, the Jordan-is-Palestine scheme, erecting more fences, finding a new Palestinian leadership, demanding good governance, implementing the Road Map, funding a Marshall Plan, imposing a trusteeship, establishing joint security forces, splitting the Temple Mount, leasing the land, withdrawing unilaterally, and so on. None worked, none will work. Defeat and victory remain imperative.

Would the fall of the Islamic Republic of Iran help?

Yes, regime change in Iran has vast implications for the Middle East but not so much for the Palestinian war on Israel. The mullahs' political collapse will not close down the Palestinians' conviction that rejectionism works, that "revolution until victory" will prevail, that they can eliminate the Jewish state. Israel cannot out-source victory.