

# **Understanding the Arab Strategy Towards Israel**



Wounded Soldier, Marcel Janco, 1948

Clausewitz wrote in *On War*, that “war is a mere continuation of policy by other means,” a virtual political instrument. In

the same way is politics itself a method of warfare. Not war as an isolated event, rather war as a long strategic vector for victory. Even then, the strategy adopted does not necessarily entail violent warfare because the instrumentalities of politics can be sufficient to overwhelm the enemy.

### *Habib Bourguiba*

Habib Bourguiba, president of Tunisia from 1957-87, fired the first political shot for a staged approach to vanquish the Jewish state of Israel. Here was an Arab personality proposing, in 1965, a peace plan based initially on the United Nations and international legitimacy. Resolution 181 from 1947 would leave Israel with less territory than her post-'48 borders; and Resolution 194 from 1948 would inundate Israel with hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. If Israel would reject these steps for conflict-resolution, then the Arab stance would earn global vindication. Israel's political and legal legitimacy would erode.

While the inception of the PLO in 1964 awakened a call for revolutionary guerrilla warfare, Bourguiba offered a pacific solution with a vision of Arabs and Israelis living in harmony. His was a reasonable plan, eschewing demagoguery, and abandoning war. The Arab world, led by President Nasser of Egypt, resounded with horror at the mention of peace with Israel, denouncing Bourguiba for recommending that "we [Arabs] should respect stages." Drawing upon his own personal and national experience in the long and successful Tunisian struggle for independence, and the expulsion of French colonialism, Bourguiba concluded that the dissolution of Israel required time and patience.

After the Six Day War in June 1967 with the Arab loss, Cecil Hourani, a former adviser to President Bourguiba, developed the theme of containing, Arabizing, and Orientalizing Israel as the optimal strategy. A combination of

foreign and domestic pressures would convince the Jews to prefer a return to their status under Arab rule rather than pursue the impossible dream of a secure and recognized Jewish state in Palestine. In 1974, Boutros Ghali, Egyptian academic who was subsequently appointed Minister of State for Foreign Affairs under Sadat, considered Israel's defense of its sovereignty to be "a very stiff attitude."

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We shall examine three cases of the strategy of stages in the context of the prolonged Arab-Israeli conflict, highlighting the primary Arab personalities who exhibited sophistication and creativity, with no small dose of duplicity. The common thread is the realization that rational analysis must replace emotional exhilaration, or deep despair, in choosing politics over war at least in the initial stage of the undertaking.

#### *Anwar Sadat*

Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt from 1970-81, chose diplomacy in 1977 after attacking Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

In the 1970s, various intellectual, cultural, and political figures in Egypt introduced the new thinking into the Israeli-Arab issue. Mohammad Sa'id Ahmed began his book *When the Guns Fall Silent* with a challenging statement: "The time has come to think about what we dared not to think." He argued in favor of adopting peace with Israel as a method based on the model of superpower détente for which the culmination is not the resolution of conflict as such. The final goal, Sa'id Ahmed wrote, is "the extinction of the Zionist enterprise with the absorption of Zionism in the Arab expanse." Incrementalism and struggle, international pressure and Israel's withering from within, serve as the signposts for achieving a peace that would not signal the end of the

conflict—*but the end of Israel.*

Other noteworthy Egyptian personalities who dangled the idea of peace with normalization of relations with Israel included Naguib Mahfouz and Ali Salam, but they really seemed to intend full acceptance of Israel. Rage, boycott, and assault, burst forth against this betrayal of an Arab consensus that negated the right of a Jewish state in the midst of the Arab world. Sadat, however, had other thoughts in mind, while his beguiling persona radiated with the aroma of political theatre.

Sadat traveled to Israel in November 1977 and launched his so-called “peace initiative” to chart a novel course in Middle East political history. His strategy, when unraveled, encompassed a stratagem that could trap Israel into submission.

Sadat had intimated in private conversations with fellow-Arabs, that he would sign a peace treaty—as he did in 1979—if that was the only way to recover the Sinai peninsula. Moreover, the Camp David Peace Treaty included a plan for Palestinian autonomy in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza [*soi-disant* West Bank and Gaza Strip], which would serve as the political route toward the establishment of a Palestinian state. The essential purpose of such a state is the platform provided for irredentist disruption, invasion, and destabilization in Israel. Sadat referred in his Knesset speech in Jerusalem to the need for Israel withdrawing back to the June 4, 1967 lines, and to the need for a resolution of the Palestinian Question. Presumably, the latter matter required an additional Israeli capitulation to advance toward peace.

Sadat skillfully placed Israel on a political vector of territorial withdrawal. The Israel-Egyptian peace remained cold, no people-to-people peace evolved, anti-Semitism was the popular narrative in Egyptian society and culture. In the

deal, Egypt got Sinai and, as Sadat bitingly remarked of the Israeli Prime Minister: "Menachem [Begin] got a piece of paper." Yet the deep significance of Sadat's initiative was the underlying precedent of future withdrawals on other fronts. The clever Egyptian president had said in a 1975 interview: "The task of our generation is to return to the [pre-] 1967 borders; afterward the next generation will carry the responsibility."

### *Yasir Arafat*

Yasir Arafat assumed the leadership of the multi-faction Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) established in 1964. Its covenant stated that Palestine is an Arab land, Zionism is a foreign invader, and the Jews do not qualify as a people. The only way to liberate Palestine was "armed struggle" (Art. 9) against the racist, fascist, and Nazi-like state of Israel.

In 1974, a decade later, the PLO formulated its "phased plan" to persevere along the path of liberation, but as a staged process. It would begin with the establishment of a "combatant national authority" over any territory liberated from Israel, and then advance toward the founding of a democratic Palestinian state over all of Palestine—*in place of Israel*. The 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence, while mentioning the 1947 Partition Plan with the ominous implication of Israel relinquishing areas from its 1948 victory, seemed a sign of moderation and acceptance of Israel. However, this very generous interpretation—in the year when a militant and violent Palestinian uprising struck Israel—lacked validation.

Thereafter, the Oslo agreement in 1993 launched the PLO-phased plan onto the international and political stage. Israel recognized the PLO and Palestinian rights, and agreed to interim arrangements for Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Israel's military control on the

ground morphed into incremental territorial pullbacks in 1994, 1995, 1997, and 1998.

Despite this, Arafat's overall response was incompatible with reconciliation: he called for jihad, recalled the 628 Hudaybiyyah episode in early Muslim history when Islam's prophet Mohammad violated his agreement with the Meccans—foreshadowing Arafat violating his agreement with the Israelis. His authorized murderous terrorist operations against the Israeli civilian public. Prime Minister Rabin was lost in moral confusion when he epitomized Israel's political drift from common sense by labelling Israeli victims of terrorism "sacrifices for peace."

Arafat dared to take the big idea of Palestine and lodge it, as Fouad Ajami wrote, in the filth and misery of the Gaza Strip. He set up an administration, formed a police force, and dreamt that the flag of Palestine will fly on the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. Palestinian personalities like Mahmud Darwish and Edward Said were aghast at what was in their eyes Arafat's betrayal of the big idea; after all, Israel was not collapsing nor withering, and Arafat was grinning and cajoling with the enemy. They considered him a traitor for what was in their eyes the surrender of Palestine. However, Arafat knew better, playing to the Israeli and international audiences, displaying a gusto for histrionics (kafiyyeh, scruffy beard and all): he demanded, took, and asked for more. He designed a new political game and set in motion the PLO's phased plan.

The social and economic interaction between Israelis and Palestinians after 1967 offered a political mechanism to undo the integrity of the Jewish state. With the emergence of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, cooperation acquired an official and institutional foundation. This provided Palestinian spokespersons with the idea that, in the end, one state would emerge for the two peoples. The disappearance of Israel and the rise of a secular democratic state including

pre-'67 Israel and the post-'67 territories would be cast as a triumph for equality, reconciliation, and justice. Ziad Abu Ziad, Faisal Al-Husseini, and Abu Iyad, were among Palestinian figures who advocated the one-state solution. A shared sovereignty arrangement according to George Abed, or a cantonal framework in one state according to Emile Nahle, were some of the formulations that Palestinians elucidated. Underlying the spirit of such proposals was the partial and interim quality of the Oslo accords. Nabil Shaath, senior PLO negotiator, openly declared that any agreement achieved was only temporary and non-obligatory while pursuing the goal to emasculate Israel's diminishing geo-strategic condition.

Meanwhile, considering the bottleneck on the West Bank political playing field, whose basic feature was Israeli settlement and military rule, the PLO/PA was relentless in demanding a two-state solution. This tactical move, with its air of Palestinian moderation and concession, mobilized international opposition to ongoing Israeli "occupation." In itself, a Palestinian state in the West Bank contiguous to Israel would provide the PLO with its Ho Chi Minh trail on the road to conquering Tel Aviv.

Oslo, in sum, was a strategy for ongoing war, in part violent and in part diplomatic, rather than for achieving an authentic peace. A November 2021 confirmation of the PLO-Fatah position, in anticipation of the 104th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, appeared in a Palestinian Authority newspaper that explicitly called for the need "to put an end to the colonialist Zionist project [Israel]." Even though the Palestinians deceived the Israelis, at other times they did not flinch from telling the truth.

### *Mansour Abbas*

Mansour Abbas (not to be confused with Mahmoud Abbas/Abu Mazen president of the Palestinian Authority), deputy head of the southern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, led his



Ra'am (United Arab List) party in the March 2021 Israeli parliamentary elections to garner a commendable four seats. He then became a partner and participant in the Bennett-led coalition government and is playing an unexpected and critical role in Israeli politics. Abbas presented a pleasant demeanor, while yet committed to what he called a "civilian jihad" for the benefit of the Arab community in the country. The Israeli government had declared illegal and banned the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in 2015, for having provided funds to Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) which in its Charter (Art. 2) identifies as a wing of the Muslim Brothers.

The contemporary Islamic Movement in Israel is one of the many ideological offshoots in the world of the Muslim Brothers founded in Egypt in 1928. Its doctrinaire patron demands militancy and warfare to establish Islam as the "whole of life," in the words of Bernard Lewis. Secrecy and insurrection were part of the Brothers' modus operandi. However, the Israeli branch within the pre-'67 borders, cognizant of the anomaly of non-Muslim dominance over Muslims in the Jewish state, chose to focus on seemingly benign and unobjectionable issues: the re-Islamization of Arab identity through prayer, education, and social activities, modulated by law-abiding behavior to bolster the self-defined Palestinian citizenry.

Mansour Abbas related that he was raised on the legacy of Sheikh Abdallah Nimr Darwish who founded the Islamic Movement in Israel. A collection of Darwish's writings and sermons, translated into Hebrew from the Arabic, appeared in 2021 under the title *Islam is the Solution*. Those four words constitute the quintessential theme that the founder of the Muslim Brothers, Hasan al-Banna, formulated. It is the slogan of the Islamic Movement, and recurs frequently when Darwish explained that Islam as a religion of peace and justice is the only true guide and remedy for all the ills of civilization. The Koranic revelation and the ensuing Sharia law, it follows,

will provide a framework for co-existence and harmony between Muslims and non-Muslims (especially Jews and Christians), without oppression, occupation, and terror. Darwish presents Islam as a humanitarian religion and a bastion for tolerance and equality, ignoring that the Koran (Ch. 9: verse 33) obligates Muslims to make the true faith "triumphant over all religions." Indeed, the sheikh confidently stated that the missionary/propaganda Islamic *dawa* assures that "the future belongs to this religion."

Mansour Abbas took the sloganeering Darwish rhetoric to the forefront of a public campaign in the spring of 2021. This, with Ra'am joining the government coalition headed by Naphtali Bennett, leader of the rightist Yamina Party, signaled a revolutionary development for the Arab presence in Israeli politics. Abbas relegated to the margins of discussion the conventional and controversial Arab themes of Palestinian statehood, liberating Jerusalem, ending Israeli occupation, and calling for refugee return. He brought the discussion down to the non-political practicalities of local Arab government, personal security and gun controls, essential services, and infrastructure. Darwish had instructed his followers to respect the state and avoid any violence. These teachings from both the mentor and now voiced by the student were designed to foster an environment of moderation and accommodation, promote Jewish-Arab understanding, and advance integration of the Arab minority within the Jewish-majority society in Israel. This was in stark contrast to the shrill political language, spewing vitriolic attacks against Israel and its army, typical of the alternative Joint Arab List (JAL) with its snarling and confrontational Members of Knesset.

At root, Mansour Abbas chose to adopt a political strategy that allowed, to use a phrase from Fouad Ajami, "the conquered Palestinian citizens of Israel from 1948 to jump on the wagon of the successful Zionist enterprise." This did not indicate acceptance of Zionism, as a broad Arab consensus

never came to terms with the Jewish national revival and its culmination in statehood. The Arab narrative sees Zionism and its '48 victory as the cause of the Arab catastrophe (*Nakba*). Contrary to MK Ahmad Tibi of the JAL, whose arrogance allowed him to tell President Rivlin to his face in September 2019: "We [Arabs] are the owners of this land," Abbas meticulously avoided imperious and insulting language. For now, he ostensibly put the Palestinian Question on freeze, leaving it for a later stage. In public, he chose pragmatism over ideology.

Yet reticence has its limits. In his opening Knesset address on June 13, 2021, with the launching of the new government, Mansour Abbas referred to the "historic injustice that has been our [Palestinian Arab] fate over the years because of the [Israeli] policy of discrimination." For him, was not the very founding of Israel in Palestine in 1948 the core injustice? On June 27, Abbas gave an interview with *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* newspaper in which he directed his present thoughts to "realizing our [Arab] civil, national, and religious rights" in the Israel of 1949. Echoing his mentor's outlook, Abbas expected civil equality for the Arab citizens, without submission or inferiority, in peace and mutual security, with cooperation and tolerance between the two [Jewish and Arab] peoples. The language and tone were wrapped in a veil of secrecy around the long-term goal of the Islamic Movement. Boualem Sansal, a noteworthy Algerian novelist, had cautioned the public about Islam in France—perhaps also fitting for Islam in Israel—that initially "the threat is invisible."

More than seventy years following Jewish statehood, the exceptional advances that Israel registered offered the Arab citizens opportunities to participate in the benefits of a modern society. In return for Ra'am's pivotal role in providing Bennett with a majority in the Knesset, the 2021-22 budget committed a whopping 35 billion shekels for development in the Arab sector. Israel has never demanded that Arabs

sacrifice their multiple Muslim and Palestinian identities as a sign of allegiance to the state, or as a condition for state funding. In short, integration 'yes', assimilation 'no'.

The Muslim Movement in Israel declares its commitment to Israel as a formal and legalistic affirmation, but a recent news report in October 2021 related that two senior members of Ra'am ran a fund revealingly called "48 Aid" that transferred money to a Hamas outfit. The movement's commitment to Islam is indeed absolute. Democracy is not the solution—because *Islam is the solution*. The green flags of Islam, symbolic of the Muslim Brethren and the Islamic Movement, adorned the stage at a speech by MK Mansour Abbas to his followers on April 3, after the dramatic achievement by Ra'am in the March Israeli elections.

Abdallah Darwish quoted the Koran (ch. 16) that, with the help of Allah, Muslims must be patient. Abbas does not boycott Israel nor publicly malign her. He just does not think she has a right to exist as a Jewish state as defined in the 2018 Basic Law: Israel the Nation-State of the Jewish People. Mansour Abbas has intimated that some matters, like a Palestinian state, should be left for later. Nonetheless, while his party and electoral agenda tackles problems in local Arab life in Israel, dealing with roads and transportation, electricity and housing, Abbas talked about political matters with King Abdullah II when he responded to an invitation to visit Amman in early November.

### *Deception & Delusion*

The cumulative policies of Sadat, Arafat, and Abbas, over the last decades constitute a pattern, multiple links in a strategy of stages to diminish, demoralize, and finally demolish the Jewish state.

The comprehensive Arab campaign revolves around three circles. Egypt represents *the external circle*, to which we

attribute the Sinai withdrawal, also pullbacks from south Lebanon in the year 2000, and the transfer on the eastern frontier of lands to Jordan in 2018. The Palestinians represent *the internal circle* with withdrawals from parts of Gaza and the Jericho salient in 1994; then from cities, villages and rural areas in Judea and Samaria in 1995, Hebron in 1997, parts of Samaria in 1998; then the total pullback from the Gaza Strip in 2005, including areas in northern Samaria. Arabs in Israel proper represent *the domestic circle*, launching a political flight from the Zionist bedrock of Israel's existence. Now the ideological and national foundations of Israel are tottering with concessions to the Islamic Movement and accepting its participation at the heart of political affairs.

The domestic element draws the circle to the source of things in the Arab Grand Strategy. It constitutes the final phase, reaching the climax and pointing to the finale. The Arabs look to the future, though Israel is strapped to the present. Mansour Abbas would concur with Sheikh Abdallah Azzam, a Palestinian who journeyed from Jordan to Afghanistan to preach jihad against the Soviet invasion, who wrote that "Palestine is the foremost Islamic problem." However, that problem can be resolved by politics and not necessarily—or only—through warfare.

Through Nietzsche, we can better understand how a democracy—like Israel's—experiences a loss of will. An excess of tolerance and pluralism, with no hard sacred values, dilutes the judgment and seeps the energy from people in leadership. No matter how bizarre the demand, leaders in a democracy are sensitized to say "yes" to all and every disaffected and disgruntled groups. The combination of victimology and indoctrination fill the echo chambers, and the media engage in a brainwashing assault on behalf of the alleged underdog—the Arabs. Of a like mind with John Stuart Mill and Lord Acton, the activists and propagandists list the

benefits of freedom and vitality that flourish in a country of many nationalities, lodged in a common union.

The Israeli experience, still unfolding, carries an alternative and ominous meaning. The fact that Arab citizens weigh in heavily in demographic proportions of crime and violence against both fellow-Arabs and Jews is a menacing sign. Poll findings revealing Arab rejection of a Jewish-majority state gain scant public attention. Alongside that, Arab employment in high-profile jobs, from professors to pharmacists, free from any discriminatory hiring practice, is a noticeable social reality. Active support from the Israeli Left combined with the tacit support of the Israeli Right accelerate the emerging peril to the integrity of the Jewish nation-state. Jews will increasingly not feel safe and at home in their own country.

Shmuel Trigano has written persuasively on the destructive potential of the ideology of multi-culturalism, post-modernism without truths, minority rights for all, and identity politics, as an immediate, present, and future danger to the state of Israel. The mayor of the Arab town of Taibe, who is close to Mansour Abbas, gave voice to what is obvious to him and his Palestinian fellow-compatriots: "Taibe is part of Palestine," adding, "You [Israel] cannot erase our identity."

Memory is at the root of identity. It can also serve as an impetus for action. It becomes unacceptable to forgive what is a scalding old grievance that future generations must address. Recall the struggle for justice in the story of the King of Amon in the Book of Judges, who after *three hundred years* went to war against Israel for having conquered his lands long earlier. The Arab strategy of stages against Israel is resolute and tireless. Is it too harsh to characterize the present stage in the Arab strategy as going for Israel's political jugular?

The success of a sly deception depends not only on the skill of the deceiver but also on the indiscretion of the deluded. Sadat fooled Begin who thought there would be a warm peace with Egypt. Arafat fooled Rabin who thought there would be peace with the Palestinians. Abbas is now fooling Bennett who thinks it will be beneficial for Israel to conciliate and integrate the Arabs in Israel. The wheel turns and stops always with Israel's misunderstanding.