

“Sixty Years of Lost Opportunities” A Critique of the Arabs’ Refusal to Normalize Relations with Israel

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By Jacob Thomas

World War I was a violent worldwide conflict and with the signing of the peace treaty at Versailles on 28 June 1919, many other portentous events were set in motion, especially in the Middle East. The end of the war witnessed the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. This sprawling entity had controlled the Middle East since the early years of the 16th century. With its demise the Levant came under the control of the victorious Allies in 1918. By mandate from the League of Nations, France took control of Syria and Lebanon, and Great Britain of Palestine and Jordan. This arrangement bitterly disappointed the Arabs, because they had been promised independence after the war.

Another problem immediately surfaced in Palestine when the Arabs became aware of something previously unknown to them. On November 2, 1917, before the war had ended, the British Government had published the famous Balfour Declaration that stated the following: “His Majesty’s government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” with the understanding that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

The British authorities were soon to discover how difficult it was going to be to fulfill the promises in the Balfour Declaration. In fact, despite the 30 year presence of the British in Palestine and Jordan attempting to make it work, it proved to be impossible. Violent demonstrations erupted in Jerusalem and other parts of the country, during the late 1920s, and throughout the 1930s. Palestinian Arabs vehemently opposed the Jewish immigration into the country. In 1936, the British tried to appease the Arab population by placing a limit on the number of Jewish immigrants to be admitted into Palestine.

As soon as the Second World War was over, the situation in Palestine became very grave due to the huge influx of those Jews who had escaped the Holocaust in Europe. But the British authorities did not facilitate their entrance to the country. Whenever ships carrying thousands of Jewish refugees arrived near the Palestinian coast, they were intercepted by the British Navy, and their passengers were taken to Cyprus and placed in temporary refugee camps.

Unable to find a solution to the exacerbating situation in Palestine, the British brought the problem to the newly-organized United Nations Organization. At a meeting in Lake Success, New York, on November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly approved a partition plan for Palestine. Both the Arabs and the Palestinians rejected the

plan, and formed volunteer groups that came into Palestine to thwart the implementation of the UN sponsored Partition Plan.

The British, no longer able to maintain law and order, decided to end their Mandate over Palestine on May 15, 1948. That date marks also the declaration of the birth of the State of Israel. Arab armies from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Transjordan, and Egypt immediately entered Palestine to help its Arab population in their fight against the nascent Jewish state.

This brief account of the beginnings of the Palestinian-Israeli problem forms a backdrop to something I would like to share with the readers of FaithFreedom. An enlightened liberal Jordanian intellectual posted a most interesting article on the website of the daily online Elaph. He titled his article, "The Losers and the Winners from Camp David." The occasion was the thirtieth anniversary of the Camp David Peace Accord entered into between Egypt and Israel on March 26, 1979. Commenting on that momentous event, and offering a rationale for the Arabs' inability to learn from Camp David, the author wrote:

"That event marked the first time an Arab country would recognize Israel and begin having peaceful relations with it. The Camp David Accord shook the other Arab states to the core. They continued their resistance to any further steps of peace with Israel. They could not appreciate the fact that by his action, President Anwar Sadat regained all that Egypt had lost during the devastating military and political adventures that had taken place during President Nasser's days.

"And now, thirty years after the historic step taken by Sadat, some Arabs seem to have become more rational as they question the wisdom of their continued refusal to make peace with Israel. They can hardly believe the folly of their actions taken three decades ago, when they expelled Egypt from membership in the League of Arab States, calling it the 'Café of the Tanablat,'¹ and moving the headquarters of the League from Cairo to Tunis. Not satisfied with all those irrational measures, they banned Naguib Mahfoudh's books² and the movies that were based on his novels! In fact they went so far in their vilification of Egypt as to place it in the same category as Israel, their sworn enemy.

"But as long as the Arabs cling to their fanaticism and negativism, and exhibit a lack of self-confidence, and continue to relish a culture of war, there won't be a Palestinian State! It is very tragic that this unfortunate attitude continues to dominate the discourse of the Arab world as evidenced by the statements coming from some charlatan political leaders who keep on calling for armed resistance against Israel!

"According to Barry Rubin,³ Arab leaders raise the banner of 'resistance' only to divert the attention of their people from the accumulating problems that beset their societies. They delude the masses by claiming that the West and Israel are becoming weaker, and predict the approaching disappearance of the State of Israel, and the advent of a superior Arab leader who will lead the Palestinians to regain their homeland!

“Another troubling fact is the refusal to implement the normalization of relations with Israel, even though both Egypt and Jordan had signed peace treaties with Israel. This constitutes the greatest political crime Arabs are committing against the Palestinians. The campaign against normalization, led by Islamist and nationalistic groups, is the most stupid and ignorant political act they have adopted, all to the benefit of Israel. It has enabled it to proclaim to the whole world, ‘we want peace, but the Arabs refuse it, even when their own rulers had accepted it!’ Thus, Israel advertises itself as a persecuted state in continued need for the protection of the West, particularly America, since all Arabs keep opposing it.

“The positions of the ultra right parties in Israel, such as the Likud and Yisrael Beitenu (Israel is Our Home), have been vindicated vis-à-vis the Palestinians; while the Labor Party and those who had signed peace treaties with the Arabs, have been proven wrong. This has led Benjamin Netanyahu to declare that the policy known as “Land for Peace” is no longer a viable option. In the future, should Israel agree to a peace accord with its neighbors, the new condition would have to be “Peace for Peace.”

“Israel, both as government and people, its Knesset and media, all have learned that in practice, peace with the Arabs is worth nothing! For example, even though Egypt regained possession of the Sinai Peninsula, including the Taba resort without losing one penny or one soldier, thus freeing it to spend great funds on its development projects, (funds previously spent on armaments,) and notwithstanding the 50 billion dollars Egypt received in foreign aid; all that Israel got in exchange was to have its embassy in Cairo, housed in an apartment, where the ambassador and his staff are virtually imprisoned. They cannot move without being followed by the Egyptian Mukhabarat (Secret Service.) Israel has not been allowed to participate in any cultural activity in Egypt, not even in the yearly Cairo Book Fair! The same situation prevails in Jordan. How can we then expect Israel to sign further peace treaties with the rest of the Arab countries, specifically with Syria, after all its bitter experiences with Egypt and Jordan?

“But in spite of all those obstacles, Israel has continued in its progress politically, militarily, culturally, and economically. At the same time, the Arabs have been in retreat in all these areas. The Israeli Army is still the strongest one in the Middle East; and the per capita income in Israel is around 18,000 dollars, an amount equivalent to the per capita income of the entire Arab world, minus the Gulf States. As for the cultural scene, Israel ranks among the top countries in its scientific and cultural achievements. Its three universities, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Haifa University, and Tel Aviv University, are world famous, whereas no Arab university ranks high among the 400 most prestigious institutions. Cairo University’s rank stands at 401!

Finally, we conclude that all of Israel’s successes have been achieved through the failures of the Arabs and the Palestinians. Had Israel confronted a strong foe other than the Palestinians and their stupid leaderships, they would have succeeded in creating their Palestinian State a long time ago. Alas, how weak and totally inept has their leadership been across the years! The first leader to emerge after WWI was Haj Amin al-Husseini 4 He attended Al-Azhar University in Cairo, but was expelled after his first year! As for

Yasser Arafat, his qualification was to work as a civil engineer at the Municipality of Kuwait City. Ismail Haniyya, the leader of Hamas, was the Imam of a mosque before he assumed leadership in Gaza. In contrast with the Palestinian leadership, the Israelis could boast of Theodor Herzl, 5 the Rothschild Dynasty known as the first international bankers, and David Ben-Gurion, the father of Israel, who managed to defeat the rightist Zionist terrorist organizations after the birth of Israel.

In my book dealing with this problem, published in 1986, I pointed to the many golden opportunities that were lost by the Palestinians in their quest for the establishment of their own state. During the Cold War, their leadership imagined they could achieve their goals, because of the rivalry between the two superpowers. Having made that gamble, they did not foresee the fall of the Soviet Union, thus forcing them to deal with the only remaining Super Power, namely America. They did not take into account that, since 1967, the US had forged strategic agreements with Israel, treating it as its 51st state. At present, Israel has no incentive to sign peace agreements with the Arabs in the near future. It will have to be very cautious if it embarks on that course. Conditions for peace with the Arabs would, most likely, be extremely stringent.

Analysis

The Jordanian author lamented the fact that, for sixty long years, the intransigence of the Palestinians, and their Arab friends, lost several golden opportunities to normalize relations with Israel, and see the birth of a viable Palestinian State.

Comments

One hardly needs to add any more words to this extremely frank and hard-hitting critique. He touched on many important subjects including the ineffectiveness of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem while he held a leadership position under the British Mandate. He was an early opponent of the Balfour Declaration.

Also, and quite interestingly, he surprises the reader by referring to the Israeli scholar Barry Rubin, who has contributed a large body of scholarly work at various institutions notably GLORIA, MERIA, and the MEQ. (See note below) This is a hopeful sign.

The only thing I missed in this valuable piece was the absence of any in-depth discussion of how the Islamic world view itself effects and holds sway over Arab and Palestinian thinking. There is something deeper behind a mindset that exhibits such a bitter and continuing resistance to any thought of genuine normalization with the Jewish State.

It is my conviction that this bitter resistance stems from an Islamic belief in an Arab right of conquest. They believe it was given to them by Allah. Arab Muslims believe that because their forebears conquered Palestine in the earlier days of their history, they have a perpetual right to the land. Therefore, they have trouble accepting the existence of an alien state living in their midst. Did not Allah accompany them in their Futuhat (conquests,) for the first one thousand years of their history they continually ask? Why

then for the last one hundred years, have things changed so much. “What Went Wrong?” Some of their brave thinkers are slowly embarking on a more enlightened reading of world history. Empires rise and fall after all, and history rarely repeats itself. Remember the “divine right of kings” that all of Europe believed was set in stone? That concept too crumbled. Yes, kings and queens still have colorful monarchies around Europe but everyone knows where real political power lies. Can’t the Arabs accept such forward movement in their history too? Perhaps their desire for another Islamic Caliphate can be replaced with more challenging and democratic conceptions.

I am thankful to see the appearance of this article on the thirtieth anniversary of the Camp David Accord. Optimism springs eternal in the human breast. My hope is that many more Arab intellectuals will emulate our esteemed author in his attempt at bringing “some “Realpolitik”⁶ into the thinking of modern Arab intellectuals

The Arabic text of the article in Elaph may be accessed at:

<http://www.elaph.com/Web/ElaphWriter/2009/3/423218.htm>

Notes

1. ‘Café of the Tanabilat.’ An Arabic expression describing lazy and do-nothing people who waste their time in the cafés, chatting and smoking the Narguillah, known also as the Huka. Tanabilat is the plural of tanbal, a Turkish word for lazy, used in some Arab countries.
2. Naguib Mahfoudh was a famous Egyptian novelist and critic of Egyptian society. He died at the age of 94. During his lifetime, he authored 50 novels, and was the first Arab writer to receive the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988.
3. Barry Rubin is the Director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA), and editor of The Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA); and a member of the editorial board of Middle East Quarterly.
4. Haj Amin al-Husseini (1895-1974), was appointed by the British Authorities as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem in the early 1920s. He led the opposition to the Jewish immigration to Palestine. During WWII, he lived in Germany, and helped organize Muslim brigades in the Balkans to fight along the German Army.
5. Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) was born in Budapest, and educated in Vienna. He founded the Zionist Movement, after attending, in 1894, the trial of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French Army officer who was falsely accused and convicted of treason. That event convinced Herzl that the only solution for the Jews was to have their own country. In 1896, he wrote “Der Judenstaat” (The Jewish State). He organized the First Zionist Congress in 1897, in Basle, Switzerland.

6. Realpolitik is a German expression that signifies politics based on practical rather than ideological factors.