

Palestinian Arabs are on a Collision Course with Arab States

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The Palestinians have been so busy throwing tantrums, demanding special meetings of the Arab League, denouncing the UAE's "betrayal" and Bahrain's "treachery," that they haven't had time to sit down and analyze what went so wrong, and why they are no longer the center of Arab attention. That story is [here](#).

Less than a month after the Second Intifada erupted in September 2000, the Arab heads of state held an extraordinary meeting in Nasr City, a district of Cairo.

After the meeting, held at the urgent invitation of former

Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the Arab leaders issued a communique in which they "hailed the intifada of the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian territories" and held Israel "responsible for returning the region to a climate of tension and to manifestations of violence as a result of its practices, its assaults and its blockade of the Palestinian people, in violation of its obligations as the occupying power under the terms of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949."

This meeting of Arab heads of state was a reaffirmation of total support for the Palestinian cause, akin to the November 1967 meeting in Khartoum of the Arab League which resulted in the famous Three No's: "No peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel." In 2000, there was still no daylight between the Palestinians and the Arab states.

In response to a proposal by Saudi Arabia, the Arab leaders decided to establish two funds to help the Palestinians. Al-Aqsa Fund, they said, will be allocated a sum of \$800 million for "the funding of projects designed to preserve the Arab and Islamic identity of Jerusalem and prevent its loss, and to enable the Palestinian people to disengage from its subordination to the Israeli economy." The second one, Al-Quds Intifada Fund, was to have capital of \$200m. to be allocated for disbursement to the families of Palestinian "martyrs."

We know what happened to much of that money. Like sums the Arab states had given before, and would continue to give after, a goodly amount of that Arab aid money ended up in the pockets of Palestinian Arab leaders. Arafat himself at one time was worth \$3 billion; at his death he was said to be down to his last \$1 billion in stolen funds but, alas, it all mysteriously disappeared. A large chunk of it went to his

financial adviser Mohammed Rashid, while other cronies who knew where the money had been hidden helped themselves to the rest. Mahmoud Abbas, Arafat's henchman and successor, was himself said to have made off with \$100 million.

Other Palestinian leaders who have made out like gangbusters with foreign aid are two leaders of Hamas, Khaled Meshaal and Moussa abu Marzouk, each of whom has amassed a fortune of at least \$2.5 billion. Six hundred other Hamas millionaires are now living among the impoverished Gazans whom they claim to care about. At the same time, in the Palestinian Authority, President Mahmoud Abbas increased his original haul of \$100 million. By now, he and his two sons Tareq and Nasser have accumulated \$400 million. Is it any wonder, given that kind of colossal corruption, that of the \$800 million given in 2000 by the Arab states to the Palestinian Authority, very little actually reached the people who were meant to be helped?

Although the Palestinians never saw much of the financial aid promised by the Arab heads of state, they were nevertheless encouraged by moral support they received from the Arab world during the intifada. Those were the days when the Palestinians felt that they had the full backing of the entire Arab world and that the Palestinian cause was the central issue of [sic] all Arabs and Muslims...

These were the years when the Palestinians were routinely praised for their "steadfastness" (now that "steadfastness" is described by many Arabs as a "stubborn refusal to face reality").

In 2002, the Arab leaders held a summit in Beirut and announced the Arab Peace Initiative, a 10-sentence proposal for an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The initiative calls for normalizing relations between the Arab world and Israel, in exchange for a full withdrawal by Israel to the pre-1967 lines, a "just settlement" of the Palestinian refugee problem

based on United Nations resolution 194, and the establishment of a Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital. Former Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat immediately embraced the initiative. His successor, Mahmoud Abbas, also supported it.

Of course the Palestinians supported the Arab Peace Initiative. First, they wouldn't have dared turn down a proposal made by Saudi Arabia, whose support they needed. After all, what was Saudi Arabia to them, if not an ATM with a flag? And the Arab Peace Initiative made maximalist demands on Israel, which would have had to withdraw back to the 1949 Armistice Lines, lines which Abba Eban once described as "the lines of Auschwitz." Israel would again be only nine miles wide at its narrowest, from Qalqilya to the sea – a tempting target for any would-be invader from the east, such as Iran. Only after such a withdrawal, and the establishment of a Palestinian state, would the Arabs agree to normalize relations with a much-diminished Israel.

Some Palestinians saw the Arab peace plan as the turning point in the Arab world's attitude toward the Palestinian issue and Israel. It was the first time that Arab heads of state had talked about the possibility of normalization with Israel, though they conditioned it on a full Israel withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

The Arab Peace Initiative represented a decline of the Arab position [toward the Arab-Israeli conflict],” noted Palestinian political analyst Hani al-Masri. “The Palestinians identified with the plan despite the concessions it contained.”

The “decline” in the Arab position – which the Palestinian analyst Hani al-Masri does not spell out – is that the Arab states declared their willingness to allow Israel to exist at

all. That was the great “concession” to Israel made by the Arabs, one that the Palestinians most reluctantly accepted.

Masri believes that the Arab Peace Initiative (also known as the Saudi Initiative) came in the context of Saudi Arabia’s “atonement” for the 9/11 attacks. Fifteen of the 19 terrorists who carried out the attacks were Saudis.

In Masri’s worldview, the only conceivable reason why the Saudis might have made a proposal that dared to “concede” the possible existence of the Jewish state, would be to “atone” for the overwhelming participation of Saudis – 15 out the 19 Al-Qaeda terrorists –in the 9/11 attacks. That the Saudis might have good and sufficient reasons of their own – having nothing to do with their image abroad, but rather with their security at home – for being willing to accept a Jewish state, never occurs to him.

In 2007, the Arab leaders met in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and “reiterated the adherence of all Arab countries to the Arab Peace Initiative” as it was approved by the Arab summit in Beirut five years earlier.

The Riyadh summit came against the backdrop of reports suggesting that some Gulf states were secretly engaged in normalization activities with Israel. The Palestinians were aware of the secret contacts between some Arab countries and Israel, but refrained from publicly denouncing these states so as not to alienate them.

“We saw the rapprochement between some Arab states and Israel, but we decided that it would be a bad idea to attack them,” explained a senior PA official. “We did not want to deepen divisions in the Arab world. In addition, we didn’t want to be accused of meddling in the internal affairs of any Arab country. We did our best to maintain good relations with all the Arab countries, particularly those that were secretly normalizing their relations with Israel.”

The PA knew of the secret contacts between Israel and certain Arab countries, but hoped that if they said nothing, so as to avoid making trouble, and antagonizing Arab rulers involved in these contacts, in the end nothing would come of those meetings. How wrong they were. Over time, the contacts on security, sharing of intelligence on Iran, and even cooperation on some military operations (as Israel and Egypt cooperated against Jihadists in the Sinai), brought Israel and its Arab interlocutors ever closer.

In retrospect, the official said, "we may have made a mistake by remaining silent."...

At that point there was nothing the Palestinians could have done. Had they publicly attacked the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt for cooperating on security matters with Israel, in an attempt to whip up the Arab street against the leaders of those countries, the fury of those same leaders at such "meddling in our national affairs" would have quickly translated into those countries ending their aid, diplomatic and financial, to the Palestinians.

"The Palestinian leadership failed to see the writing on the wall," remarked Palestinian lawyer Khalil Zahran. "By the time the Palestinian leadership woke up, it was too late. The leadership's strong reaction to the Israel-Emirati deal, meanwhile, has proven to be counterproductive. It was a mistake to accuse an Arab country of betraying al-Aqsa Mosque and the Palestinian issue. Worse, it was a big mistake to send people to the streets to burn pictures of UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed."...

The Palestinians were apparently blindsided by the UAE-Israel normalization agreement. That is because they remained so arrogantly convinced that no Arab state would, as they put it, "betray" them. Their cause, the Palestinian cause, should forever take precedence over the national interests of Arab

states. And instead of remaining silent, or tactfully suggesting to the UAE, “our brotherly Arab nation that has always stood by the side of the Palestinians,” that “we hope you will use your new relations to convince the Zionists to recognize the legitimate rights of our people,” instead the Palestinians howled in rage, defaced and stomped on, and then set fire to, both the Emirati flag and pictures of the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed. This did not win them friends in Abu Dhabi.

The Palestinians refused to recognize how the world had changed, and what that meant for their support from the Arab states. There were three major changes.

First, Iran had become an increasing threat to the well-being of the Gulf Arabs. The Islamic Republic had for many years been spreading its tentacles throughout the region, both directly, and through proxies and allies. It supports, and uses, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, Shi'a militias in Iraq, Bashar al-Assad's Alawite-led army (the Alawites being a sect of Shi'a Muslims) in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. All this is being done in order to create a “Shia crescent” from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, a prospect that filled – and fills – the Sunni states of the Gulf with dread.

Second, in the war to counter Iran's aggression, the Gulf Arabs have no more effective ally than Israel. It is Israel that, in the corridors of power in Washington, used its influence to support the re-imposition of American sanctions on Iran. It is Israel that shares its intelligence on Iran with the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. Above all, it is Israel that has been able to repeatedly set back Iran's nuclear project. Were Iran ever to obtain nuclear weapons, that would be a mortal threat not only to Israel, but to the Sunni Arab states of the Gulf. Those states deeply appreciate what Israel has managed to accomplish. In 2010, Israeli cyberwarriors devised Stuxnet, a computer worm, that directed Iranian computers to command more than 1,000 centrifuges to

speed up so fast they destroyed themselves. The Gulf Arabs were impressed. Then they saw the assassinations, one after the other, of four of the top Iranian nuclear scientists by Israeli agents. They marveled at how agents of Mossad managed to locate and enter a Tehran building in the middle of the night, blasting and blow-torching open not only the entrance, but 32 steel doors, behind which they found, and managed to spirit out of Iran back to Israel, some 50,000 pages and 163 compact discs, virtually the entire nuclear archive of Iran. And just this year, the Gulf Arab states were greatly relieved when Israel managed to sabotage a new centrifuge plant at Natanz, setting Iran's nuclear program back by an estimated two years. The Palestinians, on the other hand, are not merely useless in the war against Iran, but worse still, they accept financial support from, and are on good terms with, the Islamic Republic. This has not endeared them to the Gulf Arabs, and is seen as one more reason to let the Palestinians fend for themselves.

Third, there is widespread Arab exhaustion with the Palestinians, who constantly carp at the Arab states for never doing enough for them. The PA always wants more money and more diplomatic support. And they don't want any Arab state deciding to privilege its own national interests over the interests of the Palestinians. The Palestinians have refused generous offers from Israel twice, with Yassir Arafat walking out on their negotiations with Ehud Barak, and Mahmoud Abbas doing the same with Ehud Olmert, after the Israeli leaders had offered to give up almost 95% of the West Bank. They have refused to negotiate since. And when a donors' conference was held in Manama, Bahrain earlier this year, to discuss the promise in the Trump Peace Plan to supply the new state of "Palestine" with an aid package of \$50 billion – the largest aid package for a single country in history – the Palestinians refused to attend.

No wonder the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, in

exasperation reportedly told Mahmoud Abbas to “take whatever deal the Americans offer you.”

First, the Arab League turned down a Palestinian request to hold an emergency meeting to discuss the repercussions of the Israel-UAE accord. When the Arab League foreign ministers held their ordinary meeting in early September, they refused to endorse a Palestinian draft resolution condemning the UAE for its “agreement of shame” with Israel.

Shunned by their Arab brothers, the Palestinians were finally forced to come to terms with the fact that the notion of Arab solidarity has passed away. For the first time in decades, the Palestinians now realize that the Palestinian issue is no longer the central issue of the Arab world. And for the first time in decades, the Palestinians are now fully aware that the Arab world has changed.

“As far as many Arab countries are concerned, Iran, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood organization are the real enemy, and not Israel,” said Amjad Shaheen, a prominent activist with the Palestinian ruling Fatah faction. “What’s worrying is that many Arabs are attacking the Palestinians and are saying they are fed up with us and our issue. The Palestinian people feel abandoned and isolated. I don’t think our leadership has a clear strategy how to cope with the new developments in the Arab world.”

Yes, that’s where things now stand: “Many Arabs are attacking the Palestinians and are saying they are fed up with us and our issue.” They richly deserve that attitude. And there is no way for them to recover their previous position as the center of Arab concerns. Their future is bleak, unless they come to their senses, and under new leaders – possibly Mohammad Dahlan, who lives in the Emirates and is favored by them – accept something very like the generous Trump Plan that they so foolishly rejected.

The Palestinians have recently been shocked into recognizing that they are no longer the center of Arab attention, that the Gulf Arabs are growing ever closer to Israel because the Jewish state is their most effective ally against Iran, that they are tired of the incessant demands made on them by the Palestinians, and furthermore, would like to benefit economically from establishing ties to the most advanced state in the Middle State.

Respected east Jerusalem Prof. Sari Nusseibeh believes that the Palestinian leadership has no choice but to make the best of what it has.

“It is incumbent on the Palestinian Authority leadership to transcend whatever feelings [it has] and to see if an opportunity has risen,” Nusseibeh said. “I think this has to be studied. Why not ask, for instance, the UAE to push for the kind of solution that the Palestinians have always asked for? Why not ask them to push for things that people have always wanted, such as the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons? I believe that one should make best use of what one has.”

Does Sari Nusseibeh think that after all the invective hurled by the Palestinians, leaders and people both, at the UAE, that the Emiratis are going to expend any more political capital on their behalf? The UAE already accomplished one very big concession for the Palestinians: Israel has agreed to “suspend” its plan to extend its sovereignty over parts of Judea and Samaria, including the Jordan Valley and the five major settlement blocs. This achievement made no impression on the Palestinians, who offered not a syllable of gratitude. And they have treated Bahrain the same way: same curses, same defacing, stomping on, setting fire to both the Bahraini flag and to pictures of the Emir, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

The Arab summit resolutions with regard to the Israeli-Arab

conflict have failed, Nusseibeh noted. "The support we've had from the Arab world over the past two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight decades has not actually borne fruit, as far as the Palestinians are concerned. It is in this light that one should assess the recent agreements between Israel and Arab countries, whether implicit or explicit. Things seem to be sliding back, so to speak. Of course, this causes a great deal of pain for the Palestinians, just as the failure of the Oslo agreement causes a great deal of pain."

Nusseibeh, who once served as the PLO's representative in Jerusalem, advised the Palestinian leadership "to try and see if they could use the developing relations between Arab states and Israel to see if they can push forward the peace process.

"Perhaps it is more possible to do this now than it was in the past, when there were no relations [between the Arab states and Israel]," he said. "I think the Palestinian leadership should look into this possibility, in spite of the pain at the sense of being betrayed. In politics, one has to always be on the lookout for what possible opportunity there is to advance the interests of one. In the past, we had an Arab consensus, which was no peace with Israel until there is peace with the Palestinians. If you look at the history of this policy, one can't but say it has failed. Why be blind to the fact?"...

The most important reason for the new warmth of some Arab states toward Israel is nothing that the Palestinians can affect or turn to their advantage. That is the threat of Iran, and Israel's unrivaled ability to foil Iranian plans, whether it is the attempt to build Iranian bases in Syria, or to transfer precision-guided missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon, or to further its nuclear project at home.

"One should be expecting changes sometime soon," he said. "I

don't think [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu is going to be there forever. On the Palestinian side, there may well be change, and some of the changes may actually not come about in a positive way. What I'm concerned about is that the stalemated position our leadership finds itself in might well put some pressure to bring about change in that leadership. Our leadership is under pressure not only because it has not been moving forward with the peace process, but because the Palestinians in the areas it controls are not happy with its governance. I don't even discount violent change. Everything is possible."

Why should Sari Nusseibeh be "concerned about" a change in the Palestinian leadership? Surely he recognizes the mismanagement and colossal corruption of that leadership? Or is he one of them himself, who doesn't want the old order to be reformed or replaced? And with what understatement does he address the disaffection of Palestinians with their rulers, when he describes Palestinians "in the areas it [the PA] controls" who "are not happy in its governance." Not "happy in its governance"? That's putting it mildly. The Palestinians are in a rage about their "governance," but can do nothing about it. Abbas is now in the fifteenth year of his four-year term. He and his cronies continue to enjoy the fruits of their kleptocracy and are not about to reform themselves.

Nusseibeh seems to think the Palestinian leaders want to move "forward with the peace process" – that is, to end the conflict with Israel. Is that true? That conflict has, until now, provided them with a good living, with lots of opportunities for helping themselves to aid money, and for providing sinecures for relatives in the bloated PA bureaucracy. Under the Trump Plan, all aid from abroad would be carefully monitored to ensure it is not misappropriated. This is not something those leaders would welcome.

And unless the Palestinians can somehow make the Iranian

threat – and the lesser threat from Erdogan’s Turkey – go away, it’s difficult to see why the Gulf Arab states would change their minds on Israel.

Besides Israel’s extraordinary usefulness in security matters, the Jewish state has much more to offer the Arabs. It provides the possibility for Arab states – including those outside the Gulf – of entering into agreements with an advanced Western economy, on technology, trade, and tourism. Israel also offers the Arabs the benefits of its own advances in medicine (including research on testing, therapeutics, and vaccines for Covid 19), agriculture (including novel methods of irrigation, constantly improved), brand-new laser anti-missile systems, artificial intelligence, solar energy, waste water management, military drones, million-mile batteries and five-minute chargers for electric vehicles, and much more. Why would Arab states not want to benefit from all that Israel offers?

The Palestinians, on the other hand, have nothing to offer the Arab states if they do the PA’s bidding, and only curses, flag burnings, and base ingratitude if they do not. That is why there are said to be at least three other Arab states now in the queue, lining up to follow the examples of the UAE and Bahrain. Judging by the deals that have already been made between Israel and the UAE within a week of the normalization signing, those states won’t regret it.

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