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Where are the Palestinians going?

The short answer, I’m afraid, is nowhere, or nowhere different, or nowhere good.

To understand what I mean one has to look at the question in historical perspective – taking in what has happened over the past hundred and twenty years, looking at the trajectory of the Palestinian national movement, with occasional glances aside at the trajectory of the Jewish national movement, Zionism, over the same time span.

Zionism, as formulated in the 1880s and 1890s, sought the establishment of a Jewish state over all of Palestine. Indeed, in the map submitted by Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann to the victors of World War I, deliberating the post-war settlement in 1919, the Zionist movement sought a state encompassing southern Lebanon from the Litani River to the present-day Israel-Lebanon frontier, and the area immediately east of the Jordan River, comprising the Biblical areas of Golan, Gilead, Moav and Edom as well as the core area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean sea, which was to become British Mandate Palestine. The Zionist movement sought the whole Land of Israel or Palestine, and some.

But with the backdrop of growing, vicious anti-Semitism in central and Eastern Europe in the mid-1930s, which required the establishment, as soon as possible, of a safe haven for fleeing European Jews, and simultaneously of the revolt of Palestine’s Arabs against the British Mandate government, the movement, under Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion, began a process of reducing its territorial demands. When the British Peel Commission, having investigated the Arab rebellion’s causes and consequences, in July 1937 ruled that the best solution was a partition of the country between the Jews and the Arabs, the Zionist movement accepted, for the first time, the

principle of partition. It agreed that it could not have the whole Land of Israel and that it must share it. This occurred at the Zionist Congress of August 1937.

From that point on, the movement internalized the inevitability of partition. It accepted, if you like, the verdict of history. And in November 1947, when the United Nations resolved on partition, the Zionist movement accepted the principle as the basis for a solution of the conflict.

And during the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, the country was effectively partitioned between Israel, which got the bulk of the territory, and Jordan and Egypt, which respectively occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Ever since, with the notable exception of the years 1977-91, when the right-wing Likud dominated Israeli politics, the country's political system and people accepted partition as the basis for a peace settlement. A right-wing minority, of settlers and religious parties, rejected the idea. But they were a minority.

The principle of partition underlay the Oslo Peace process, which was ushered in with the election of Yitzhak Rabin as prime minister in 1992. The process saw the Israelis relinquish to the PLO control of the cities of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and this is the principle that underlay the Barak and Clinton peace proposals in Camp David in July and again in December 2000: A Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip side by side, living in peace, with a Jewish state in the rest of Palestine, effectively, that part on which the state of Israel was established in the course of the 1948 war. This principle underlay former Prime Minister Sharon's evacuation of the Gaza Strip in 2005 and current prime minister Ehud Olmert's election platform in 2006.

Israelis may have argued then, and still argue, about how much of the West Bank to give up, 85 per cent or 95%, but the vast majority are at one in agreeing to relinquish the bulk of the territory, and the Gaza Strip, in exchange for peace. A two-state solution.

The Palestinian national movement's ideological trajectory has been different. That movement, since its inception in the 1920s, has consistently advocated a one-state solution - all of Palestine under Arab rule.

The mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammad Haj Amin al Husseini, who led the Palestinian Arab national movement, in 1937 told the British Peel Commission that Palestine was an Arab land and must remain so. The Jews were thieves and would-be usurpers, nothing more. He rejected partition.

So what of the Jews who lived at the time in Palestine, alongside the country's 1 million Arabs, the commissioners asked him?

‘Does his eminence think that this country can assimilate and digest the 400,000 Jews now in the country?’

‘No,’ responded Hussein.

They would have to be deported? the commissioners pressed him.

‘We must leave all this to the future,’ he responded.

But the commissioners were not assuaged or duped. In its report the Peel Commission commented: ‘We cannot forget what recently happened, despite treaty provisions and explicit assurances, to the Assyrian [Christian] minority in Iraq’ – the commissioners were referring to the massacre a few months before of hundreds of Iraqi Christians by the country’s Muslims. “Nor can we forget,” added the commissioners, “that the hatred of the Arab politician for the [Jewish] National Home [in Palestine] has never been concealed and that it has now permeated the Arab population as a whole.”

What the commissioners were saying, then, back in 1937, is that were Palestine to become an Arab Muslim state with a large Jewish minority, it could be expected to expel or slaughter that minority in short order.

But all that happened in 1937 was theory. The Peel recommendations, rejected by the Palestinian national movement, were never implemented. But 1947-48 was to be a defining moment, the defining moment in the evolution of the two national movements and in their conflict.

As we have said, UN General Assembly Resolution 181, of 29 November 1947, was accepted by the Zionist movement, as it was by the United States and the Soviet Union, a unique coming together of the two global super-powers then facing off in the Cold War.

But the Palestinian Arab national movement, and the surrounding Arab states, rejected it. And not only rejected it but declared ‘Jihad’ – and went to war against the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, hoping to nip the Jewish state in the bud and, perhaps, drive the Jews into the sea, as some Arab spokesmen put it. But both the Palestinian Arab militias and the invading armies of the Arab states were unsuccessful, and Israel arose and endured. The world had rejected a ‘One-state’ solution and Israeli arms had frustrated its realization.

But a ‘One-state’ solution remained the objective of the Palestinian national movement. After Hussein came Yasser Arafat and the PLO and after him, the Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

What Arafat and the PLO said about what was required is well known: Only ‘the Jews who resided in Palestine before the beginning of the Zionist invasion will be considered Palestinians,’ meaning citizens of the Palestine Arab state, said the PLO Charter of 1964. It was referring to the Jews who

had been resident in the country before 1917. The PLO, stated the charter, 'aims at the elimination of Zionism in Palestine ... Zionism is racist and fanatic in its nature ... fascist in its methods ... The liberation of Palestine will destroy the Zionist and imperialist presence.'

It was in this spirit that Arafat, in July and December 2000, rejected the proposals by Barak and Clinton to settle the conflict on the basis of two independent states.

The constitution of the Fatah, the core organisation within the PLO, is as explicit as the PLO Charter: Fatah, it states, aims at the 'complete liberation of Palestine, and the eradication of the Zionist economic, political, military and cultural existence ... [the] uprooting [of] the Zionist existence [through armed struggle until] the Zionist state is demolished.'

All of Palestine must be constituted as one Arab state. The Hamas, the Fatah's successor as the main component of the Palestinian national movement, is no less adamant about its goals, which also, of course, include the Islamization and the imposition of sharia law over all of Palestine. Its charter from 1988 states: 'Any procedure in contradiction to Islamic sharia, where Palestine is concerned, is null and void.' 'The movement's program is Islam.' 'Hamas – strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine'. 'Israel will exist ... until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it.' 'Peaceful solutions and international conferences are in contradiction to the principles of the Hamas.' 'There is no solution except through jihad. The liberation of Palestine is an individual duty for every Muslim wherever he may be.' 'It is necessary to instill in the minds of the Moslem generations that the Palestinian problem is a religious problem, and should be dealt with on this basis.'

One-state, an Islamic arab state, is the goal of the Hamas – and this is the goal and trajectory of the Palestinian people, who elected the Hamas to power, in free elections, in January 2006. This is the deep, abiding will of the Palestinian people, make no mistake.

But over the past few years, against the backdrop of the Second Intifada, a growing number of Western intellectuals have also come round to supporting what they call a 'one-state solution'. They are motivated by feelings of guilt, realpolitik or anti-Semitism. They argue that a 'Two-State' solution is unworkable.

But these intellectuals do not phrase their 'One-State' preference in the destructive, anti-Semitic jargon of the Islamists (the Hamas often refers to the Jews as 'sons of apes and pigs'). Rather, they present more unctuous,

benign arguments. Look how Tony Judt, an historian of modern Europe, recently phrased his plea for Israel's dissolution:

In a world where nations and peoples increasingly intermingle and intermarry at will; where cultural and national impediments to communication have all but collapsed; where more and more of us have multiple elective identities ... in such a world Israel is truly an anachronism [and] ... a dysfunctional one.

His prescription: 'To convert Israel from a Jewish state to a binational one.' He does not understand that his plea for a binational state is merely providing cover for Hamas and Fatah one-staters, who want an Arab state, short and simple, preferably without a Jewish minority at all.

Tony Judt appears to echo the 1930s and 1940s, when a group of Jewish intellectuals, who included the philosopher Martin Buber, and the Marxist Hashomer Hatzair Party, advocated 'Bi-nationalism' as an alternative to Zionism; Jews and Arabs could and should coexist under one political roof. But the overwhelming majority of Palestine Jews and Arabs rejected the idea. The Zionists argued that the Jews needed a Jewish state, in which Jews would be sovereign. The Jews had experienced minority status for 2,000 years in Christian and Islamic lands, and had failed to enjoy the experience. They further argued that bi-nationalism, based on absolute parity, was unrealistic as either there would be, in the end, an Arab majority (through their higher birth rate) or a Jewish majority (through Jewish immigration) – in which case, if it was a democracy, the majority would determine the rules.

The Arabs rejected bi-nationalism because, they said, Palestine was theirs and theirs alone; perhaps a very small number of Jews could stay on, as an (essentially powerless) minority. They refused to acknowledge the historical roots of the Jews in the Land of Israel or to grant that these gave the Jews any legitimate claim to the land.

Bi-nationalism was unrealistic and impractical back then and is even more unrealistic today, in face of the intolerant, absolutist spirit of Islam that has taken hold in the Middle East, including in the Palestinian territories.

Already back in 1937, the Peel Commission explained why bi-nationalism was unrealistic: "There is no common ground between [the two communities in Palestine]. The Arab community is predominantly Asiatic in character, the Jewish community predominantly European. They differ in religion and in language. Their culture and social life, their ways of thought and conduct, are as incompatible as their national aspirations." A further factor of course, as it was in 1937, must be that neither of the two

populations wants a bi-national state. But let me return for a moment to what the Peel commissioners called “ways of thought and conduct,” meaning the disparate values of the two communities – which have grown more disparate over the past two decades.

Let me give an illustration. In the mixed Arab-Jewish town of Ramle, outside Tel Aviv, there is an Arab clan called the Abu Ghanems. Over the past six years, eight of the clan’s women have been murdered by male clan members, principally by their brothers (one of whom, incidentally, is a medical doctor) – out of respect for what is called “family honor.” The women refused to marry men the family, meaning the males, deemed appropriate; or they had dressed in a way deemed by the males inappropriate; or they had looked the wrong way at the wrong man. For this, for sullyng the family honor, they had to die.

Israel’s Jewish population regards such killing as unconscionable, indeed, inexplicable. Among Israel’s Arabs, as indeed in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan and Syria and Egypt and Iraq, such killings are everyday occurrences. The only difference is that in Israel such murders are reported – and, when there exists evidence and there are witnesses, the perpetrators are punished. Prosecution is very unusual in the Arab world. Indeed, in some Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, merely removing a veil may result in a public whipping or worse.

The Gaza Strip and West Bank have steadily grown more medieval over the past twenty years under the impress of rising Islamic fundamentalism, the Gaza Strip more than the West Bank. In the Gaza Strip, ruled by the Hamas organization, there are no functioning cinema houses. In all of the Palestinian cities of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, save for Bethlehem and Ramallah, where there are substantial Christian communities, there is a prohibition on the sale of alcoholic beverages, and it is strictly enforced. In Gaza, in recent weeks, internet caffes have been torched. In Qalqilya, a West Bank town, several months ago the scheduled ‘Palestine Festival’ was cancelled by the Hamas-dominated municipality on the grounds that “mixed dancing of men and women is inappropriate, and contact with Western culture is unacceptable,” as the official explanation stated.

Israel’s Jews speak Hebrew and, apart from a minority, are highly secular, modern, open, liberal, and democratic, respect women and gay rights, and are culturally highly innovative and scientifically and economically advanced. Like Westerners in general, they are highly self-critical. Palestine’s Arabs, like their brothers in the rest of the Arab Middle East, speak Arabic and are, overwhelmingly, religious (many are fundamentalists). They are intolerant of non-Muslims and gays, and women are regarded as inferior. Their schools and universities are governed by an uncritical (and un-self-critical) mindset and a propagandistic curriculum.

The past sixty years which have seen the 1948 destruction of Palestinian society and exile, successive Israeli victories and the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, decades of Palestinian terrorism of the worst kind and Israeli clamp-downs and counter-terrorist strikes. The mutual hatred now separating these two peoples is real and well-grounded and necessarily obtrudes as an impassable obstacle on the road to a bi-national solution.

To this, one should add the economic disparities between the two communities living in Israel-Palestine; the Jewish standard of living is far higher than the West Bank and Gaza Arabs', and infinitely higher than that of the Palestinian refugee communities living outside the country. This too would make for impossible friction and violence.

'One-State' advocates, both Arab and Western, often assert the 'successful' co-existence of Arabs and Jews in Arab states and empires over the centuries. Jews and Arabs have lived well together in the past. This is nonsense. The small Jewish communities in the Islamic world always suffered from discrimination and humiliation; often, there were forced conversions and massacre (*vide* Fez in Morocco in 1033, 1276, 1465 and 1912, Baghdad in 1941, Aden in 1947, etc.). As early as the 7th century, Muhammed, Islam's founder, rid Hijaz, the heartland of Arabia, of its Jewish tribes, by forced conversion, slaughter and expulsion. Jews remained second- or third-class subjects in all the subsequent Islamic empires. Even Maimonides, the Medieval philosopher who served as doctor to the Sultan, was to write: 'God has cast us into the midst of ... the nation of Ishmael, who persecute us severely and ... debase us ... None has matched [them] in debasing and humiliating us.' Over the centuries, the Jewish communities in the Islamic world have disappeared; nothing today remains of them (most emigrated; others were expelled).

Life as a minority in Muslim Arab polities proved a miserable failure. But that, precisely, is what the 'One-State' proponents would resurrect in Palestine. They aim for a Muslim Arab majority state and a (small) Jewish minority, not true bi-nationalism. The arithmetic is simple. There are today between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, the area destined for the 'One-State' solution, about five million Jews and more than four million Arabs. The Palestinians insist that, as part of any peace settlement, the Palestinian refugees from 1948 and their descendants, be granted 'the Right of Return'. Such a return would mean that many of the two million refugees living outside Palestine would return, instantly assuring an Arab majority in the emergent state.

But even without the implementation of 'the right of return', Arabs would, within a decade or so, become a majority simply by dint of their higher birth rates. (The Palestinian family, on average, has four-plus

children; Israeli Jews, two children per family.) Either way, the story would necessarily end with the world being graced by yet another Arab state – the 23rd in number – and the Jews with no state at all.

During the 1990s, PLO leader Yasser Arafat seemingly, publicly, agreed to drop the ‘One-State’ solution and accept Two States – a Palestinian Arab state at peace with Israel. But in private, as during his now infamous sermon in a Johannesburg mosque in May 1994, he dismissed the ongoing Oslo process, to which he was party, as merely a new ‘Hudnat Hudeibiya,’ that tactical ceasefire agreement in the 7th Century between the Prophet Muhammed and an anti-Muslim Arabian tribe which Muhammad promptly, unilaterally tore up the moment it suited him. As Arafat put it in his broken English, referring to Oslo: “This agreement I am not considering it more than the agreement, which had been signed between our prophet Muhammad and [the] Quraish [tribe] ... The Jihad will continue.” And this he said was just after he had embarked on a peace process with Israel.

Arafat, deep in his heart, believed – like most Palestinians - that Palestine, all of it, belongs to the Arabs and that the Jews are robbers who must be driven from the country. And this is why in 2000 he rejected the ‘Two-State’ solution that was proposed by Barak, and Clinton. And this was why the Palestinians launched, and Arafat endorsed, the Second Intifada, whose seeming aim was the liberation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip from Israeli occupation but whose real purpose – as publicly enunciated by the Islamic fundamentalists who spearheaded the Intifada – was the eventual destruction of Israel and the ‘redemption’ of all of Palestine. The ‘One-State’ solution.

Which brings me back to my opening question where are the Palestinians heading? The short answer is: nowhere. Having elected a Hamas government devoted to Israel’s destruction, no compromise is possible, indeed no meaningful negotiations or peace process are possible. Most Israelis reject the settlements and would be willing to uproot most of them; but they will not do so in favor of a Palestinian government that seeks Israel’s destruction, not merely its evacuation of the West Bank.

Palestinian president Abu Mazen may mouth pacific slogans and he may even be sincere in his wish for a compromise solution based on two states. I doubt it – but maybe. But he is irrelevant, he has no power. The Hamas has the real power and represents the will of the Palestinian people. And even when trying to curry favor with the West and undermine the Western economic boycott that has hobbled the Palestinians since the Hamas was elected to power, the fundamentalists go no further than proposing a ceasefire, a hudna, if Israel first agrees to withdraw to the 1967 borders and allow back the Palestinian refugees. No one in the Hamas suggests changing the movement’s ideology and charter, of accepting Israel’s existence and a

compromise solution. Israel's destruction remains the aim; all the Hamas is willing to offer are some tactical concessions.

So where does that leave the Palestinians? With increasing Islamization, massive poverty and zero development, with massive emigration of Christians and middle class Muslims seeking a better life in the West, with a Gaza Strip ruled by street gangs called the Al Aksa and Qassam brigades feuding over turf rights and economic gain, and without any hope of progress towards Palestinian statehood. Some Palestinians may take comfort or joy from the occasional lobbing of primitive Kassam rockets from Gaza into Israel's towns and villages and from the occasional successful suicide bombing in a restaurant or bus across the border. But these will bring no relief to the slums of Gaza and no progress toward statehood – only the building of yet higher Israeli security barriers and occasional retaliatory strikes into the Palestinian territories. In the end, the Iranians – if the world allows them - may solve the problem with atomic weapons, but then there will be neither Palestinians nor Israelis around to negotiate peace, and a land so desolate that no one will want to fight over it.