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The ARAB CASE for ISRAEL

And Other Essays from a Distant Conflict

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II

THE MYTH OF ANCIENT PALESTINE

Palestinians argue that they hail from an ancient nation. Even Jesus Christ, an Aramaic-speaking Jew from Galilee, is anachronistically depicted as a Palestinian. In this narrative, the ancient nation of Palestine was invaded in 1948 and occupied by imperial European Jews, who took the state and made it their own.

This chapter will show that not only is this Palestinian narrative false, but that when the Brits declared Mandate Palestine, the Sunni Arab majority categorically opposed it, seeing it as an imperial scheme to divide Arabs and Muslims and keep them from establishing a greater Arab/Muslim nation. The Sunni Arab rejection of Palestine mirrored the Sunni Arab rejection of French-created Lebanon, to the north. In both cases, it was the minorities who saw an advantage in the smaller mandate states and thus endorsed them. Smaller states made the Sunni Arab majority less overwhelming, especially compared to living in a large Arab and/or Muslim state.

The collapse of the Turkish Ottoman Muslim empire forced its former subjects in the Levant to start thinking about and debating their collective identity, which had to evolve from imperial provincial to local national. Palestinian nationalism was thus born, not in 1920, as commonly believed, but much later, in 1964.

This chapter will debunk the dominant narrative and offer a more plausible alternative. Perhaps if the Arabs, including Palestinians, realize that their national identity is not as ancient and fixed as they think, they will find it easier to trade it for more useful advantages, such as a higher standard of

living.

Hussein Abubakr Mansour is a dear friend and one of the sharpest Arab intellectuals in the Western world. Like most Arab thinkers, he spent many years being forced to choose between propagandizing for the autocrats or leaving. He fled Egypt and became a political asylee in the United States.[14] When he explains modern Arab political thought, he starts from the same point that everyone agrees on: the 1798 Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, during which subjects (*raaya*) of the Muslim Ottoman Empire suddenly found themselves face-to-face with Europeans who did not define themselves by their religion or tribe, as had been customary throughout human civilization until then, but as citizens of France—in other words, French.[15] That experience, which we shall explore in more depth later on, triggered a debate among Muslims of Egypt and the Levant. Some of them declared themselves to be a Muslim nation under the Ottoman sultanate. But the sultanate itself was in the process of abandoning Islam—secularizing and "Turkifying."

Turkification suppressed non-Turkish languages and cultures, prompting the Arabs to experiment with two strains of separatist nationalism. One school believed that, just as Turkic Muslims were a nation, so were the Arab Muslims, who should all be part of a single pan-Arab empire—a concept that left out non-Muslims. The other believed that independent nation-states should emerge for each minority. As Britain and France inherited the Arab Ottoman provinces in the wake of World War I, each European power sponsored one of the two strains. The British encouraged Arab nationalism, which it had long viewed as a strategy for weakening the Ottoman empire. Their man was the custodian of Mecca's holy shrine of Kaaba, Hussein the Hashemite, whose son Faisal set up a short-lived Arab kingdom in Damascus in 1919. The French, for their part, wanted minorities to have their own states, instead of sticking with Arab nationalism, given that "the main weakness of Arab nationalism as an idea was that it confused, and still confuses, the history of the Arabs with the history of Islam." France thus made Lebanon for the Christians, a Sunni "Syria out of Damascus and Aleppo, an Alawite state in the northern coastal region and, after 1922, the state of Jabal Druze" in the south.[16]

Borders, however, were drawn in ways that served the interests of Britain and France, mainly focused on connecting Iraqi oilfields in the north and the south to ports on the Mediterranean. Some regions, such as Mount Lebanon, were expanded and turned into independent nations, such as Grand Liban. Other regions, such as the western Jordan Valley, were cut off from "Transjordan" to its east. The ancient name of Palestine, that described mainly the central part of what is today Israel, was expanded to include all the territory west of the Jordan River. At times, France and Britain jockeyed for more territory under their control, such as the British asking for the Litani River to be the border separating Palestine from Lebanon, with the French turning down the British demand and keeping the Ottoman-era border that separated non-Sunni and Christian south Lebanon from Sunni Muslim north Palestine. Other regions in the Levant—Hawran, the Golan Heights, Jazeera, Hijaz, among others—were ancient names that were not turned into nation states.

Many Levantine minority communities jumped at the opportunity to create independent states, having lived for 1,400 years as second-class subjects, or dhimmis, under the rule of successive Muslim dynasties. The Sunni Muslim majority saw the rise of minority states as Europe stabbing them in the back—a tactic of divide-and-conquer. Hence, most Sunni Muslims opposed the new independent nations in the Levant and called for the establishment of an all-encompassing Arab state, rallying mainly behind the Hashemite monarchy in Damascus.

The absolute majority of Arabs in Palestine were Sunnis. As such, they never accepted Palestine as a separate nation-state. Instead, they agitated for joining the Arab kingdom in Damascus, or, alternatively, for the revival of the ancient Islamic Empire from the seventh century. That was why the same Arabs of Palestine who had been living for five centuries under the colonial rule of the Ottomans now had a problem with the new colonial rule, that of the British.

The Arabs of Palestine did not attack the British to win Palestinian independence. After all, these Arabs opposed the British colonials and all their stipulations, including the creation of Mandatory Palestine, and

“concluded that only by the use of force can they prevent Britain from making the whole of Palestine into a Jewish state.”[17]

1920: BRITAIN CREATES MANDATE PALESTINE

In over two millennia, since the Arabic language first started taking shape, there was never an Arab or Muslim dynasty that considered Jerusalem to be its capital. In fact, throughout history, there has never been a sovereign country called Palestine, although the area that extended from Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea was given that name by a Roman emperor, and has appeared as such on maps from the Byzantine era until the founders of modern Israel gave it the current name (which refers to Jewish history). In 1920, the British merged two or three former Turkish provinces into what was called Palestine, which they governed until 1948, by mandate from the League of Nations (the predecessor to the United Nations).

Palestine was not created as a state, but a territory entrusted to the British with a few guidelines. “Recognition has thereby been given to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country,” read the League of Nations resolution titled “the Palestine Mandate.” Until 1948, the ethnonym “Palestinian” applied to Arabs, Jews, and other ethnic groups living there; hence, resolutions on Palestine by both the League of Nations and, after its founding in 1945, the United Nations did not refer to Palestinians to mean Arabs only.

Arabs both inside and outside of Mandatory Palestine perceived of “Palestine” as just another Arab province, separated from the greater Arab mass by European powers. For example, Fawzi al-Qawuqji, who was born in Lebanon’s Tripoli and served as an officer in the Ottoman army, became a “hero of Arab nationalism and the struggle for Palestine.”

Ezzedine Al-Qassam, born in Syria’s Latakia and trained as an Islamic cleric, connected with the Arab Kingdom in Damascus and met with Faisal. When the French decimated the Arab Kingdom, Qassam fled to Haifa. He signed on the petition to Palestine’s High Commissioner to appoint Amin al-

Husseini as the Mufti of Jerusalem. Qassam's "reputation as a Syrian exile with a French death warrant likely contributed to the esteem in which he was held by young men."[18] In 1935, Qassam was killed after having set an ambush for a police force near his residence in Haifa. It would be hard to make a case that Qassam—a Syrian Arab nationalist cleric born 200 miles north of the "resistance" standoff that led to his demise—was motivated by Palestinian nationalism.

Even the Palestinian-born Husseini held the Islamic Congress, in 1931 in Jerusalem, where he tried to get himself elected "caliph"—that is, caliph of all Muslims of the world—not the king or president of Mandate Palestine.[19]

The Arabs of Palestine attacked the British because they wanted to join an Arab or Islamic nation. That was why, until 1939, when the British found themselves trying to win over the Arabs of the world in the war against Nazi Germany, London favored the Jews who played along with the British plan in Palestine. Starting in 1939, however, Britain reversed its commitment to creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and instead recognized that its "interests in the Middle East lay with the independent Arab states and not with the Zionist project."[20] As Britain turned on Jews and took the side of the Arabs, the Jews reacted. The fight for Jewish independence began.[21]

As the Nazis took Paris in 1939, King Abdullah of Jordan, the brother of Faisal, tried to convince the British to allow him to annex French mandate Syria and Lebanon. Iraq's Hashemites wanted to annex Syria within an Iraqi-Syrian union. The Hashemite ambition in Iraq and the Levant prompted their rival Ibn Saud to reach out to the British to take over French mandate territories to counter his rivals.[22] Therefore, when the British-led Jordanian army took over and annexed the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the war against the newly declared State of Israel, Riyadh played an instrumental role in blocking Arab recognition of the annexation.

It was this Arab rivalry, not Palestinian nationalism, that kept Arabs of the West Bank stateless, even after Jordan had given them Jordanian passports and built a bureaucracy in the West Bank and an infrastructure. The Arabs in the West Bank later formed the core of what came to be known as the Palestinian people.

In 1939, Britain convened a conference in London to end the 1936 Arab Revolt. Jews were represented by Zionists—Jews seeking the creation of a national homeland in Palestine, in accordance with the original British Mandate. The Arab delegation was formed of representatives of five Arab governments and a relative of cleric Amin al-Husseini. The cleric was the chief of the most radical and Islamist faction among Palestine's Arabs, who started his career cheering for joining Faisal's Arab kingdom in Damascus, and later turned Islamist and allied with Hitler. When the Palestinian delegation delivered its speech in London, it referred to the disputed land with the Jews as "Palestine," but referred to the people who lived in Palestine as Arabs, or the Arabs of Palestine, but never as Palestinians.[23]

At the 1939 London Conference, "the Jews required guarantees—they were not an ordinary but an 'extraordinary' minority, one needing extraordinary safeguards."[24] The Arabs refused and insisted that Palestine should become a "sovereign Arab state," with "protections guaranteed to the Jewish minority or any other minority."[25]

With the formal expiration of the British Mandate on May 14, 1948, the Jewish community in Palestine declared independence and called their state "Israel." On October 1, Arabs in Gaza declared Palestine as an independent state with the Arab Hashemite flag as its own. The declaration was not recognized by the Hashemites themselves, who launched a war across the Jordan River to take the whole territory. As Jews fought their War of Independence, the Jordanian army, led by British general John Baghot Glubb (better known as Glubb Pasha) wrestled the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Israeli hands, expelled or killed all the Jews who lived there, and annexed these lands to the Hashemite monarchy under King Abdullah I. Jordan considered unification with Iraq, under Abdullah's brother—Hashemite King Faisal I.[26]

Meanwhile, Ibn Saud in Riyadh saw in a Hashemite Arab kingdom in the Levant and Mesopotamia a threat to his claim to be the leader of all the Arabs. International rivalry between the declining British Empire, standing behind the Hashemites, and the rising American superpower, supporting the Saudis, might have aggravated the animosity that had started in 1925; that is

when the Hashemites lost Western Arabia, including their seat of power in Mecca, to the Saudis of Nejd, in Central Arabia.

When Jordan took the West Bank and East Jerusalem from the Israelis in 1949, Saudi Arabia used its clout to obstruct the Hashemite annexation of these territories. In 1950, the Political Committee of the Arab League held an extraordinary session in Cairo and decided that the "annexation of Arab Palestine by any Arab state would be a violation of the league's charter, and subject to sanctions." The committee threatened to expel Jordan from the league, forcing the Jordanians to argue that "annexation of Arab Palestine was irrevocable, although without prejudice to any final settlement of the Palestine question." As such, the Arab League considered the West Bank and East Jerusalem to be a trust in Jordanian hands until "the Palestine question is solved in favor of its inhabitants."[27]

In 1952, army generals toppled the Egyptian monarchy and called their coup a revolution. One of the putschists, the charismatic Gamal Abdul-Nasser, emerged on top. Two years later, he released his first eighty-two-page platform under the title *The Philosophy of the Revolution*. Nasser said that while he was a soldier fighting in the 1948 war against Israel, his thinking was focused on events unfolding in Egypt.[28]

Fearing for the future of their own monarchies from Nasser and their own generals, the Saudis and the Hashemites closed ranks and allied together against the new enemy, now represented by the populist and charismatic Nasser. "When the battles ended in Palestine and I returned to the homeland [Egypt], the whole region had become—to my mind—one," Nasser wrote, adding, "One [Arab] region, same circumstances, same factors, and the same powers conspiring against it."

Egypt's rising pan-Arab general scared Arab monarchies and they decided to test him.

In April 1956, Nasser flew to Jeddah and signed a pact with King Saud Bin Abdul-Aziz and Imam Ahmed of Yemen, under which the armies of the three countries would be placed under a unified command to deal with any foreign aggression.

Six months later, Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal, prompting war with

Britain, France, and Israel. However, US President Dwight Eisenhower saved Nasser by issuing a declaration that ordered the tripartite alliance to call off their operation, so Saudi Arabia and Yemen never had to come to the rescue.

In 1958, Syria invited Nasser to merge Egypt and Syria into one nation. The United Arab Republic (UAR) was thus born. Nasser entrusted the rule of Syria, now known as the northern region, to a Syrian intelligence officer who ruled the country with fire and fury. In September 1961, a coup in Syria resulted in its secession. Nasser, however, maintained the veneer of the UAR and went shopping for a replacement, when—a year after the Syrian secession—an opportunity presented itself in Yemen.

In September 1962, Imam Ahmed died and was succeeded by his son al-Badr. General Abdullah Sallal, however, carried out a coup—which he called a revolution—and declared Yemen a republic. Civil war ensued. Nasser sided with the putschists and deployed Egyptian troops to Sanaa in the hopes of annexing the nascent Yemeni republic. Saudi Arabia and Jordan, for their part, took the side of Yemen's royals.[29]

"We've suffered losses" in Yemen, Nasser said in a speech. "Since the first day and until yesterday, we have lost 21 officers and 115 soldiers," and added, "The boots of each one of those is more honorable than the crowns of King Saud and King Hussein [of Jordan]."[30]

1964: THE BIRTH OF ARAB PALESTINE

Saudi Arabia took its proxy war with Nasser to the UN, instructing its Permanent Representative Ahmad al-Shuqayri (an Arab from Acre in Israel) to lobby the Security Council for a resolution that would declare Nasser's forces as alien invaders and request their withdrawal from Yemen. Shuqayri dragged his feet, prompting Riyadh to fire him, only for Nasser to reward Shuqayri by appointing him, in September 1963, as the "Representative of Palestine at the Arab League"—despite Saudi and Jordanian contestations. Now that Palestine had become a member of the Arab League which—after Syria's secession and Yemen's implosion—Nasser could potentially annex to his UAR, all that Palestine needed was a state and Palestinians.

On May 28, 1964, Shuqayri convened the “First Arab Palestinian Conference,” held in East Jerusalem. It adopted the Palestinian National Covenant, a charter written by Shuqayri the year before, and declared the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). For the first time in history, Palestine was defined as “the homeland of the Arab Palestinian people,” with its borders being those of Mandate Palestine West of the Jordan. The covenant said that it did not recognize the UN Partition Plan—Resolution 181. Most important to Nasser, Article 13 of the covenant read: “[Creating] an Arab union and the liberation of Palestine are two goals that complement one another, an Arab union will lead to liberating Palestine, and liberating Palestine will lead to an Arab union.”[31] In Nasser’s mind, the goal was Palestine’s “liberation,” but not an independent Palestinian state.

But not so fast. The Hashemites and the Saudis deployed different tactics against Nasser and his newly-created PLO. Jordan reasoned that boosting Palestinian nationalism would counter Nasser’s Arab nationalism, so King Hussein inaugurated the first PLO conference in East Jerusalem. Saudi Arabia, for its part, tried to shut down Nasser’s idea. At the Arab League, where resolutions are approved by consensus only, Riyadh blocked a resolution for the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Saudis also tried to undermine the PLO conference in Jerusalem by dissuading Palestinians from participating, and even blocking those who resided in Saudi Arabia from doing so.

With the Saudis blocking the birth of Palestine at the Arab League, and with the Jordanians not conceding the West Bank to Shuqayri, Nasser could not add Palestine to his UAR. Using his widely popular and populist Radio Cairo, Nasser incited Palestinians—and the Arabs in general—against the Saudis and the Hashemites.

Riyadh responded by reaching out to Palestinians who had helped midwife the PLO’s birth in Jerusalem. One of those was a Kuwait-based chief of a little-known faction that called itself Fatah. His name was Yasser Arafat, and he established “a direct link to Saudi Arabia through the country’s Minister of Petroleum Ahmad Zaki Yamani.”

In 1965, “Yamani arranged for Arafat to meet King Faisal, Nasser’s chief

rival among Arab leaders. [Arafat] came back with millions" of dollars. So instrumental was Yamani in liaising between his country and Arafat that, in 1975, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) kidnaped Yamani at the OPEC meeting in Vienna, and then spared his life for a hefty ransom.[32]

To undermine Shuqayri, Arafat accused the PLO "of being beholden to Arab regimes and of not representing the average Palestinian." Arafat's campaign against the PLO enraged Nasser, who accused Saudi Arabia of using Arab League summits to scheme against him, and threatened to boycott them. "A regressive Arab country, Saudi Arabia, spent five million pounds on an American organization to produce and circulate propaganda against us in America and the American Congress," Nasser said in 1966. "This propaganda does not have a single word against Israel."[33]

To oust Shuqayri and Nasser, Arafat had to counter pan-Arab nationalism, thus promoting Palestinian nationalism for the first time in the history of the Arab conflict with Israel. Arafat also outshone the PLO militarily. While the PLO waited for its Arab League-sponsored Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) to stand up and face Israel in traditional war, Arafat's Fatah engaged in asymmetric war against the Jewish state, launching terrorist attacks that killed Israeli civilians.

THE 1967 WAR

The only thing Nasser could do to outmaneuver Saudi Arabia and its protégé Arafat, to show himself as the true champion of Palestine and the undisputed Arab leader, was to initiate hostilities against Israel. While anti-Nasser propaganda might have accelerated his going to war with Israel, his motives have been debated, inconclusively, for a long time, and have included reports about faulty Soviet intelligence passed on to Egypt that Israel was about to launch war.

Be it as it may, Nasser's escalation with Israel—which included amassing forces in Sinai and closing off the Strait of Tiran to maritime traffic to the port of Eilat—led to the June 1967 Six Day War, in which the Jewish state

routed Nasser's army. The war broke out on June 5; Syria and Jordan then joined it; and by June 10, Israel had taken the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria.

With overwhelming Arab sympathy toward the defeated Nasser, Saudi Arabia did not rub salt into his wound after his 1967 defeat. On the contrary, it rallied to his side at the Arab League Summit in Khartoum, which was planned to discuss the 1967 War, but whose final statement opened with "reiterating Arab unity."[34]

Thus ended the proxy war in Yemen between Riyadh and Cairo. The 1967 War might have been between Israel and the Arabs, but it also shook the status quo inside the Arab camp. Once Arab business was taken care of, the third item of the Khartoum statement read: "No reconciliation, no negotiations with and no recognition of Israel." The Khartoum gathering thus won its epithet: The Summit of the Three Nos.

Nasser's first reaction to his 1967 defeat was remorse; in tears, he tendered his resignation. But as Ajami writes, the man "who knew the political power of images and impressions…realized" that new revolutionary forces would engage him in "a fight he could easily lose"; and "determined to maintain the initiative in inter-Arab politics…he threw the War of Attrition into the equation."[35]

Nasser told a crowd in Cairo, "Either Israel withdraws from the occupied territories, or we continue fighting. There is no politics in this."[36] Hard as he tried, however, the spectacular defeat of Arab armies weakened him in favor of non-state actors.

In 1968, Israel launched a punitive campaign against Palestinian guerrilla fighters across the Jordan River, focusing on the town of Karamah, whose name means "dignity" in Arabic. Jordanian artillery entered the fray, and the Israelis retreated with unexpected losses. Arafat, who was commanding the Fatah fighters, emerged as a war hero whose imaginary victory made up for Nasser's 1967 disastrous defeat. Arafat thus became the new face of the conflict with Israel, a Palestinian nationalist who rose at the expense of Nasser, his pan-Arab nationalism, and Nasser's man at the helm of the PLO

—Shuqayri. Generous Saudi funding to Arafat reached 1.5 million pounds a year. In February 1969, Arafat replaced Shuqayri as PLO chairman.

Arafat's rising stardom made Nasser invite him to Cairo and ask his Palestinian guest, "How many years do you need to destroy Israel and set up your state?" When Arafat had no answer, Nasser told him to "think about peace." It would take Arafat more than two decades to show interest in peace. He thrashed Nasser, shortly before the Egyptian leader's death, for accepting a US "initiative for an Arab-Israeli settlement."

Nasser died in 1970. In the struggle between Egypt's pan-Arab nationalism and Saudi-backed Palestinian nationalism, Riyadh stood victorious; but since it had broken Nasser, it owned his conflict with Israel. Saudi Arabia's first order of business was to transform the Palestinian revolutionary militias into a "national authority" that could win global recognition and negotiate a fair solution with Israel.[37]

The process of transforming Arafat started in August 1969 with an arson attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Though the Israelis arrested the arsonist two days later—an Australian Christian tourist named Denis Michael Rohan who suffered from auditory hallucinations—much of the Muslim world assumed it was a deliberate Israeli attack. In response, Saudi Arabia called for a summit of countries with Muslim populations. A meeting was held in Rabat. A year later, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was founded in Jeddah, which was declared as the headquarters of the new organization "pending the liberation of Jerusalem." The 1970 OIC summit called on its members "to facilitate the representation of the Palestine Liberation Movement in Islamic countries."

The PLO started gaining recognition outside the Arab League. Arafat and the PLO were not yet ready to give up on the revolution and the liberation of all the Palestinian soil with the force of armed struggle. The 1973 War, however, surprised everyone and forced the Saudis to accelerate their peace plans, but not before they played their diplomatic hand one more time, this time using the "oil weapon."

Throughout the 1960s, Gulf capitals had flirted with the idea of an oil embargo on Western countries that supported Israel. At the "Three Nos

Summit" in Khartoum, member states debated slamming the West with a punitive oil embargo, but Gulf capitals argued that oil revenue was needed to mitigate the 1967 War losses and to rebuild the devastated Arab armies. The opportunity to twist some Western arms by withholding oil exports rose again when, on October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a two-front war on Israel. On October 20, 1973, oil-producing Arab nations stopped exporting oil to the United States and other Western nations deemed to be supportive of Israel.

Arab capitals, however, learned that withholding oil exports to the West was a double-edged sword: it slowed down Western economies, but also inflicted losses on Arab exporters. Gulf governments had stacked reserves in US dollars, but the oil embargo sent inflation skyrocketing and Riyadh feared for the value of its savings. It did not take long before Saudi Arabia started looking for an off-ramp. On March 19, 1974, after Egypt and Israel had signed a ceasefire agreement, Gulf nations ended the oil embargo. Some reports suggested that Saudi flexibility could have been prompted by statements from US officials implying a possible takeover of Saudi oil fields. Whether Riyadh ended the oil embargo to salvage its revenue and the value of its cash reserves, or to stop an impending US takeover of its oilfields, Riyadh acted out of Saudi national interests.[38]

PREPARING FOR PEACE (1974–1977)

Since none of the Arab tactics to finish off Israel worked, as early as November 1973 Egyptian President Anwar Sadat seemed eager to sue for peace. Saudi Arabia was not far behind. Its support for Sadat's overture to Israel was hinted at in Sadat's speeches and later confirmed in declassified Western documents. But unlike Sadat, who pushed for peace openly and publicly, the Saudis supported a "fair solution" with Israel behind closed doors.

Sadat was, with Nasser, one of the Free Officers who had toppled the royal government in Egypt in 1952. His revolutionary "progressive" credentials were impeccable. His army's achievements in the first week of the

1973 War had made him a hero. And with Sinai under Israeli control, Sadat had Egyptian territory to win back, regardless of the Palestinian issue.

Saudi Arabia, however, had none of Sadat's excuses to openly support peace. The Saudi government was often shamed for being a monarchy—therefore "reactionary" and not "progressive." The Saudis did not fight any wars against Israel and had no border or disputed territory with the Jewish state. While Cairo's urgency for peace with Israel was justifiable, Riyadh's was not.

While US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger conducted "shuttle diplomacy" between Egypt and Israel to arrange for a ceasefire in November 1973, the Egyptian Army was still on its back foot, which forced Cairo to agree to attend a UN peace conference that was held in Geneva in December. (Jordan, which did not participate in the 1973 War, attended Geneva in the hope of recovering land it had lost in 1967.) That UN conference became the first ever public, face-to-face meeting between officials from Arab countries and Israel.

Sadat justified his decision to go to Geneva as such: "During the peak of our military victory in October 1973, I called on the world for a UN peace conference with the participation of representatives of the heroic Palestinian people," Sadat said in a speech to parliament. "I thus put Israel, for the first time, in front of a choice that it could not run from and continue to deceive the world that it wanted peace but that it was the Arabs who were opposed to peace."[39]

Sadat claimed to be calling Israel's bluff by forcing the Israelis to attend peace conferences, notwithstanding that it was the Israeli government, just weeks after the Six Day War in 1967, that first offered, for peace with the Arabs, to give back territory Israel won. "We're waiting for a phone call from the Arabs," Moshe Dayan, Israel's defense minister during the 1973 war, had famously said. [40]

Meanwhile, Egypt's 1973 War partner, Syria, ruled by revolutionary generals, made its participation contingent on that of a Palestinian delegation. Given its ongoing attacks on Israeli non-combatants and the lack of international legitimacy, the PLO was not invited to the UN Geneva

Conference that was held in December 1973. The Saudis were set to rectify the glitch, by turning the PLO from a militia into a government and winning it global recognition.

First, Saudi Arabia renewed Arab consensus over the legitimacy of the PLO. At the Arab League summit held in Rabat in October 1974, the PLO was described as "the sole representative of the Palestinian people." The OIC, based in Jeddah and relatively under Saudi influence, took its own recognition of the PLO and that of the Arab League to the UN. In November, the UN General Assembly approved Resolution 3236, which recognized the PLO as "the representative of the Palestinian people."[41]

In Rabat in 1974, there was also a departure in language from the customary consensus on liberating all of Palestine. Perhaps to gloss over a rift that had opened up between Arab governments over the participation of Egypt and Jordan in UN's Geneva Peace Conference, the Arab League now identified two sets of goals: "goals of the current phase," and longer-term ones.

Short-term goals were seemingly designed to cater to the camp of Egypt and Jordan and included "the liberation of all the Arab land occupied in the June 1967 aggression," and "a commitment to restoring the national rights of the Palestinian people as outlined by the PLO." Long-term goals, likely drafted to cater to Iraq, Syria, and Libya, pledged "to reject partial [peace] settlements," and committed "to the liberation of all occupied Arab lands and the restoration of the national rights of the Palestinian people."[42]

The change of mood in Cairo, Amman, and the Gulf capitals—with the exception of Kuwait—was unmistakable. These Arabs, including the two poles Cairo and Riyadh, were open to suing for peace with Israel. The Palestinians had to play along.

In June 1974, the PLO held a meeting in Egypt in which it abandoned its decade-old position that the creation of a Palestinian government would only be possible after the liberation of all the land of Mandate Palestine. In Cairo, the PLO issued a statement of ten points. The first rejected UN Security Council Resolution 242, a resolution globally understood as an instruction for Israel to withdraw from territory it took from the Arabs in 1967. The PLO

wanted the whole land, not only the 1967 territory. However, the PLO said that the organization would create an independent Palestinian authority on "whatever land is liberated," and insisted that it would not recognize Israel or its border anyway. This is the position of Hamas today, as spelled out in its charter, as amended in 2017.

The PLO also said that it would never give up "the right of return and self-determination on all the soil of the homeland." The "right of return," according to which all Palestinians and their descendants would be allowed to return to what is today Israel, would eventually prove to be the longest-lasting Palestinian demand and the main obstacle to peace with Israel.

Given the global and Arab mood in favor of peace at the time, Arafat and the PLO offered even more spin that sounded like an invitation for peace with Israel. In November 1974, in his speech at the UN widely known as "the gun and the olive branch" speech, Arafat called on "Jews to turn away…from the Israeli leadership," and "live in our democratic Palestine."[43]

Thirty-eight years and three Arab-Israeli wars after the Arabs of Palestine had delivered their speech at the 1939 London Conference, demanding an end to the Jewish homeland, Arafat and the PLO were upholding that same principle in 1974—but now not in the name of "Arabs of Palestine," but "our democratic Palestine."

In 1976, both Saudi Arabia and the Communist bloc were urging Arafat to declare the PLO a government in exile—an idea that had been proposed by Sadat four years prior; but the PLO feared that becoming a government would undermine its ability to engage in asymmetric war against Israel.

A year later, Saudi Crown Prince Fahad received US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in Riyadh and urged him to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians. The Saudis used a tactic similar to Sadat's. They tried to justify—to Arab audiences—their call for peace by blaming Israel for not accepting it, and thus depicting their policy as a way of calling the Israeli bluff. "The Arab world has been doing all it can to achieve the conditions which will lead to peace," said Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal. The Arab world "can't do much more without movement on the Israeli side." This talking point strategy continues until today.[44]

CAMP DAVID TO THE FIRST INTIFADA (1977–1987)

On November 9, 1977, ten days before he landed in Israel and delivered a speech before Knesset, Sadat stood before Egypt's parliament. "I have visited Iran and Saudi Arabia for consultations. We are delighted to have dear brother Yasser Arafat, who is sitting here with us today," Sadat said, adding, "In Saudi Arabia, there was full coordination with brother Yasser Arafat, PLO chief—the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."[45]

After informing his audience that his steps in pursuit of peace with Israel were in coordination with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the PLO, Sadat deployed his favorite tactic: he depicted his zeal for peace with Israel as an attempt to call the bluff of the Jewish state and to show how Israelis were not serious when they talked about peace. "Israel will be amazed when it hears me say this in front of you: I'm willing to go to their house, to the Knesset itself, to discuss [peace] with them."[46]

For declaring his intent to go to the Knesset, Sadat received a standing ovation, including from Arafat. Peace seemed close.[47]

On November 20, 1977, Sadat came to Israel and spoke before the Knesset. Although across Israel and the West, the fact of his visit and his willingness to speak of peace drove the headlines, the speech itself focused to a significant degree on the "Palestinian People and their legitimate rights":

> [E]ven the United States has opted to face up to reality and facts, and admit that the Palestinian People are entitled to legitimate rights and that the Palestinian problem is the core and essence of the conflict and that, so long as it continues to be unresolved, the conflict will continue to aggravate, reaching new dimensions. In all sincerity, I tell you that there can be no peace without the Palestinians…. [I]t is no use to refrain from recognizing the Palestinian People and their rights to statehood and rights of return.[48]

Weeks later, likely fearing to be outflanked by the radical regimes of Syria, Iraq, and Libya, Arafat attacked Sadat for making peace with Israel,

blaming him for not asking Israel to acquiesce to the creation of a Palestinian state, although that was exactly what Sadat had demanded in his speech at the Knesset.[49]

Weary that Sadat's failure in his pursuit of peace "would weaken the moderate Arabs and empower the radical ones," Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported Sadat's trip to Israel, according to declassified British documents.[50] Riyadh, however, did not break publicly with the consensus at the Arab League that denounced the Camp David Accord for peace between Israel and Egypt, which Sadat had signed in September 1978.

The Camp David Peace Accord outlined what peace between Israel and the Palestinians should look like. "Transitional arrangements for the West Bank and Gaza for a period not exceeding five years," during which the governing Israeli military withdraws "as soon as self-governing authority has been freely elected" by inhabitants. These arrangements, according to the treaty, "should give due consideration both to the principle of self-government by the inhabitants of these territories and to the legitimate security concerns" of Israel. Camp David's "land-for-peace" concept informed all peace plans that followed.[51]

In November of that year, the Arab League held a summit in Baghdad in which it called on the Egyptian parliament to not ratify the peace treaty. When Cairo did, the League convened again in March 1979, this time in Tunis, and (despite US pressure) expelled Egypt, instructing all member states to sever ties with Cairo.[52]

Although Riyadh did sever its ties with Cairo, it continued its $1.5 billion annual aid to Egypt. Sadat blamed the Saudis for letting radical regimes outplay them at the Baghdad Summit. The Saudis saw "the outcome of Baghdad differently. All participants accepted a resolution that 'affirmed' the support of the Arabs for 'a just peace,' based on complete Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in the 1967 war." The Saudis believed that "this formula [implied] acceptance of Israel's right to exist and was close approximation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 242." By inducing "Iraq, Algeria and the other radicals to accept that…the Saudis actually nudged the other Arabs significantly closer to Sadat's position."[53]

Without Egypt and Sadat, and with Iraq now reliant on Saudi Arabia for support in its war with Iran, the Saudis hoped they could continue pushing their "just peace" idea based on a two-state solution. Saudi Crown Prince Fahad thus proposed a peace initiative at the Arab League Summit, held in Fez in August 1981. This time, it was Syria's Hafez Assad who led the opposition to the Saudi peace effort. Assad was joined by Kuwait. Arafat, for his part, disappointed the Saudis when he failed to step up and endorse the plan, as he had promised Riyadh he would do.[54]

The Saudi peace plan "was drafted by Fatah's moderate leaders, and was supposed to win immediate Palestinian support, at least from Fatah's leadership, but that never happened," wrote minister Ghazi al-Qusaibi, a member of the Saudi delegation in Fez. "Instead, Palestinian radicals assailed the plan, while Yasser Arafat was being himself, delivering dozens of contradictory statements."

In his memoirs, Qusaibi wrote that Arafat "used to come [to Saudi Arabia] and say that he personally supported the plan, then leave and say that his opinion did not matter, and that what mattered was the position of the PLO leadership," adding that all the attempts of Saudi Crown Prince Fahad to get a clear response from Arafat failed. The Saudis therefore withdrew their proposal in Fez.[55]

A year later, Israel invaded Lebanon and besieged West Beirut, demanding Arafat's surrender. Arafat had relocated to Beirut in 1970, in the aftermath of the Black September that saw the Jordanian monarchy eject him and his militia from Amman. A weakened Arafat came under the mercy of his Lebanese Muslim hosts, who were under the influence of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh pressured its Lebanese allies to let go of Arafat. The Lebanese leaders summoned Arafat to the mansion of Sunni leader and Riyadh ally Saeb Salam and asked the PLO chief to spare the country further destruction by leaving. Arafat went into exile in Tunisia.[56]

Even though, upon Arafat's request, Riyadh had used its ties with Washington to make Israel spare his life, prompting Arafat to privately "send a touching letter of appreciation to the role of King Fahad"[57] in arranging Arafat's exit from Beirut to Tunisia, the PLO chief publicly blamed the

Saudis for betraying the Palestinian cause: “Had Lebanon not asked us to leave, and had the Arab countries not supported the Lebanese request, we would have not left Beirut, and we would have continued our struggle.”[58]

With Arafat temporarily beaten and the Palestinians on the run, the Syrian military also suffering heavy losses in side battles with Israel in Lebanon, and with the tide turning against Iraq in its war against Iran, the Arab League revisited the Saudi peace plan that it had rejected in 1981, and endorsed it in 1982. This was “the first time that Riyadh offered coexistence with Israel.”[59]

The plan’s main points became the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative that the Arab League would approve twenty years later and re-endorse at most of its summits that followed. The Fez points were:

- An Israeli withdrawal from all 1967 territories including Arab Jerusalem
- The dismantlement of [Israeli] settlements constructed on 1967 territory
- A reaffirmation of the inalienable self-determination rights of the Palestinian people under the leadership of the PLO, its sole representative, and offering compensation for [refugees] who do not wish to return
- The creation of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.[60]

FIRST INTIFADA, 1987, AND THE 1988 ALGERIA DECLARATION

Isolated and irrelevant in Tunisia, Arafat in 1983 snuck back into Lebanon through the northern port of Tripoli, and tried to reorganize his rank and file. This time it was Assad and his army that ejected the PLO chairman from Lebanon, despite Assad’s claims of supporting the “Palestinian cause.” As Arafat sank into oblivion, an opportunity reared its head: in December 1987, Palestinians in the West Bank clashed with Israeli security. Arafat realized that he could capitalize on the riot and instructed his deputy Abu Jihad to sponsor what came to be known as the First Intifada. By April 1988, Israel’s

Special Forces had located and assassinated Abu Jihad in his house in Tunis, yet the Intifada continued.

In the years that preceded the downfall of Iran's shah, Abu Jihad had cultivated strong ties with Iranian opposition, training them in camps in Syria. When the opposition took power in Tehran in 1979, it rewarded Arafat and tried to pull him away from Saudi Arabia.[61]

As the Intifada ground on, Washington intensified its diplomacy. Secretary of State George Shultz presented a plan which stipulated that, in return for Israel's withdrawal from Arab territories occupied in 1967 per UNSC Resolution 242, Arab countries would sign peace treaties with Israel. The Shultz Plan was to be discussed at a conference with the participation of Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon—but not the PLO. "There is no place at the negotiating table for those who cannot accept that resolution as the basis for negotiations, and no place for those who practice terrorism or deny Israel's right to exist," Shultz said.[62]

The conference never took place; but the "land for peace" concept continued to evolve, prompting Jordan to detach itself, in 1988, from the West Bank to allow its residents to elect their leadership and govern themselves, as was outlined by the successive peace plans. Its residents were calling for independence, while Israel believed it could only grant them autonomy, for fear that full independence would pose security risk to Israel. This dynamic has continued until today.

By November 1988, fearing that Palestinians of the West Bank would negotiate with Israel without him, Arafat convened the Palestinian National Council in Algeria and approved a Declaration of Independence, which stipulated that "despite the injustice that had befallen Palestinians because of UN General Assembly Resolution 181 that divided Palestine into two states Arab and Jewish, this resolution offers international legitimacy that safeguards the right of the Arab Palestinian people in sovereignty and national independence." Arafat therefore endorsed the two-state solution, but fell short of recognizing Israel and renouncing violence.[63]

The year 1990 proved to be another turning point in the Middle East. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, coupled a year

later with the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and America liberating it, reshuffled political alignments in a major way, since most of the anti-Israel and anti-America Arab regimes relied on Moscow for military and diplomatic support. The United States emerged as the world's only superpower. Radicals like Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Libya's Moammar Qadhafi were broken and isolated. Syria's Hafez Assad became more open to peace talks.[64]

CONCLUSION

The Arab story of Palestine and Israel sounds linear, and to some, logical. Palestine, within its 1920 borders, was a country that (in the Arab view) had existed since time immemorial, rendering even Jesus—an Israelite, according to the Quran—a Palestinian. According to this story, Palestine had been an independent country whose population lived in harmony and happiness, until imperial Britain showed up in 1920, and with it came the Jewish Zionist movement—an imperial tool that Britain left behind to protect its interests in the Middle East. According to some Palestinian historians, the existence of Israel was designed to serve the British interest of protecting the eastern flank of the Suez Canal.[65]

As I have shown, the Arab story is incorrect and anachronistic. For most of the twentieth century, the Arabs of Palestine rejected the very creation of a Palestinian nation—not only because these Arabs opposed a possible Jewish homeland, but because dividing the Middle East into nation states stood at odds with both the pan-Arab and pan-Islamist nationalism that had started to rise in Arabic-speaking lands in the nineteenth century, in response to a surge in nationalism in Europe.

As in Lebanon—where non-Muslim minorities, especially Christians, endorsed their newfound countries as independent states within their European mandate borders—it was Jews and Christians who endorsed Palestine within its 1920 borders. Almost every enterprise with the word "Palestine" in it was Jewish, whether Palestine Airways or the Palestine soccer national team.

And as in Lebanon—where Muslim Sunnis opposed the country's

European-drawn borders and insisted on joining a to-be-created greater Arab or Muslim nation—Muslim Sunnis in Palestine also rejected a Palestine within 1920 borders and demanded union with the short-lived Hashemite Arab kingdom in Damascus.

Until 1964, the Arabs in Palestine rarely perceived of themselves as Palestinians, independent of the to-be-created Arab nation. Even when the PLO was founded in 1964, its primary motive was to join Egyptian Nasser's United Arab Republic, which had lost Syria in 1961 and failed to annex Yemen after 1962. Palestine was a Nasser project, both to exact revenge on his rivals—Jordan and Saudi Arabia—who obstructed his annexation of Yemen, and to compensate for losing Syria and Yemen in his union. So much Nasserism was behind the declaration of the PLO and Palestine that Saudi Arabia voted against the creation of Palestine at the Arab League at the time.

Later scholarship, mainly non-Arab, attributed the creation of the PLO and Palestinian nationalism to the Soviet intelligence service (the KGB), in its global competition during the Cold War. But while the Soviets certainly took the side of the PLO, the main driver was Arab politicking and rivalry. Nasser was defeated in his war with Israel in 1967, and with that defeat his rivalry with Saudi Arabia died out. Riyadh now owned the PLO project and replaced Nasser's man, Shuqayri, with its own: Arafat. After 1967, military-to-military wars between the Arabs and Israel started losing currency and were totally phased out after 1973, giving rise to Palestinian guerilla warfare and terrorism against Israel—a wave that Arafat rode until Israel crushed him in Beirut in 1982.

Having invented and unleashed Palestinian nationalism, it was hard to put the genie back in the bottle, and the Arab League put forth the two-state solution, for the first time, that same year. Jordan gave up on its dream of annexing the West Bank, and the Saudis tried to rehabilitate Arafat from a guerrilla to a statesman capable of striking a two-state deal with Israel. With pan-Arabism gone and his militia power dissipated, Arafat agreed.

Yet the rise of Islamism and Hamas gave the Palestinian leader (as one of his closest aides would reveal decades later) the impression that he could leverage Hamas's violence to his advantage in talks with Israel. Like almost

all his decisions since his rise to fame in 1968, Arafat miscalculated and overplayed his hand, therefore killing all routes to a Palestinian state, as we shall see in the next chapter.

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