

The Real Palestinian Catastrophe

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A woman documents demonstrations at Gaza City’s border with Israel, May 14, 2018.

A debased national movement at 70.

As Israel celebrated the 70th anniversary of its independence and the move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, Palestinians last week commemorated their 70th “Nakba Day.” The Nakba, or catastrophe, in question is meant to be the founding of the state of Israel, but this year Palestinians had a real Nakba to occupy them: the degeneration of their national movement into dictatorship, corruption, violence, and extremism.

There were two signal manifestations of this decline in the past week. The first was staged by Hamas, the largest of the Palestinian Islamist terrorist groups, which has ruled Gaza since 2007. Last week Hamas organized masses of protesters (and according to Israel sent dozens of operatives armed with pipe bombs and grenades) to storm the border fences with Israel. Hamas has failed in governing Gaza, which is mired in poverty and suffers shortages of water, electricity, and employment opportunities for its 1.8 million people, two-thirds of them under the age of 25. The unemployment rate in Gaza is 44 percent and even higher among youth. Hamas and those it rules are caught in a trap the terrorist group has created: Its ideology prevents peace with Israel but its circumstances have apparently persuaded its leaders that another major conflict would lead only to more devastation. So instead it sacrifices Palestinian lives in border attacks that produce no benefit whatsoever for the people of Gaza.

In fact the main achievement of those border attacks is to remind Israelis—who left Gaza in 2005, abandoning their military bases and settlements there—that Hamas considers *all* of Israel’s borders illegitimate. The dispute with Hamas isn’t over settlements or the “occupation” or Gaza itself. It is over Israel’s existence. In Gaza, the Islamist part of the Palestinian national movement does nothing to advance Palestinian interests, instead isolating its people from Egypt, Israel, the West Bank, and the rest of the world.

Hamas offers violence and nihilism, funded by Iran and dedicated to the fantasy of “return” to Israel across those border fences. But even using all the pressure it could muster, it could not gather more than 40,000 at the fences, significantly under its goal of 100,000. Nor was the reaction in the West Bank (which saw demonstrations of fewer than 2,000 people spread over a dozen or more sites) and in the Arab world as great as Hamas might have anticipated. The month of Ramadan began May 16 and may see a continuation of violence, and even perhaps expansion into another round of war between Israel and Hamas. But the underlying situation will not change: Hamas has turned Gaza into a prison for those it rules. It cannot achieve peace, or decent and normal lives for the people of Gaza, through violent confrontation with Israel.

The second manifestation was staged by the secular part of the Palestinian national movement, which is dominated by Yasser Arafat’s Fatah party. Fatah rules in the West Bank and controls both the Palestinian Authority and the PLO. Over the decades, Fatah has morphed from a terrorist group fighting to destroy Israel, into a terrorist group fighting for Palestinian statehood, then after Arafat’s death in 2004 into a political group struggling against Hamas and other terrorist organizations, and more recently into a plain dictatorship whose only goal seems to be protecting the privileges of its own ruling elites.

The event that demonstrated Fatah’s decline most clearly occurred on April 30, when Palestinian Authority president and PLO chairman Mahmoud Abbas called a meeting of the Palestine National Council (PNC), the PLO’s legislative body. There he delivered himself of a three-hour speech replete with explanations that the Jews have no real historical tie to the Middle East and that European anti-Semitism was caused by the Jews’ “social behavior, [charging] interest, and financial matters.” The speech was reminiscent of his January 14 tirade, in which he explained that Zionism “did not begin 100 years ago. It did not begin with the Balfour Declaration. . . . It began in 1653 when Cromwell ruled Britain. . . . He came up with the idea of transferring the Jews from Europe to the Middle East.”

At this PNC gathering Abbas had himself reelected by acclamation; there was no voting. The entire scene—the length of his speech, the sometimes bizarre and sometimes plainly anti-Semitic content, the election by applause—was a throwback to Castro or Ceausescu and left many Palestinian observers in despair. Israel is celebrating 70 years in freedom, prosperity, and strength, the U.S. embassy is moving, the “occupation” that began in 1967 shows no sign of ending, there are no peace negotiations—and the leader of the Palestinians is crushing dissent, elevating cronies, and discussing Oliver Cromwell.

Repression in the West Bank is growing steadily. Judicial independence has been reduced. Civil society organizations that violate “national unity” or threaten the “social fabric” face closure, and their leaders face jail. The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, led by Khalil Shikaki, the best-known Palestinian pollster, may go out of business this year. In just this fashion Abbas worked in 2015 to close down an NGO founded by former prime minister Salam Fayyad, seizing its funds and closing its bank accounts. Like Hamas in Gaza, the Palestinian Authority arrests and detains journalists who criticize Fatah and its leaders.

Corruption is rife. At the PNC meeting, election or exclusion depended not on service to the Palestinian cause or integrity but on fealty to Abbas.



Under the Oslo Accords in the 1990s, what were supposed to be embryonic democratic institutions were created. After Arafat’s death these hollow shells were briefly filled; free elections were held for president in 2005 and for parliament in 2006 (the latter won by Hamas). But there has been no election in the Palestinian territories since January 2006, and the legitimacy of the leadership is in very steady decline. The one-party rule by Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank reflects the worst of Arab political culture.

Nor does either organization, Fatah or Hamas, offer Palestinians a practical program for national independence. The alignment of Israel and most Sunni states against Iran means those states are less likely to fund Hamas, whose violent rhetoric and conduct and whose absolute rejection of Israel’s existence reflect instead Iranian policy. In December, Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar boasted of his contact with Qassem Suleimani, head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard’s Quds Force, and of Suleimani’s pledges of support.

On the West Bank side, since the first Oslo agreement a quarter-century ago, the Fatah/PLO program has ostensibly been a negotiated deal with Israel that would lead to true independence—the “two-state solution.” But there has been no progress in a decade: Abbas rejected a peace offer from Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert in 2008 and refused all of the Obama administration’s efforts to get him back to the negotiating table.

Israelis debate how much Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could offer in a real negotiation, because he presides over a right-of-center coalition that might be split by any compromises. But Bibi won't be put to the test, because Abbas is past the point of considering serious negotiations and serious compromises. He lacks the legitimacy to do so, and his recent fulminations and crackdowns suggest a man who, at 83, is long past the ability to lead to peace. He is in no mood to undertake a debate with Hamas and others who will call him a traitor for any deal he makes. He appears to have decided what his legacy must be: "steadfastness," meaning that, like Arafat, he said no to everything. He would rather be seen as a stalwart leader who held high the banner of Palestinian nationalism and refused to bargain with the Zionists than undertake the undoubtedly painful compromises that peace would entail. In 2003 (when the United States and E.U. forced Arafat to accept him as prime minister) Abbas looked like an alternative to Arafat and a potential Israeli peace partner. Fifteen years later those hopes are long gone, which helps explain why the Trump administration has not yet released its peace plan: Abbas would reject it instantly.

All this leaves Palestinians high and dry, with no way forward at all. Whatever the criticism of the "occupation," Israelis will certainly not abandon the West Bank to chaos or to a possible Hamas takeover. Today the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state is simply too dangerous to Israel and to Jordan to be contemplated. With Hamas in control of Gaza, and Iran and its proxies seizing large parts of Syria and dominating Lebanon, who would control such a state in the West Bank? How likely is it that Israel, now battling against Iranian control of southern Syria, will open up opportunities for further Iranian incursions? And how can such matters be discussed seriously between Israelis and Palestinians (and for that matter, with Americans and Jordanians) when the leader of the PA and PLO will not return to the table and instead indulges in bizarre rants about Jewish and British history?

The great likelihood is that five years from today, that situation will be fundamentally unchanged. Perhaps Abbas will be gone, but his successors will be Fatah stalwarts and in any event will need years to consolidate power sufficiently even to contemplate leading Palestinians into the difficult compromises of a peace settlement. There is growing desperation among Palestinians that

neither Fatah nor Hamas represents their hopes—or can fulfill them. There are only two other options. The first is the “one state solution,” meaning union with Israel, but that is a nonstarter Israel will reject no matter who is its prime minister. The other option is some kind of eventual link to Jordan.

In polite diplomatic society, and in Palestinian public discourse, such a link cannot be mentioned. But younger people who visit there, Palestinians have explained to me, can see a society that is half Palestinian and functions as an independent nation with a working system of law and order. Jordanians travel freely, rarely suffer from terrorism, and have an Islamist (Muslim Brotherhood) party, the Islamic Action Front, that participates in the political system and sits in parliament. There are elections, even if power is ultimately concentrated in the royal palace. The kingdom has close relations with all the Sunni states and the West, and is at peace with Israel.



The fundamental question all this raises is what, in 2018, the nature and objective of Palestinian nationalism is. Is the goal sovereignty at all costs, no matter how long it takes and even if it is increasingly divorced from peace, prosperity, and personal freedom? Is “steadfastness” the greatest Palestinian virtue now and forever? These questions cannot be debated in either Gaza or the West Bank. But as Israel celebrates 70 years and the “occupation” is now more than a half-century old, how much longer can they be delayed?

Today’s desperate Palestinian situation is largely the work of Fatah, the party that led it down a dozen blind alleys, embraced terror, lost an election to Hamas, and at least twice (2000 and 2008) rejected offers of peace from Israel. It may well be that the window for a sovereign Palestinian state was open from 1991 to 2008 but has now closed. Certainly there is no prospect of an early deal with Israel, and in Arab capitals, enthusiasm for the Palestinian cause is clearly declining. At the conferences in the Arab world that I attend, the “centrality” of the Palestinian issue continues to be argued—but more and more often it is raised only by people who are 70 or 80 years old.

The catastrophic mishandling of Palestinian affairs by generations of leaders from Haj Amin al-Husseini (the pro-Nazi mufti of the British Mandate period) to Yasser Arafat and now to Mahmoud Abbas has been the true Palestinian Nakba.

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