
1948, Israel, and the Palestinians— The True Story

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SIXTY YEARS after its establishment by an internationally recognized act of self-determination, Israel remains the only state in the world that is subjected to a constant outpouring of the most outlandish conspiracy theories and blood libels; whose policies and actions are obsessively condemned by the international community; and whose right to exist is constantly debated and challenged not only by its Arab enemies but by segments of advanced opinion in the West.

During the past decade or so, the actual elimination of the Jewish state has become a *cause célèbre* among many of these educated Westerners. The “one-state solution,” as it is called, is a euphemistic formula proposing the replacement of Israel by a state, theoretically comprising the whole of historic Palestine, in which Jews will be reduced to the status of a permanent minority. Only this, it is said, can expiate the “original sin” of Israel’s founding, an act built (in the words of one critic) “on the ruins of Arab Palestine” and achieved through the deliberate and aggressive dispossession of its native population.

This claim of premeditated dispossession and the consequent creation of the longstanding Palestinian “refugee problem” forms, indeed, the cen-

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tral plank in the bill of particulars pressed by Israel’s alleged victims and their Western supporters. It is a charge that has hardly gone undisputed. As early as the mid-1950’s, the eminent American historian J.C. Hurewitz undertook a systematic refutation, and his findings were abundantly confirmed by later generations of scholars and writers. Even Benny Morris, the most influential of Israel’s revisionist “new historians,” and one who went out of his way to establish the case for Israel’s “original sin,” grudgingly stipulated that there was no “design” to displace the Palestinian Arabs.

The recent declassification of millions of documents from the period of the British Mandate (1920-1948) and Israel’s early days, documents untapped by earlier generations of writers and ignored or distorted by the “new historians,” paint a much more definitive picture of the historical record. They reveal that the claim of dispossession is not only completely unfounded but the inverse of the truth. What follows is based on fresh research into these documents, which contain many facts and data hitherto unreported.

FAR FROM being the hapless objects of a predatory Zionist assault, it was Palestinian Arab leaders who from the early 1920’s onward, and very much against the wishes of their own constituents, launched a relentless campaign to obliterate the Jewish national revival. This campaign culminated in the violent attempt to abort the UN resolution

of November 29, 1947, which called for the establishment of two states in Palestine. Had these leaders, and their counterparts in the neighboring Arab states, accepted the UN resolution, there would have been no war and no dislocation in the first place.

The simple fact is that the Zionist movement had always been amenable to the existence in the future Jewish state of a substantial Arab minority that would participate on an equal footing “throughout all sectors of the country’s public life.” The words are those of Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the founding father of the branch of Zionism that was the forebear of today’s Likud party. In a famous 1923 article, Jabotinsky voiced his readiness “to take an oath binding ourselves and our descendants that we shall never do anything contrary to the principle of equal rights, and that we shall never try to eject anyone.”

Eleven years later, Jabotinsky presided over the drafting of a constitution for Jewish Palestine. According to its provisions, Arabs and Jews were to share both the prerogatives and the duties of statehood, including most notably military and civil service. Hebrew and Arabic were to enjoy the same legal standing, and “in every cabinet where the prime minister is a Jew, the vice-premiership shall be offered to an Arab and vice-versa.”

If this was the position of the more “militant” faction of the Jewish national movement, mainstream Zionism not only took for granted the full equality of the Arab minority in the future Jewish state but went out of its way to foster Arab-Jewish coexistence. In January 1919, Chaim Weizmann, then the upcoming leader of the Zionist movement, reached a peace-and-cooperation agreement with the Hashemite emir Faisal ibn Hussein, the effective leader of the nascent pan-Arab movement. From then until the proclamation of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948, Zionist spokesmen held hundreds of meetings with Arab leaders at all levels. These included Abdullah ibn Hussein, Faisal’s elder brother and founder of the emirate of Transjordan (later the kingdom of Jordan), incumbent and former prime ministers in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq, senior advisers of King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud (founder of Saudi Arabia), and Palestinian Arab elites of all hues.

As late as September 15, 1947, two months before the passing of the UN partition resolution, two senior Zionist envoys were still seeking to convince Abdel Rahman Azzam, the Arab League’s secretary-general, that the Palestine conflict “was uselessly absorbing the best energies of the Arab League,” and that both Arabs and Jews would greatly benefit “from active policies of cooperation

and development.” Behind this proposition lay an age-old Zionist hope: that the material progress resulting from Jewish settlement of Palestine would ease the path for the local Arab populace to become permanently reconciled, if not positively well disposed, to the project of Jewish national self-determination. As David Ben-Gurion, soon to become Israel’s first prime minister, argued in December 1947:

If the Arab citizen will feel at home in our state, . . . if the state will help him in a truthful and dedicated way to reach the economic, social, and cultural level of the Jewish community, then Arab distrust will accordingly subside and a bridge will be built to a Semitic, Jewish-Arab alliance.

ON THE face of it, Ben-Gurion’s hope rested on reasonable grounds. An inflow of Jewish immigrants and capital after World War I had revived Palestine’s hitherto static condition and raised the standard of living of its Arab inhabitants well above that in the neighboring Arab states. The expansion of Arab industry and agriculture, especially in the field of citrus growing, was largely financed by the capital thus obtained, and Jewish know-how did much to improve Arab cultivation. In the two decades between the world wars, Arab-owned citrus plantations grew sixfold, as did vegetable-growing lands, while the number of olive groves quadrupled.

No less remarkable were the advances in social welfare. Perhaps most significantly, mortality rates in the Muslim population dropped sharply and life expectancy rose from 37.5 years in 1926–27 to 50 in 1942–44 (compared with 33 in Egypt). The rate of natural increase leapt upward by a third.

That nothing remotely akin to this was taking place in the neighboring British-ruled Arab countries, not to mention India, can be explained only by the decisive Jewish contribution to Mandate Palestine’s socioeconomic well-being. The British authorities acknowledged as much in a 1937 report by a commission of inquiry headed by Lord Peel:

The general beneficent effect of Jewish immigration on Arab welfare is illustrated by the fact that the increase in the Arab population is most marked in urban areas affected by Jewish development. A comparison of the census returns in 1922 and 1931 shows that, six years ago, the increase percent in Haifa was 86, in Jaffa 62, in Jerusalem 37, while in purely Arab towns such as Nablus and Hebron it was only 7, and at Gaza there was a decrease of 2 percent.

Had the vast majority of Palestinian Arabs been left to their own devices, they would most probably have been content to take advantage of the opportunities afforded them. This is evidenced by the fact that, throughout the Mandate era, periods of peaceful coexistence far exceeded those of violent eruptions, and the latter were the work of only a small fraction of Palestinian Arabs. Unfortunately for both Arabs and Jews, however, the hopes and wishes of ordinary people were not taken into account, as they rarely are in authoritarian communities hostile to the notions of civil society or liberal democracy. In the modern world, moreover, it has not been the poor and the oppressed who have led the great revolutions or carried out the worst deeds of violence, but rather militant vanguards from among the better educated and more moneyed classes of society.

So it was with the Palestinians. In the words of the Peel report:

We have found that, though the Arabs have benefited by the development of the country owing to Jewish immigration, this has had no conciliatory effect. On the contrary . . . with almost mathematical precision the betterment of the economic situation in Palestine [has] meant the deterioration of the political situation.

In Palestine, ordinary Arabs were persecuted and murdered by their alleged betters for the crime of “selling Palestine” to the Jews. Meanwhile, these same betters were enriching themselves with impunity. The staunch pan-Arabist Awni Abdel Hadi, who vowed to fight “until Palestine is either placed under a free Arab government or becomes a graveyard for all the Jews in the country,” facilitated the transfer of 7,500 acres to the Zionist movement, and some of his relatives, all respected political and religious figures, went a step further by selling actual plots of land. So did numerous members of the Husseini family, the foremost Palestinian Arab clan during the Mandate period, including Muhammad Tahir, father of Hajj Amin Husseini, the notorious mufti of Jerusalem.

It was the mufti’s concern with solidifying his political position that largely underlay the 1929 carnage in which 133 Jews were massacred and hundreds more were wounded—just as it was the struggle for political preeminence that triggered the most protracted outbreak of Palestinian Arab violence in 1936-39. This was widely portrayed as a nationalist revolt against both the ruling British and the Jewish refugees then streaming into Palestine to escape Nazi persecution. In fact, it was a massive exercise in violence that saw far more Arabs than Jews

or Englishmen murdered by Arab gangs, that repressed and abused the general Arab population, and that impelled thousands of Arabs to flee the country in a foretaste of the 1947-48 exodus.

Some Palestinian Arabs, in fact, preferred to fight back against their inciters, often in collaboration with the British authorities and the Hagana, the largest Jewish underground defense organization. Still others sought shelter in Jewish neighborhoods. For despite the paralytic atmosphere of terror and a ruthlessly enforced economic boycott, Arab-Jewish coexistence continued on many practical levels even during such periods of turmoil, and was largely restored after their subsidence.

A GAINST THIS backdrop, it is hardly to be wondered at that most Palestinians wanted nothing to do with the violent attempt ten years later by the mufti-led Arab Higher Committee (AHC), the effective “government” of the Palestinian Arabs, to subvert the 1947 UN partition resolution. With the memories of 1936-39 still fresh in their minds, many opted to stay out of the fight. In no time, numerous Arab villages (and some urban areas) were negotiating peace agreements with their Jewish neighbors; other localities throughout the country acted similarly without the benefit of a formal agreement.

Nor did ordinary Palestinians shrink from quietly defying their supreme leadership. In his numerous tours around the region, Abdel Qader Husseini, district commander of Jerusalem and the mufti’s close relative, found the populace indifferent, if not hostile, to his repeated call to arms. In Hebron, he failed to recruit a single volunteer for the salaried force he sought to form in that city; his efforts in the cities of Nablus, Tulkarm, and Qalqiliya were hardly more successful. Arab villagers, for their part, proved even less receptive to his demands. In one locale, Beit Safafa, Abdel Qader suffered the ultimate indignity, being driven out by angry residents protesting their village’s transformation into a hub of anti-Jewish attacks. Even the few who answered his call did so, by and large, in order to obtain free weapons for their personal protection and then return home.

There was an economic aspect to this peaceableness. The outbreak of hostilities orchestrated by the AHC led to a sharp drop in trade and an accompanying spike in the cost of basic commodities. Many villages, dependent for their livelihood on the Jewish or mixed-population cities, saw no point in supporting the AHC’s explicit goal of starving the Jews into submission. Such was the general lack of appetite for war that in early February 1948,

more than two months after the AHC initiated its campaign of violence, Ben-Gurion maintained that “the villages, in most part, have remained on the sidelines.”

Ben-Gurion’s analysis was echoed by the Iraqi general Ismail Safwat, commander-in-chief of the Arab Liberation Army (ALA), the volunteer Arab force that did much of the fighting in Palestine in the months preceding Israel’s proclamation of independence. Safwat lamented that only 800 of the 5,000 volunteers trained by the ALA had come from Palestine itself, and that most of these had deserted either before completing their training or immediately afterward. Fawzi Qawuqji, the local commander of ALA forces, was no less scathing, having found the Palestinians “unreliable, excitable, and difficult to control, and in organized warfare virtually unemployable.”

This view summed up most contemporary perceptions during the fateful six months of fighting after the passing of the partition resolution. Even as these months saw the all but complete disintegration of Palestinian Arab society, nowhere was this described as a systematic dispossession of Arabs by Jews. To the contrary: with the partition resolution widely viewed by Arab leaders as “Zionist in inspiration, Zionist in principle, Zionist in substance, and Zionist in most details” (in the words of the Palestinian academic Walid Khalidi), and with those leaders being brutally candid about their determination to subvert it by force of arms, there was no doubt whatsoever as to which side had instigated the bloodletting.

Nor did the Arabs attempt to hide their culpability. As the Jews set out to lay the groundwork for their nascent state while simultaneously striving to convince their Arab compatriots that they would be (as Ben-Gurion put it) “equal citizens, equal in everything without any exception,” Palestinian Arab leaders pledged that “should partition be implemented, it will be achieved only over the bodies of the Arabs of Palestine, their sons, and their women.” Qawuqji vowed “to drive all Jews into the sea.” Abdel Qader Husseini stated that “the Palestine problem will only be solved by the sword; all Jews must leave Palestine.”

THEY AND their fellow Arab abettors did their utmost to make these threats come true, with every means at their disposal. In addition to regular forces like the ALA, guerrilla and terror groups wreaked havoc, as much among noncombatants as among Jewish fighting units. Shooting, sniping, ambushes, bombings, which in today’s world would

be condemned as war crimes, were daily events in the lives of civilians. “[I]nnocent and harmless people, going about their daily business,” wrote the U.S. consul-general in Jerusalem, Robert Macatee, in December 1947,

are picked off while riding in buses, walking along the streets, and stray shots even find them while asleep in their beds. A Jewish woman, mother of five children, was shot in Jerusalem while hanging out clothes on the roof. The ambulance rushing her to the hospital was machine-gunned, and finally the mourners following her to the funeral were attacked and one of them stabbed to death.

As the fighting escalated, Arab civilians suffered as well, and the occasional atrocity sparked cycles of large-scale violence. Thus, the December 1947 murder of six Arab workers near the Haifa oil refinery by the small Jewish underground group IZL was followed by the immediate slaughter of 39 Jews by their Arab co-workers, just as the killing of some 100 Arabs during the battle for the village of Deir Yasin in April 1948 was “avenged” within days by the killing of 77 Jewish nurses and doctors en route to the Hadassah hospital on Mount Scopus.

Yet while the Jewish leadership and media described these gruesome events for what they were, at times withholding details so as to avoid panic and keep the door open for Arab-Jewish reconciliation, their Arab counterparts not only inflated the toll to gigantic proportions but invented numerous nonexistent atrocities. The fall of Haifa (April 21-22), for example, gave rise to totally false claims of a large-scale slaughter, which circulated throughout the Middle East and reached Western capitals. Similarly false rumors were spread after the fall of Tiberias (April 18), during the battle for Safed (in early May), and in Jaffa, where in late April the mayor fabricated a massacre of “hundreds of Arab men and women.” Accounts of Deir Yasin in the Arab media were especially lurid, featuring supposed hammer-and-sickle tattoos on the arms of IZL fighters and accusations of havoc and rape.

This scare-mongering was undoubtedly aimed at garnering the widest possible sympathy for the Palestinian plight and casting the Jews as brutal predators. But it backfired disastrously by spreading panic within the disoriented Palestinian society. That, in turn, helps explain why, by April 1948, after four months of seeming progress, this phase of the Arab war effort collapsed. (Still in the offing was the second, wider, and more prolonged phase involving the forces of the five Arab nations that invaded Palestine in mid-May.) For not only had

most Palestinians declined to join the active hostilities, but vast numbers had taken to the road, leaving their homes either for places elsewhere in the country or fleeing to neighboring Arab lands.

INDEED, MANY had vacated even before the outbreak of hostilities, and still larger numbers decamped before the war reached their own doorstep. "Arabs are leaving the country with their families in considerable numbers, and there is an exodus from the mixed towns to the rural Arab centers," reported Alan Cunningham, the British high commissioner, in December 1947, adding a month later that the "panic of [the] middle class persists and there is a steady exodus of those who can afford to leave the country."

Echoing these reports, Hagana intelligence sources recounted in mid-December an "evacuation frenzy that has taken hold of entire Arab villages." Before the month was over, many Palestinian Arab cities were bemoaning the severe problems created by the huge influx of villagers and pleading with the AHC to help find a solution to the predicament. Even the Syrian and Lebanese governments were alarmed by this early exodus, demanding that the AHC encourage Palestinian Arabs to stay put and fight.

But no such encouragement was forthcoming, either from the AHC or from anywhere else. In fact, there was a total lack of national cohesion, let alone any sense of shared destiny. Cities and towns acted as if they were self-contained units, attending to their own needs and eschewing the smallest sacrifice on behalf of other localities. Many "national committees" (i.e., local leaderships) forbade the export of food and drink from well-stocked cities to needy outlying towns and villages. Haifa's Arab merchants refused to alleviate a severe shortage of flour in Jenin, while Gaza refused to export eggs and poultry to Jerusalem; in Hebron, armed guards checked all departing cars. At the same time there was extensive smuggling, especially in the mixed-population cities, with Arab foodstuffs going to Jewish neighborhoods and vice-versa.

The lack of communal solidarity was similarly evidenced by the abysmal treatment meted out to the hundreds of thousands of refugees scattered throughout the country. Not only was there no collective effort to relieve their plight, or even a wider empathy beyond one's immediate neighborhood, but many refugees were ill-treated by their temporary hosts and subjected to ridicule and abuse for their supposed cowardice. In the words of one Jewish intelligence report: "The

refugees are hated wherever they have arrived."

Even the ultimate war victims—the survivors of Deir Yasin—did not escape their share of indignities. Finding refuge in the neighboring village of Silwan, many were soon at loggerheads with the locals, to the point where on April 14, a mere five days after the tragedy, a Silwan delegation approached the AHC's Jerusalem office demanding that the survivors be transferred elsewhere. No help for their relocation was forthcoming.

Some localities flatly refused to accept refugees at all, for fear of overstraining existing resources. In Acre (Akko), the authorities prevented Arabs fleeing Haifa from disembarking; in Ramallah, the predominantly Christian population organized its own militia—not so much to fight the Jews as to fend off the new Muslim arrivals. Many exploited the plight of the refugees unabashedly, especially by fleecing them for such basic necessities as transportation and accommodation.

Yet still the Palestinians fled their homes, and at an ever growing pace. By early April some 100,000 had gone, though the Jews were still on the defensive and in no position to evict them. (On March 23, fully four months after the outbreak of hostilities, ALA commander-in-chief Safwat noted with some astonishment that the Jews "have so far not attacked a single Arab village unless provoked by it.") By the time of Israel's declaration of independence on May 14, the numbers of Arab refugees had more than trebled. Even then, none of the 170,000-180,000 Arabs fleeing urban centers, and only a handful of the 130,000-160,000 villagers who left their homes, had been forced out by the Jews.

The exceptions occurred in the heat of battle and were uniformly dictated by ad-hoc military considerations—reducing civilian casualties, denying sites to Arab fighters when there were no available Jewish forces to repel them—rather than political design. They were, moreover, matched by efforts to prevent flight and/or to encourage the return of those who fled. To cite only one example, in early April a Jewish delegation comprising top Arab-affairs advisers, local notables, and municipal heads with close contacts with neighboring Arab localities traversed Arab villages in the coastal plain, then emptying at a staggering pace, in an attempt to convince their inhabitants to stay put.

WHAT MAKES these Jewish efforts all the more impressive is that they took place at a time when huge numbers of Palestinian Arabs were being actively *driven* from their homes by their own leaders and/or by Arab military forces,

whether out of military considerations or in order to prevent them from becoming citizens of the prospective Jewish state. In the largest and best-known example, tens of thousands of Arabs were ordered or bullied into leaving the city of Haifa on the AHC's instructions, despite strenuous Jewish efforts to persuade them to stay. Only days earlier, Tiberias' 6,000-strong Arab community had been similarly forced out by its own leaders, against local Jewish wishes. In Jaffa, Palestine's largest Arab city, the municipality organized the transfer of thousands of residents by land and sea; in Jerusalem, the AHC ordered the transfer of women and children, and local gang leaders pushed out residents of several neighborhoods.

Tens of thousands of rural villagers were likewise forced out by order of the AHC, local Arab militias, or the ALA. Within weeks of the latter's arrival in Palestine in January 1948, rumors were circulating of secret instructions to Arabs in predominantly Jewish areas to vacate their villages so as to allow their use for military purposes and to reduce the risk of becoming hostage to the Jews.

By February, this phenomenon had expanded to most parts of the country. It gained considerable momentum in April and May as ALA and AHC forces throughout Palestine were being comprehensively routed. On April 18, the Hagana's intelligence branch in Jerusalem reported a fresh general order to remove the women and children from all villages bordering Jewish localities. Twelve days later, its Haifa counterpart reported an ALA command to evacuate all Arab villages between Tel Aviv and Haifa in anticipation of a new general offensive. In early May, as fighting intensified in the eastern Galilee, local Arabs were ordered to transfer all women and children from the Rosh Pina area, while in the Jerusalem sub-district, Transjordan's Arab Legion likewise ordered the emptying of scores of villages.

As for the Palestinian Arab leaders themselves, who had placed their reluctant constituents on a collision course with Zionism in the 1920's and 1930's and had now dragged them helpless into a mortal conflict, they hastened to get themselves out of Palestine and to stay out at the most critical moment. Taking a cue from these higher-ups, local leaders similarly rushed en masse through the door. High Commissioner Cunningham summarized what was happening with quintessential British understatement:

You should know that the collapsing Arab morale in Palestine is in some measure due to the increasing tendency of those who should

be leading them to leave the country. . . . For instance, in Jaffa the mayor went on four-day leave 12 days ago and has not returned, and half the national committee has left. In Haifa the Arab members of the municipality left some time ago; the two leaders of the Arab Liberation Army left actually during the recent battle. Now the chief Arab magistrate has left. In all parts of the country the *effendi* class has been evacuating in large numbers over a considerable period and the tempo is increasing.

Arif al-Arif, a prominent Arab politician during the Mandate era and the doyen of Palestinian historians, described the prevailing atmosphere at the time: "Wherever one went throughout the country one heard the same refrain: 'Where are the leaders who should show us the way? Where is the AHC? Why are its members in Egypt at a time when Palestine, their own country, needs them?'"

MUHAMMAD NIMR AL-KHATIB, a Palestinian Arab leader during the 1948 war, would sum up the situation in these words: "The Palestinians had neighboring Arab states which opened their borders and doors to the refugees, while the Jews had no alternative but to triumph or to die."

This is true enough of the Jews, but it elides the reason for the refugees' flight and radically distorts the quality of their reception elsewhere. If they met with no sympathy from their brethren at home, the reaction throughout the Arab world was, if anything, harsher still. There were repeated calls for the forcible return of the refugees, or at the very least of young men of military age, many of whom had arrived under the (false) pretense of volunteering for the ALA. As the end of the Mandate loomed nearer, the Lebanese government refused entry visas to Palestinian males between eighteen and fifty and ordered all "healthy and fit men" who had already entered the country to register officially or be considered illegal aliens and face the full weight of the law.

The Syrian government took an even more stringent approach, banning from its territory all Palestinian males between sixteen and fifty. In Egypt, a large number of demonstrators marched to the Arab League's Cairo headquarters and lodged a petition demanding that "every able-bodied Palestinian capable of carrying arms should be forbidden to stay abroad." Such was the extent of Arab resentment toward the Palestinian refugees that the rector of Cairo's al-Azhar institution of religious learning, probably the foremost Islamic authority, felt obliged to issue a ruling that made the shelter-

ing of Palestinian Arab refugees a religious duty.

Contempt for the Palestinians only intensified with time. "Fright has struck the Palestinian Arabs and they fled their country," commented Radio Baghdad on the eve of the pan-Arab invasion of the new-born state of Israel in mid-May. "These are hard words indeed, yet they are true." Lebanon's minister of the interior (and future president) Camille Chamoun was more delicate, intoning that "The people of Palestine, in their previous resistance to imperialists and Zionists, proved they were worthy of independence," but "at this decisive stage of the fighting they have not remained so dignified."

No wonder, then, that so few among the Palestinian refugees themselves blamed their collapse and dispersal on the Jews. During a fact-finding mission to Gaza in June 1949, Sir John Troutbeck, head of the British Middle East office in Cairo and no friend to Israel or the Jews, was surprised to discover that while the refugees

express no bitterness against the Jews (or for that matter against the Americans or ourselves) they speak with the utmost bitterness of the Egyptians and other Arab states. "We know who our enemies are," they will say, and they are referring to their Arab brothers who, they declare, persuaded them unnecessarily to leave their homes. . . . I even heard it said that many of the refugees would give a welcome to the Israelis if they were to come in and take the district over.

SIXTY YEARS after their dispersion, the refugees of 1948 and their descendants remain in the squalid camps where they have been kept by their fellow Arabs for decades, nourished on hate and false hope. Meanwhile, their erstwhile leaders have squandered successive opportunities for statehood.

It is indeed the tragedy of the Palestinians that the two leaders who determined their national development during the 20th century—Hajj Amin Husseini and Yasir Arafat, the latter of whom dominated Palestinian politics since the mid-1960's to his death in November 2004—were megalomaniacal extremists blinded by anti-Jewish hatred and profoundly obsessed with violence. Had the mufti chosen to lead his people to peace and reconciliation with their Jewish neighbors, as he had promised the British officials who appointed him to his high rank in the early 1920's, the Palestinians would have had their independent state over a substantial part of Mandate Palestine by 1948, and would have been spared the traumatic experience of dispersion and exile. Had Arafat set the PLO

from the start on the path to peace and reconciliation, instead of turning it into one of the most murderous terrorist organizations in modern times, a Palestinian state could have been established in the late 1960's or the early 1970's; in 1979 as a corollary to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty; by May 1999 as part of the Oslo process; or at the very latest with the Camp David summit of July 2000.

Instead, Arafat transformed the territories placed under his control in the 1990's into an effective terror state from where he launched an all-out war (the "al-Aqsa *intifada*") shortly after being offered an independent Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and 92 percent of the West Bank, with East Jerusalem as its capital. In the process, he subjected the Palestinian population in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to a repressive and corrupt regime in the worst tradition of Arab dictatorships and plunged their standard of living to unprecedented depths.

What makes this state of affairs all the more galling is that, far from being unfortunate aberrations, Hajj Amin and Arafat were quintessential representatives of the cynical and self-seeking leaders produced by the Arab political system. Just as the Palestinian leadership during the Mandate had no qualms about inciting its constituents against Zionism and the Jews, while lining its own pockets from the fruits of Jewish entrepreneurship, so PLO officials used the billions of dollars donated by the Arab oil states and, during the Oslo era, by the international community to finance their luxurious style of life while ordinary Palestinians scrambled for a livelihood.

And so it goes. Six decades after the mufti and his henchmen condemned their people to statelessness by rejecting the UN partition resolution, their reckless decisions are being reenacted by the latest generation of Palestinian leaders. This applies not only to Hamas, which in January 2006 replaced the PLO at the helm of the Palestinian Authority (PA), but also to the supposedly moderate Palestinian leadership—from President Mahmoud Abbas to Ahmad Qureia (negotiator of the 1993 Oslo Accords) to Saeb Erekat to prime minister Salam Fayad—which refuses to recognize Israel's very existence as a Jewish state and insists on the full implementation of the "right of return."

And so it goes as well with Western anti-Zionists who in the name of justice (no less) call today not for a new and fundamentally different Arab leadership but for the dismantlement of the Jewish state. Only when these dispositions change can Palestinian Arabs realistically look forward to putting their self-inflicted "catastrophe" behind them.