

Henry Pachter

Who Are the Palestinians?

by
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Who are they, the Palestinians, and who has the right to speak for them? Oppressed nationalities find it difficult to get a hearing because those who pretend to represent them are often political adventurers who merely exploit them—whether for other powers' imperialistic purposes or to vent on imaginary enemies their own hatred of the world. This is true of the Somalis, the Irish, the Bengalis, the Ibos; it is twice as true of the Palestinians because their country happens to lie at the crossroads of a world power struggle. Nowhere else do local enmities serve so many outside masters; nowhere else do foreign interests spread so much confusion about the very identity of the people whom they are pretending to save.

So, first of all let us agree: like most Irish, most Palestinians are not terrorists; but like many Ulstermen or Basques, many Palestinians will condone or even applaud acts of terrorism as long as they lack other means to express what they consider their just grievances, and as long as those grievances continue to be seen as just by others. Let us also agree that their plight is not of their own making; they have been objects of other people's policies for three thousand years.

Palestine, the land of the Philistines, a Semitic people that once was subjugated by Joshua and by David, has retained that name through the centuries as it was conquered by Hittites, Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, (1) Christians from the West, Osmanli Turks, and the British. Until recently in modern times it was sparsely settled, mostly by Arab Bedouins, and considered part of Syria. A movement to liberate and unite the Arabs, then under Turkish domination, existed long before the First World War.

Then the British used Arab tribesmen to wrest Palestine, Mesopotamia (Iraq), and Syria from the Turks, promising them "sovereignty" and self-determination. After prolonged uprisings those parts of Syria that lay east of the Jordan River were given to Hashemite sheiks, who thereafter were called

kings; the part west of the Jordan River was styled the British Mandate of Palestine and supposed to evolve toward self-government; northern Syria became a French mandate. The terms of the mandates were illegal even by the standards of the Covenant of the League of Nations, which was their covering law. Previously, a unilateral declaration by Foreign Minister Arthur Balfour had designated "Palestine" as a "Jewish homeland"; but at the same time Weizmann and Lord Harlech assured the Arabs that this should not interfere with Arab aspirations to sovereignty.

What these terms meant or how to reconcile them was never spelled out except in Balfour's memoirs, where he wondered how anybody could have been misled into thinking that they meant anything (2). But on the evidence of contemporary customs and conditions, the Balfour Declaration was consistent with a Jewish immigration rate of 50,000 a year and a ratio of two to one between Muslims and Jews. In 1930, after serious Arab riots, immigration was severely restricted—just when Jews were desperate, not for a homeland but for a place of asylum. At the outbreak of World War II, the population consisted of 456,000 Jews and 1.1 million Muslims; at its end, the census counted 1.143 million Muslims, 583,000 Jews, and 145,000 Christians.

The Holocaust and the war left the Allies with a "disposal problem" in western Europe: nearly 100,000 East European Jews who had been made homeless by persecution and political changes were languishing in displaced-persons camps, fed by charitable contributions and government aid, mostly from the United States which, however, did not lift its own restrictions on immigrants from Eastern Europe. Responding to strong pressures from Zionist organizations—and minding the electoral situation at home—President Truman resolved the problem by agreeing to the foundation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Soviet diplomacy gladly gave its assent, viewing any diminution of the British Empire as so much gain for itself, and hoping to ingratiate itself with both Jews and Arabs.

At first the British wanted to build a base in Haifa because, ironically, they were about to fulfill another Arab demand: to evacuate the base in Alexandria. On the other hand, a White Paper of 1939 also promised independence to Palestine. Weary of Arab terrorism and immediately prompted by Jewish terrorism, the Labour Party government decided to abandon the thankless task of policing the peace between Jews and Arabs. (3) The deal was consummated by a United Nations Security Council resolution

(4) the only instrument of international law on which the state of Israel can base its existence.

It is therefore necessary to remember that the United Nations at that time created not one state but two on the west side of the Jordan: one Jewish and one Arab. The Jewish state so created was totally nonviable: it consisted of three noncontiguous parts encompassing most Jewish settlements and a like number of Arab settlements. Even Ben Gurion, however, accepted this rump territory because at that time he still assumed that Palestine would remain an economic unit where two peoples would be able to develop in symbiosis—a binational state in all but name.

A word about this assumed symbiosis. Not only Jews but Arabs too had come into Palestine, attracted by the higher wages and better working conditions under Jewish employers, or simply by the promise of prosperity that the Jewish immigration and its foreign backers brought to the country. The Jewish labor organization, Histadruth, had seen with alarm how fellow Jews were hiring Arab labor at low wages while Jewish immigrants were jobless. From the early 1920s on, therefore, the Histadruth had been waging a campaign “to fight for places to work.” (5) Its strongly nationalistic appeal brought quick success to this campaign: by the 1930s Arabs worked for Jews mostly in menial positions that Jewish workers would not accept. Even so, a remarkable number of Arabs in Palestine prospered, learned mechanical skills, and went to college, so that former Palestinians now occupy enviable positions in all Arab countries as executives, opinion leaders, professional people, foremen, and skilled workers.

There is no doubt that the socioeconomic upset emanating from Jewish Palestine was one of the reasons for Arab sheiks, kings, and capitalists to fear the establishment of a Jewish state. Another was the threat of Jewish mass immigration and the growth of a new power center that was bound to subvert the status quo in the Middle East. At that time, only twenty years after the Balfour Declaration, Zionism was still considered a tool of British imperialism, and the Mufti of Jerusalem broadcast for Hitler from Berlin during the Second World War. To him, as to many Arabs today, Zionism was the imperialists’ base in the Middle East.

A lot of silly arguments have been heard about this catchword, imperialism. Does it apply to Zionism? It is true that Orde Wingate trained the Haganah (Jewish underground defense organization); but another British officer,

Glubb Pasha, led the army of Transjordan. And eighty years before these events, Lord Palmerston sponsored the unification of Italy; will anyone therefore charge that Garibaldi was a tool of British imperialism? The Jewish state was the goal of a national conquest; its conflict with Arab states or Arab interests is on the order of national rivalries, and this remains true even if Jews or Arabs or both are allied with imperial powers. At one time the British favored the Jews, but after 1930 they found Zionist presumptions increasingly embarrassing. Zionism exploited British power and then turned against it. The British, in turn, contrary to Lenin's theory of imperialism, did not mean to "exploit" Palestine economically but, as the mandate power, to prohibit the development of Jewish industries.

The United States has invested heavily in Arab oil developments. The charge that it uses Israel to keep the sheiks docile, however, is totally unfounded and, on the face of it, ridiculous. The policy of the oil companies and of the State Department has been consistently pro-Arab unless one defines as pro-Israel any policy not aiming at the destruction of the Jewish state. The responsibility for Israel's preservation, as for some other elements of the status quo the United States is committed to defend, has been a heavy burden. But it is in the nature of empires to be drawn into national border conflicts where their clients have interests, and very often they would rather not have to support them. Far from being used by the Russians or the Americans for their purposes, both Arabs and Jews have deliberately involved their big brothers in their own defense concerns.

Much has been made of the Histadruth's job policy. Obviously, in terms of Lenin's theory of imperialism, Jewish business has not been guilty of exploiting cheap Arab labor; rather, Jewish colonists have been guilty of making Arabs jobless and driving them from their lands. I have to explain here a subtlety of feudal law: *fellahin* can be sold along with the land on which they have been sitting, but the land cannot be sold without them; it cannot be pulled away from under their feet. When the Jewish agency, aware only of capitalist law, bought land from the callous *effendis*, it may honestly have thought that thereby it had acquired the right to expel the *fellahin*, which repeats the story of the "enclosures," well known to readers of Marx's *Capital*. As the Phoenicians had done at Carthage and the Athenians in Sicily, the Jews acquired land and Jewish colons "settled" it. This is the original meaning of "colonization." (6)

Notwithstanding Lenin, it may be called an imperialist policy on the part of the nation that hopes to prevail in such a fight for the land. Jewish settlers, who had naively begun to cultivate this ground -including *kibbutzniks* who did so in the name of socialism - wondered why the former owners or tenants of those grounds were firing at them or staging surprise attacks on their innocent children; from the vantage point of the expelled Palestinians, the settlers were usurpers, colonizers, imperialists in flesh and blood, not just the tools of mysterious powers across the sea. (7)

This is the background of the war of 1948, which resulted in Israel's conquest of a contiguous territory (within the boundaries of 1948-1967) and in the Hashemite annexation of territory west of the Jordan River, including part of Jerusalem and such Biblical cities as Bethlehem and Nablus. Perhaps even more important for our present purposes, it resulted in the flight of 600,000 Arabs from their native home (8). In the light of the communal strife that had preceded the British pullout, that flight is totally understandable. A sensible person avoids being in anybody's line of fire, especially in this kind of civil war. The Jewish defense organizations had taken care to project an image of fierceness. Some, like Menachem Begin's Irgun Zvai Leumi and the Stern gang, were outright terrorists; their tactics appalled even Ben Gurion. (9) In June 1945 the Irgun blew up the King David Hotel, causing ninety-one deaths. British soldiers were shot by snipers; cars loaded with dynamite were driven into British army camps. Do these people have a right to complain about terrorism? Even the Palmach, the combat organization of the Haganah, blew up bridges and derailed trains. The crimes that had been committed in a few—fortunately very few—places had frightened the Arabs; when war came to their area, they followed the advice to stay clear of it. In so doing, they indicated that they were not taking part in the war operations. Clearly, in all wars of the past, displaced populations did expect to go back to their places of home, of work, of personal contacts. To keep them from returning, to forbid them a choice between staying abroad and accepting conquest, violates custom and international law—in fact it is a crime. Yet, for reasons of national policy, the Israeli government seized this opportunity to create a demographically homogeneous Jewish state. (10)

IT WAS AT THIS MOMENT, and through this deed, that the issue of “the Palestinians” was created. So far, we have encountered Palestinians as the inhabitants of an area that might include all of the present state of Jordan, or

only the population of the Mandate territory. Now the name has come to define almost exclusively the million Arabs who claimed that they had been expelled from their homeland and who were forced to live in primitive camps spread outside Israel in the Gaza strip, on the West Bank, in Lebanon, and in Syria. These camps were maintained by UNRRA, a United Nations affiliate, and financed mostly by American contributions.

Aside from the moral and humanitarian outrage they constitute, maintaining these camps was a political mistake of the first order. They became hotbeds of unrest, recruiting grounds for terrorist organizations, breeding places for corruption, blackmail, and crime. A few cents a day per head, amounting to many millions of dollars per year, meant an invitation to count many heads twice. The fraudulent claim that there are 2 million people in those camps is clearly exposed by the census figures of 1946. Even if every single Arab in all of Palestine had fled, there could still not be more than 1.2 million. Of course in the thirty years that have elapsed, the original 600,000 have been blessed with children and grandchildren; even some “dead souls” may have been procreative.

No one denies that many Arabs on the West Bank considered the miserable allowance in the camps preferable to their normal subsistence under Arab governments. On the other hand, genuine refugees from Palestine left the camps and found lucrative employment in other Arab states; many others died. All remain statistics in the camp population, and so are their children, although the children may live in other countries. By the most conservative statistics, therefore, more than half of the present camp inmates never lived in Israel. The Israelis who justify their claim to the land by the tribal memory of two thousand years obviously have no argument against people whose claim is based on tribal memories reaching back only thirty years. More than the expellees' actual misery, the bitterness of the sacrifice that was imposed on them intensifies the hatred that defines the Palestinians as a nation distinct from other Arabs.

Should the displaced Palestinians have been admitted by other Arab states? The Germans expelled from Eastern Europe after the Second World War were among the Federal Republic's greatest assets. England admitted West Indians and mestizos whose country had become someone's state. Why do not Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, or rich Kuwait, Algeria, Saudi Arabia help their Palestinian brothers—for whom they shed such abundant tears—get integrated into their countries? Although the oil sheiks have the means, they

feel no obligation to do so. (11) Actually, they would rather use these unfortunate victims of national wars as pawn in their own game of power politics. They are not interested in healing this wound; they want it to fester, but in the body of Israel, and in the body of world peace.

How could this have been prevented? At some point between 1948 and 1968, the United States should have stopped subsidizing the refugee camps and Israel should have made an offer that might have, in one bold stroke, drastically reduced the number of "Palestinians" and disarmed their militancy. The offer should have been based on recognition of legitimate claims by those who could prove that they had lost their property, home, or job in the present territory of Israel. They should have been given the option of either a settlement in money or return under Israeli law. Since the conditions of life as a second-class citizen are never enviable, even when the nationalities are not emotionally hostile to each other, I believe that few Palestinians would have opted for return. Most would rather have taken the money, especially if at the same time U.S. subsidies had been ended. (12)

The Jewish authorities and public opinion have rejected such proposals on the twofold ground that Israel could not accommodate so many Arabs without disrupting her economy and without endangering the safety of her state. (13) The first part of this rejoinder sounds odd in view of their steady clamor for more immigrants from countries holding more Jews than there are Arab statistics in the camps. The second part is refuted by the results of the Six-Day War, which has added another million Arabs to the population of Israel and many Israelis now speak of a "Greater Israel."

Most Israelis would probably want to keep the occupied areas if they could move the Arabs out, while Arab nationalism, strangely, demands the return of uninhabited desert first and liberation of the bemoaned brothers later.

In fact, Palestinians are not just the refugees in the camps of 1948. There are a million Arabs who live under military authorities in conquered territory. Despite the greater prosperity that annexation has brought to them, they are a source of unrest and an acute danger to peace. There can be no settlement, no truce, and no confidence between Arabs and Jews as long as their status is not determined equitably and as long as there is no international machinery to ascertain the will of the Palestinians themselves. Unless a political dialogue is initiated between Israel and responsible Arab leaders—a dialogue about concrete proposals, that will satisfy legitimate claims—Yasir Arafat will step

into the vacuum and pretend that he knows what the Palestinians want, and he will go on blackmailing his Arab friends and the international community. He also has rivals: should he not occupy the vacuum, some terrorist group or perhaps even the Communist Party will. The ball, therefore, is in Israel's court. (14)

At the time of the Six-Day War, the Israeli government declared that it would hold the occupied territories only as pawns and evacuate them in return for a peace treaty. It has offered to pay compensation to those who have lost property in old Palestine—or rather, to allow the United States to make such payments; but it has not given refugees a choice of taking payment or returning. Meanwhile, the cancer of the Palestinians not only continues to fester but is being transplanted to the world arena, where it eats away the possibilities of peaceful coexistence. A decision is urgently needed to attack the primary point of the evil. Neither recriminations about the past nor legal constructions of right and wrong are required. What is required is finding political answers to political problems.

The offer to receive or to compensate legitimate claimants might be made with greater confidence by the Israeli government if at the same time the Palestinians were to be offered a state of their own. It has been suggested that the West Bank and the Gaza strip—two noncontiguous territories—would constitute such a state. Unfortunately, that state would not be economically viable; hence it would be a pawn in the political game of the oil sheiks. Nor would such a proposal be politically acceptable without including the Arab part of Jerusalem. The Israelis are loath to give up any part of Jerusalem, and there is at this time no device of condominium or international control that would make the administration of the city possible without friction. It is clear that the real point of the quarrel is not viability but sovereignty. All the principals are too primitive in their tribal instincts or too immature as nations to be reasonable on questions where self-respect is at stake. Therefore, the solution for Jerusalem will have to be imposed by the great powers; it cannot be negotiated between the parties concerned. As long as they pretend to negotiate about it, they merely indicate that they do not mean to make peace.

By contrast, the return of the occupied territories must be negotiated by Israel itself with its neighbors, and the return of the refugees can be negotiated only privately between the Israeli government and those private parties who claim to have been residents of the area now under the government's jurisdiction. By its very nature, this cannot be a problem

between Israel and Egypt or Syria, for neither of these countries claims sovereignty in Palestine. It could be negotiated between Israel and a state that can speak in the name of the Palestinians. These are a distinct people, different in background and culture from the Bedouins of Jordan, from the mercantile Lebanese, from the temperamental Syrians, from the millennia old Egyptians. They must determine their own fate, both in Israel and in the West Bank area. They would probably prefer to sever their political ties with Jordan and might be interested in economic arrangements, to mutual advantage, with Israel. It stands to reason that they would rather not fight Boumédiène's wars and that the skimpy subsidies some of their guerrillas are getting from oil sheiks cannot substitute for a developmental plan and a technology to go with it. In the long run, a Palestinian state on the West Bank might easily fall into Israel's orbit, or become a client of Moscow, Beijing, Washington, Teheran—who knows?

It is not necessary to believe that appeasement will bring an early cessation of terrorist attacks or a lowering of the level of invective in Arab rhetoric. But it may lay the foundation of a more constructive relationship between the Arabs and Jews on the local level and perhaps bring to old Palestine some kind of unity on the basis of economic interests and businesslike relations. In other words: it is necessary to strip this political problem of ideology. Although in this age everybody is "raising consciousness" or seeking to establish an identity, there is altogether too much of that in the Middle East. The Palestinians speak Arabic and worship in mosques; but they have come from many countries and have intermarried with many conquering nations. Their identity is of rather recent origin, through the misfortunes of war and yet another foreign conquest. Their appeasement ought to be less difficult than their arousal. They are looking for opportunities. I am even tempted to say that they can be bought; but they are being terrorized, and this may be the greatest obstacle to peace at this moment.

Can Israel wager her security on the vague prospect that one day the Palestinians might not only awaken but also mature? There are no alternatives, and one must look for solutions that have some promise of lasting. One may hope to prevent an explosion though one may not be able to remove the dynamite. Above all one must divide, not unite, one's enemies. Third World strategists have made the Palestinian issue into a cutting edge of their attack on Western positions in world politics. To blunt that edge, it is not necessary for the United States to take drastic measures, though it needs to radically rethink the issue. The friends of Israel—and, surprisingly, that

includes many who have valiantly criticized “Cold war attitudes” in U. S. policies—are tied to the confrontational patterns of the past decades; they think in terms of security rather than in political terms. They have missed valuable opportunities for peace in the past ten years. They gamble on the survival chances of a particular structure of the Israeli state, which is a dangerous gamble at best and is becoming more dangerous every day. The thought of having Arab citizens in their midst horrifies the Israelis; but while staring at that danger, they don’t see the gathering of Arab armies outside the gate. They have too much confidence that the gate can be held shut for all time; this is an illusion for which others have paid dearly. In the long run, security lies only in the confidence of one’s neighbors.

Aware that I have made some controversial statements, I want to make clear that the issue is neither moral nor judicial, but political. Those who wish to debate my proposal should refrain from reminding me who “started it” or who is “more to blame” or whose “rights” are better. Wherever I have touched upon such questions, my intention has merely been to show how Palestinians see them, and that is a political fact, not a moral judgment.

Notes

1. Arabs today identify themselves only by speech. Originally the term means conquerors coming from the Peninsula.
2. In 1922, Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill rejected the interpretation that Arab laws and customs had to be subordinated to Jewish interests, and Arab representatives rejected every constitution the British or the League of Nations tried to impose on the country. The Arab Congress in 1928 demanded a “fully democratic” government—whatever that meant in terms of Arab constitutions.
3. Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin was no “anti-Semite”; he simply dropped a hot potato that cost England 50 million pounds a year. He was not the only Englishman, however, to wonder why the Jews were turning against England—of all nations—which had fought Hitler. Gratitude is not a political word, but bitterness is.
4. The United Nations then had fifty-seven members; obviously the resolution would not pass today. Except for states recognized in the Westphalian Peace Treaty (1648) and at the Vienna Congress (1815),

no other state has received such sanction. States are usually a product of violence.

5. This was the term used abroad; the Hebrew term sounds less offensive.
6. A reader points out that the number affected was comparatively small and that terrorism developed mostly in the cities. Unfortunately, the symbolic and political value of the object does not depend on its size or price.
7. "The revolt is largely manned by the peasantry, that is to say by the people whose life and livelihood are on the soil but who have no say whatever in its disposal; and their anger and violence are as much directed against the Arab landowners and brokers who have facilitated the sales as against the policy of the mandatory Power under whose aegis the transactions have taken place. The fact that some of those landowners have served on national Arab bodies makes them only more odious to the insurgent peasantry and has rendered it less amenable to the influence of the political leaders as a whole." George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (New York: Lippincott, 1939), pp. 406-7. The Jewish leaders—except for the Communists, Martin Buber, and some chalutzim—never thought of allying themselves with these victims of colonization. See Bernard Avishai in *Dissent*, Spring 1975.
8. Some say the number was 800,000—more than had been living in the Jewish half of Palestine.
9. Obviously, what applies to Arabs must apply to Jews. Most Jews may not have approved of terrorism—though my father, usually one of the most law-abiding citizens, did; but Arabs are even less able than Jews to distinguish between factions in the other camp. The crime must be condemned; an entire people must not be condemned for it. But I am not arguing here about the morality of terror; my aim is to establish the fact that the Arab population *felt* threatened.
10. Unfortunately, socialists like *Dissent* contributors Avishai and N. Gordon Levin have defended this theft on the ground that "socialist values" can be realized better in a securely Jewish environment. Would they agree with the Soviet government that "Soviet values" can be realized better in an environment that does not include Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, or Trotsky?
11. Israel claims that she accepted a million Oriental Jews, mostly expelled from the Arab countries. The rationale of the Jewish "homeland," however, conflicts with the suggestion that these should

be balanced against the Arab expellees. They would be entitled to Israeli citizenship even without being harassed in Baghdad. Besides, a forcible population exchange is repugnant from any internationalist perspective.

12. Gordon Levin rejects the notion that readmission could “serve [any] real human interests besides a satisfaction of Arab honor.” But that is a question of deep concern, and it is in Israel’s power to restore that sense of honor.
13. It seems that Zionism has abandoned its earliest propaganda, which claimed that a Jewish state would make its Arab citizens happy and contented.
14. Arab notables in the occupied areas are subject to intimidation; some Israelis therefore think that Arafat is the only *available* partner. It is certain that no parley is now conceivable without him, a calamity that conforms to the pattern of the Israeli’s poor grasp of diplomatic realities: they have always been forced to choose between two evils after they had rejected an alternative that would have been, after all, second best.