

The Al Aqsa Intifada in Perspective

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Abstract

In September 1993, Yasser Arafat and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords, promising to resolve their dispute with Israel by peaceful means only. This paper examines the evidence surrounding the origins of the violent Al Aqsa Intifada (2000–2005). This evidence suggests that the PLO entered the Oslo peace negotiations in bad faith, intending to use violence to achieve the long-term goal of replacing Israel with a single Palestinian Arab state.

Keywords: Al Aqsa Intifada, PLO, Hamas, West Bank, Gaza, Oslo Accords

Introduction: The Oslo Accords and International Law

The year 2023 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords between the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The text of the Accords, also known as the "Declaration of Principles" (DOP), signed at the White House on September 13, 1993, declares in its preamble that "it is time to put an end to decades of confrontation and conflict" and to "strive to live in peaceful coexistence and mutual dignity and security."¹ The Accords established a "Palestinian Interim Self-Governing Authority" to begin governing portions of the West Bank and Gaza Strip "for a transitional period not exceeding five years, leading to a permanent settlement" (Article 1; cf. Article 6). The Oslo Accords did not themselves include any permanent resolution of the key issues separating the Israeli and Palestinian sides, but stipulated: "Permanent status negotiations will commence as soon as possible" and "It is understood that these negotiations shall cover remaining issues, including: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, relations, and cooperation with other neighbors" (Article 5). Article 15 of the Accords states: "Disputes arising out of the application or interpretation of this Declaration of Principles, or any subsequent agreements pertaining to the interim period, shall be resolved by negotiation" or by arbitration, if mutually agreed upon.

The DOP was essentially a peace treaty between the PLO and Israel. The two had effectively been at war with each other at least since the PLO Charter of 1968, which stated that "armed struggle is the only way of liberating Palestine."² Both parties to the agreement committed to resolving all outstanding disagreements by peaceful

1 "Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization," Sept. 13, 1993, in Rabinovich and Reinharz, 2008: 490–493. See also <https://peacemaker.un.org/israelopt-osloaccord93>.

2 "Palestine Liberation Organization, the Palestine National Charter, July 17, 1968," in Rabinovich and Reinharz, 2008: 243–246. On the proposed amendment of the Charter by the Palestinian National Council on May 4, 1996, to accommodate the Oslo Accords, see Rabinovich and Reinharz, 2008: 506–507. On the failure of the Palestinian legislature to ever actually enact the proposed amendments, see Begin, 2024.

means and *only* by peaceful means. In a letter to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin dated September 9, 1993, Yasser Arafat stated this explicitly, writing:

The PLO commits itself to the Middle East peace process, and to a peaceful resolution of the conflict between the two sides and declares that all outstanding issues relating to permanent status will be resolved through negotiations. The PLO considers that the signing of the Declaration of Principles constitutes a historic event, inaugurating a new epoch of peaceful coexistence, free from violence and all other acts which endanger peace and stability. Accordingly, the PLO renounces the use of terrorism and other acts of violence....³

As the scholar of international law Robert Barnidge points out, "the Declaration of Principles inaugurated a legal relationship between Israel and the PLO that both parties intended to be governed by international law" (Barnidge, 2016: 109). International law is clear, as Barnidge notes: "That Israel and the PLO have channeled the settlement of their dispute through negotiation means that either party's failure to comply with this substantive obligation of law to negotiate can result in an internationally wrongful act and, in response, countermeasures and responses by the victim party" (Barnidge, 2016: 2). Barnidge explains further: "The cornerstone of this body of law is that disputes must be settled peacefully ... and in the absence of the threat or use of force (Barnidge, 2016: 115–116).

Identifying the causes of any eruption of violence between Israelis and Palestinians thus has international legal implications. If the Palestinian Authority were to be identified as the agent, instigator, or organizer of such violence, it would be committing a serious violation of its international legal obligations.

3 "Israel Palestinian Peace Process: Letters of Mutual Recognition," September 9, 1993, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israel-palestinian-letters-of-mutual-recognition-september-1993>.

The Origins of the Al Aqsa Intifada

These legal and historical facts provide essential background data for understanding the significance of the Al Aqsa Intifada, the name given to the violent Palestinian uprising against Israel that began in late September 2000 and lasted roughly five years. "Al Aqsa" is an abbreviation of the Arabic phrase *al masjid al Aqsa*, meaning literally, "the furthest mosque," a reference to the terminus of Muhammad's "Night Journey." It is believed by Muslims to be identical with what Jews call the "Temple Mount" in Jerusalem.⁴ The Arabic phrase *al Haram al Sharif* or "the Noble Sanctuary" is another name for the same compound. The death toll from the Al Aqsa Intifada came to roughly 4300, with about three Palestinians killed for every one Israeli. The Israelis, however, were disproportionately civilians deliberately targeted by Palestinian attackers, especially via suicide bombings, while the Palestinians were disproportionately combatants killed as the Israeli military and police responded to Palestinian attacks. A standard narrative of how the violence began took hold very soon after its onset. Efraim Karsh sums up this narrative well:

Media outlets, commentators, and politicians throughout the world blamed the premeditated Palestinian violence on the supposed "provocation carried out at al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem on 28 September 2000 [i.e., Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount]," to use the words of a special Security Council resolution, which the United States failed to veto. (Karsh, 2016: 10)

Palestinian apologists were quick to describe Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount on September 28, 2000, as the immediate cause of the conflagration, and they were equally quick to identify alleged Israeli aggression and intransigence as the deeper causes of the Second Intifada (Abunimah, 2006: 47; Makdisi, 2008: 89).

Efraim Karsh refers above to the "premeditated Palestinian violence" that followed Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount, and this accurate phrasing points to facts about

4 On the Night Journey in Islamic tradition, see Guillaume, 1955: 181–187.

the Intifada's origins that have yet to penetrate or displace the conventional wisdom about Sharon's supposed provocation. As early as 2003, in his book *Arafat's War*, Karsh presented documented evidence of the premeditated nature of the violence unleashed by the Palestinians in September 2000. The Second Intifada was not a spontaneous outburst of rage triggered by Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount. In fact, as Karsh wrote, "Far from capturing the Palestinians by surprise, Sharon's visit was meticulously coordinated with the Palestinian Authority" (Karsh, 2003: 188). Quoting such Palestinian sources such as Imad Faluji, Sakhr Habash, Othman Abu Gharbiya, Mamduh Naufal, and Marwan Barghouti, Karsh provided substantial evidence that the PA and Fatah leadership at the highest levels had begun planning the Intifada in July 2000 after the failure of the Camp David peace talks hosted by US President Bill Clinton (Karsh, 2003: 186–199). For example, Karsh quotes a talk given by PA Minister of Post and Communications Imad Faluji, reported in *Al-Ayyam*, a Palestinian newspaper closely aligned with the PA and its ruling Fatah party, dated December 6, 2000:⁵

The Palestinian Authority began preparing the present intifada and bracing for it since the return from Camp David at the request of President Yasser Arafat, who envisaged the intifada as a complementary measure to the Palestinian steadfastness in the negotiations, and not as a protest over Sharon's visit to al-Haram al-Sharif [a.k.a. Temple Mount or Al Aqsa Mosque compound]. (Karsh, 2003: 193)

Faluji would repeat this at a talk he gave in March 2001 at a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon.⁶ Also in 2003, the same year that Karsh published *Arafat's War*, Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin published their meticulously researched study, *Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography* (Rubin and Rubin, 2003). They cited the same Palestinian sources documenting the preplanned, non-spontaneous nature of the Al

5 Karsh incorrectly gives the year as 2002 in *Arafat's War*, 274, n. 20. See also MEMRI, 2001b.

6 MEMRI, 2001b.

Aqsa Intifada: Imad al-Faluji, Sakhr Habash, Mamduh Nofal, Marwan Barghouti (Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 203–205). The Rubins summed things up: "As had happened before, Arafat saw violence as an alternative to negotiations, as a way to get what he wanted either by intimidating or defeating his foe" (Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 203). So much for the Oslo Accords and the commitment to use only peaceful means in resolving the disagreements with Israel. The respected analyst Ely Karmon published an article in 2003 citing several of the same sources quoted by Karsh and the Rubins (Karmon, 2003).

In subsequent years, various Palestinian figures have added their public statements to the body of evidence documenting the preplanned nature of the Al Aqsa Intifada, and Israeli analysts have published useful compilations of these statements. Itamar Marcus and Nan Jacques Zilberdik published a compilation of evidence, based on testimonies by PA leaders, showing that Arafat planned and led the Intifada (Marcus and Zilberdik, 2011). A similar compilation quotes two important interviews with Yasser Arafat's widow, Suha Arafat, one broadcast on Palestinian Authority Television on November 12, 2011, and the second on Dubai Television on December 16, 2012 (Halevi, 2013). In these two interviews, Suha Arafat said essentially the same thing about the origins of the Al Aqsa Intifada. To quote the second one:

Yasser Arafat made a decision to initiate the intifada right after the failure of the Camp David talks. We met in Paris and he asked me to remain there. When I asked why he said "because I am going to start an intifada." (Halevi, 2013)

An important finding of the analysts mentioned above is evidence of extensive collaboration between Arafat and his Fatah party, on the one hand, and Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, on the other. From the start, Hamas refused to be a party to the Oslo Accords since it opposed any implied recognition of Israel's right to exist (Rabinovich and Reinharz, 2008). In this Hamas resembles both Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Halevi (2013) quotes senior Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Zahar as saying in 2005 that "due to the failure of the negotiations at Camp David, the PLO

began telling Hamas that the gate was now open for carrying out actions [i.e., terror attacks against Israel]." In 2010, al-Zahar repeated this point, stating that Arafat "desired to exploit terror attacks for tactical purposes." On December 15, 2014, the Palestinian news agency WAFA published an interview with al-Zahar in which he reiterated the point:

Abu Ammar [i.e., Yasser Arafat] reached the decision that the negotiations at the Camp David summit [in July 2000] were going nowhere. He sent a security representative to Sheikh Salah Shehade [head of the Hamas military wing at the time] with the message: "I have no objection to Hamas taking action" and we knew [what this meant] when we met to go over details.

Al-Zahar went on to explain, "We [Hamas] received arms from them [the PA]" (Halevi, 2015; Miller, 2014).

A high-level defector from Hamas, Mosab Hassan Yousef, has confirmed this collusion between Hamas and the PA in launching and waging the Al Aqsa Intifada. Yousef writes that on September 28, 2000, his father needed to be driven to Marwan Barghouti's house after dawn prayers (Yousef, 2010: 127). Mosab Hassan Yousef's father, Sheikh Hassan Yousef, a top Hamas leader, explained to him: "Sharon is scheduled to visit the Al-Aqsa Mosque tomorrow, and the PA believes this is a good opportunity to launch an uprising" (Yousef, 2010: 128). Yousef writes further: "Yasser Arafat and the other PA leaders had been determined to spark another intifada. They had been planning it for months, even as Arafat and Barak had been meeting with President Clinton at Camp David. They had simply been waiting for a suitable triggering pretext" (Yousef, 2010: 132). Mosab Hassan Yousef prefaces his discussion of the Al Aqsa Intifada as follows

Conventional wisdom among the world's governments and news organizations tells us that the bloody uprising known as the Second Intifada was a spontaneous eruption of Palestinian rage triggered by General Ariel Sharon's visit to what Israel calls the Temple Mount complex. As usual, the conventional wisdom is wrong. (Yousef, 2010: 127)

Yousef also notes: "Sharon's people had received reassurances from Palestinian security chief Jibril Rajoub that his visit would not be a problem as long as he did not set foot in a mosque," which he did not (Yousef, 2010: 130). Sheikh Hassan Yousef himself has confirmed his son's account, affirming the close collaboration between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority throughout the Al Aqsa Intifada.⁷ Fatah has also confirmed its collaboration with Hamas during the Al Aqsa Intifada (Marcus and Zilberdik, 2019).

The Al Aqsa Intifada would last nearly five years, with the violence subsiding by the end of 2005. Arafat would die on November 11, 2004, while the violence was still raging. Far from trying to tamp down the violence, Arafat was its commander in chief. An example of his involvement in the violence and his simultaneous duplicity about that involvement came on January 3, 2002, when Israeli commandos commandeered the freighter *Karine A* in the Red Sea. The ship was loaded with fifty tons of weapons from Iran headed for the Palestinian Authority. The evidence linking Arafat to the ship was substantial (Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 254). The ship's captain, Omar Akawi, was a 25-year veteran of Fatah, Arafat's party. He admitted that he knew he was carrying arms to the PA. The ship was in radio contact with Adal Mughrabi, head of arms procurement for the PA. The ship itself had been purchased by Fouad Shoubaki, "one of Arafat's closest aides, who sat at a desk just a few steps away from Arafat's office in the Ramallah headquarters compound" (Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 254). Arafat was infamous for micromanaging PA expenditures, and "the *Karine A* had been preceded by two similar operations to supply the PA with arms, both intercepted by Israeli forces." Yet Arafat still denied any link to the shipment (Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 254).⁸

7 MEMRI, 2019.

8 For more evidence of Arafat's duplicity, see MEMRI, 2023d.

The Significance of the Al Aqsa Intifada

We have established so far that the Al Aqsa Intifada was not spontaneous, but was in fact preplanned by the PLO at its very highest levels, from Arafat on down. The non-spontaneous nature of the violence is confirmed by Arafat's arms procurement efforts and his leadership of the Intifada from 2000 until his death in 2004. We have also established that the deliberate violence unleashed by the PLO and PA against Israel in September 2000 was a grave violation of the international legal obligations that Arafat and the PLO had assumed when they signed the Oslo Accords in 1993.

Had Arafat and the PLO leadership been genuinely committed to the Oslo peace process, they would not have planned a terrorist war against Israel in the summer of 2000, and they would have worked to tamp down any popular eruptions of violence in September of that year rather than stoking the violence with massive arms shipments such as that aboard the *Karine A*. The facts surrounding the Al Aqsa Intifada lend support to those historians and analysts who have long argued that Arafat and the PLO did not sign the Oslo Accords in good faith (Fishman, 2003, 2023; Bodansky, 2002; Nisan, 2014; Fishman and Kuperwasser, 2020; Schwartz, 2022; Schwartz and Gilboa, 2023; Karsh, 2023; Yaari, 2023a). Efraim Karsh is one such historian. In *Arafat's War* (2023), Karsh argues that Arafat and other top PLO leaders had always regarded the Oslo Accords as a kind of "Trojan horse," by which they could secure a land base within historic Palestine to continue their ongoing war to eliminate the State of Israel altogether. Karsh quotes a talk Arafat gave to a group of Arab diplomats in Stockholm's Grand Hotel on January 30, 1996. Arafat reportedly said, "We plan to eliminate the state of Israel and establish a purely Palestinian state. We will make life unbearable for Jews by psychological warfare and population explosion. Jews will not want to live among Arabs."⁹ Karsh also cites evidence that Arafat repeatedly referred to the "phased strategy" that the PLO had adopted in

9 Karsh cites both the *Jerusalem Post* and *Jerusalem Report* from 1996 as his sources: Karsh, 2003: 57–58, 260, ch. 3 n. 1. For further details about Arafat's Stockholm talk and various sources confirming its contents, see Yedidya Atlas, "Arafat's Stockholm Address," May 10, 1996, <https://iris.org.il/quotes/stockholm.htm>.

1974. Prior to 1974, the PLO had rejected any compromise that would have set up a Palestinian state on "part of the Palestinian national soil" (Rabinovich and Reinhartz, 2008: 253–257). In 1974, the PLO softened its stance somewhat to allow for the possibility of establishing an "independent combatant national authority over every *part* of Palestinian territory that is liberated" (emphasis added) as a temporary phase or stage in the ultimate total "liberation" of Palestine (Rabinovich and Reinhartz, 2008: 344–345).¹⁰ Karsh notes, "In September 1993 alone, Arafat evoked the phased strategy more than a dozen times in media appearances throughout the Arab world," including in a personal message in Arabic to the Palestinian people at the time of the famous Oslo Accords signing ceremony on the White House lawn: "Do not forget that our Palestine National Council accepted the decision in 1974. It called for the establishment of a national authority on any part of Palestinian land that is liberated or from which the Israelis withdrew" (Karsh, 2003: 59; Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 69, 238–239, 242–243). Karsh also mentions the three occasions in 1994–1995 that Arafat, speaking to Muslim audiences, compared the Oslo Accords to Muhammad's Hudaibiya treaty, a temporary ceasefire between Muhammad and his pagan enemies signed in 628 CE that lasted only two years while Muhammad gathered his strength to complete the conquest of Mecca.¹¹ As Arafat noted on one of these occasions, "Prophet Muhammad reached [a similar] agreement with the infidels in Hudaibiya and it was torn down two years later" (Karsh, 2003: 60–61). Karsh also notes other prominent PLO and PA leaders, including Sakhr Habash, Othman Abu Gharbiya, Faisal Husseini, Yasser Abd Rabbo, Sheikh Hamad Bitawi, and Farouq Qaddoumi, who described the Oslo Accords as implementing the phased

10 The PLO may have gotten the idea for the "phased strategy" from the North Vietnamese communists. See Abu Iyad, 1978: 66–70. Even today, the example of Vietnam continues to inspire the PLO; see, e.g., MEMRI, 2023b.

11 On the Treaty of Hudaibiya, see Guillaume, 1955: 499–507. The agreement was merely a ceasefire, meant to last a maximum of ten years, but Muhammad claimed that the other side had violated its terms and resumed his war to conquer Mecca after only two years. In the Islamic tradition, Hudaibiya came to undergird a crucial aspect of the classical Islamic law of war or *jihad*, namely, that truces could not last more than ten years, and that permanent peace treaties recognizing an infidel country's right to sovereignty were not legally valid. See Al-Misri, 1994: 604–605; Khadduri, 1955: 45, 144, 210–213.

strategy (Karsh, 2003: 62–72). To select just one of these examples, Faisal Hussein, a member of the leading Palestinian Hussein clan, a top leader of Fatah and the PLO reputed to be a "moderate," and the PA minister of Jerusalem affairs, told an Egyptian newspaper in June 2001:

When we ask all Palestinian forces and factions to regard the Oslo Accord ... as temporary measures, or phased goals, this means that we are baiting the Israelis or duping them.... Our ultimate goal remains the liberation of all historical Palestine from the river to the sea, even if this means the continuation of the conflict for another thousand years. (Karsh, 2003: 63–64)

Hussein explicitly compared the Oslo Accords to the Trojan horse and described the Al Aqsa Intifada as Palestinian fighters "coming down" out of the horse like the ancient Greeks who destroyed Troy (Karsh, 2003: 63–64).¹² Of special importance for gaining insight into Arafat's thinking is a series of remarkable statements by the British-Palestinian journalist Abd al-Bari Atwan. Atwan was born in a Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza Strip in 1950 and educated at Cairo University, and he has resided in London since 1978, where he has had a long career as a journalist and editor of some of the world's leading Arabic-language newspapers and websites, including *Asharq al-Awsat*, *Rai al-Yawm*, and *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, the last of these known for its advocacy of the Palestinian cause. Speaking on Arabic News Broadcast TV (UK) on February 16, 2006, Atwan said the following:

After the Oslo Accords were signed, I went to Tunisia to visit him [Arafat] in July. I told him: "We disagree. I don't support this agreement. It will harm us." [Arafat] told me: "By Allah, I will drive them crazy. I will make these [Oslo] Accords a disaster for [Israel]. It won't be in my lifetime, but you will see the Israelis run away from Palestine. Have a little patience." The Al-Aqsa Brigades [Fatah terrorist wing] were founded and armed by him [Arafat]

12 See also MEMRI, 2001a.

as a reply, as a counterweight to the historic mistake of the Oslo Accords.
(Palestinian Media Watch, 2006)

On September 13, 2018, to mark the 25th anniversary of the Oslo Accords, Atwan published an article in the online newspaper *Rai al-Yawm* in which he wrote about that meeting with Arafat:

I recall that when we left his headquarters in the Jugurtha neighborhood of Tunis, he pulled me aside on the pretext that he wanted to go for a walk, and to get away from the listening devices, and then said: "I want to tell you something that I ask that you not mention or attribute to me until after my death." Sighing, he continued: "I am going to Palestine through the Oslo gate, despite my reservations [about this path], in order to bring back to there [i.e., to Palestine] the PLO and the resistance. I promise you that the Jews will leave Palestine like rats abandoning a sinking ship. This will not come true in my lifetime, but it will in your lifetime." He told me that he did not trust the Israelis at all. I confirm with certainty that he spoke the truth.... As he wished, Arafat attained martyrdom, via Israel's poison, after being besieged in his headquarters [in Ramallah] for months for refusing to sign the Camp David agreements or to relinquish Jerusalem and the right of return, and for causing the outbreak of the armed Second Intifada and bringing in weapons from everywhere possible. I know well that he cooperated with the Hamas fighters in Gaza and the West Bank, and funded and armed them. In this framework, he established a bridge with Hezbollah and its leaders in southern Lebanon. They would send arms in ships, inside barrels that were tossed overboard near the Gaza coast. (MEMRI, 2018)

Abd Al-Bari Atwan recounted this story for a third time on Al-Mayadeen TV, a pan-Arab satellite news channel based in Lebanon, on August 19, 2021, shortly after the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan:

Israel today is in a state of confusion, a state of panic. They know very well that what happened in Kabul airport will repeat itself at Ben Gurion airport. But Ben Gurion airport will be closed.... They will have no other option but [to flee through] the sea.... In July 1995, I met with President Yasser Arafat in Tunisia.... Arafat offered me to take a walk outside. It was at night, around 1 AM. So, we went out to take a walk and he told me: By Allah, you will see the Israelis fleeing Palestine, like rats fleeing a sinking ship. You will get to see this in your time. I will not live to see that day, but you are much younger than me, and you will get to see this. (MEMRI, 2021)

Arafat's message to Abd al-Bari Atwan in 1995 fits perfectly with the message he conveyed to Arab diplomats in Stockholm in 1996. It is also consistent with his comparison of the Oslo Accords to Muhammad's Treaty of Hudaibiya. Each of these messages is consistent with the 1974 PLO "Phased Plan" and completely inconsistent with a permanent renunciation of violence or recognition of Israel's right to exist. Yet another piece of evidence regarding Arafat's thinking at the outset of the Oslo peace process is an interview with Munib al-Masri, a leading Palestinian businessman and investor, broadcast on May 24, 2023, on a Fatah-affiliated television station in Lebanon. Al-Masri reminisced:

When Arafat presented the two-state solution in Oslo, I was very upset with him, because he said that 22 percent would go to the Palestinians and the rest to the Israelis.... I went to visit him in Tunis, and he said to me: "Calm down. Our idea is to have them accept the two-state solution as a first phase, until the Arabs learn –" [Here the interviewer interjects: "A transitional solution." Al-Masri continues]: Yes. [Arafat said:] Until [the Palestinians] live comfortably, and the Right of Return is implemented, and all that, and then we will be living in one democratic country. (MEMRI, 2023c)

Here we find a crystal-clear expression of the program embraced by the PLO in its 1974 "Phased Plan" and more evidence that Arafat entered the Oslo peace process in

bad faith. A recent expression of the PLO's Phased Plan for the gradual elimination of Israel can be found in the official Palestinian Authority daily newspaper *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, on July 26, 2022. Muwaffaq Matar, a regular columnist and member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, defended PA President Mahmoud Abbas and the PLO against the charge that they were content with a Palestinian state confined to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank by reminding his audience of the larger strategic plan dating to 1974:

The long-term vision of the leader of the national liberation movement, Mahmoud Abbas – its gist is to wrest the Palestinian people's historical and natural right from the colonialist states, which committed the worst crime in the history of humanity: establishing their front base (Israel)... We are fighting to wrest free and liberate every inch of our land from the colonialist states' proxy (Israel) through the policy of stages. (Hirsch, 2022)

Also important is the broader geopolitical context of the Oslo Accords, which the PLO entered when it found itself weaker and more isolated than ever before in its history. After the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Arafat and the PLO leadership were forced to leave Lebanon and go into exile in Tunisia; ceding the military theater in Lebanon to Hezbollah threatened them with growing irrelevance (Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 77–99). Moreover, the PLO had historically received political and military support from the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact (Herf, 2016), both of which had disintegrated after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, to be replaced by a weakened Russian Federation and an expanding NATO and European Union. In 1990, when Saddam Hussein invaded and occupied Kuwait, Arafat and the PLO sided with Iraq, thus earning the outrage and retaliation of the Kuwaiti government and their Saudi allies after the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War. The restored Kuwaiti state brutally banished 400,000 Palestinians from Kuwait (Rosen, 2012). By backing Saddam Hussein, Arafat lost important sources of revenue in the Gulf States, including Kuwait. Barry and Judith Colp Rubin write:

With support from Arab governments falling to an all-time low, the PLO faced a serious economic crisis. In March 1991, after a U.S.-led coalition defeated Iraq, Arafat admitted that the PLO had lost \$12 million a month from its major sponsors.... This, plus the flight of Palestinians from Kuwait and an impoverished Iraq, constituted a Palestinian disaster on a scale close to 1948 and 1967. (Rubin and Rubin, 2003: 101)

In contrast, the United States after 1991 emerged as the sole remaining superpower, as yet unchallenged by a China that was only beginning its economic and military ascent. In contrast to an impoverished and isolated PLO, Israel enjoyed the patronage of the wealthiest, most powerful nation on earth. Had the PLO been serious about making peace with Israel in 1993, they would have recognized the futility of attempting to destroy Israel and replacing it with a Palestinian Arab state. They would have decided that the most they could hope for was a state or quasi-state of their own in about 20 percent of the former British Mandate for Palestine. They would have given up on the so-called right of return for the millions of Palestinian "refugees" (really not refugees at all but descendants of refugees from the 1948 war), recognizing that this would be a deal-breaker in any negotiations with Israel. They would, in short, have acted rationally as by far the weaker party in their negotiations with Israel.

In fact, the PLO/PA has consistently acted as if they were the stronger party, rejecting the very detailed peace plans offered by Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Camp David in 2000 and at Taba in 2001, and by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008, without offering any alternative plan of their own in return, and, as we have seen, launching a terrorist war in September 2000.

It is clear from statements by Palestinian leaders themselves that the uncompromising and maximalist demands of the PLO leaders regarding the "right of return" of the "refugees" is a major reason why Palestinians and Israelis have never been able to reach a peace agreement (Feldner and Solnik, 2001). On July 30, 2000, only five days after the end of the failed peace talks at Camp David, Mahmoud Abbas said: "We were not prepared to limit the number of refugees who would be allowed

to return, even if they had proposed a number of three million refugees" (Feldner and Solnik, 2001). On November 24, 2000, Abbas said: "We made it clear to the Israelis that the Right of Return means a return to Israel and not to the Palestinian state ... because it is from there that [the Palestinians] were driven out and it is there that their property is found" (Feldner and Solnik, 2001). Abbas's comments are consistent with President Clinton's assertion that the 2000 peace talks failed primarily due to the Palestinians' demand for the "right of return" of the "refugees" (Hirsh, 2001; Clinton, 2004: 943–944; Ross, 2004: 756; Susser, 2012: 42–59, 92, 155, 218). As Barry and Judith Colp Rubin observed in 2003: "More than any other issue, the Palestinian position demanding a total return [of the 'refugees'] persuaded the Israelis that they were not really interested in a deal and had not given up their hope of destroying Israel" (Rubin and Rubin, 2001: 198).

Unfortunately, nothing has changed since 2000. On November 30, 2014, Mahmoud Abbas, speaking now as Palestinian Authority president, said: "We cannot recognize a Jewish state ... [because] there are six million refugees who wish to return" (Abbas, 2014). On September 16 and 17, 2016, Abbas made the same claim again, insisting: "There are six million Palestinian refugees who are waiting to receive what they are entitled to, [waiting] to be allowed to return to their homes" (Abbas, 2016). Mahmoud Abbas and the other Palestinian leaders surely know that no Israeli government could ever agree to such a demand. They know that their demand is a deal-breaker – and that is exactly why they keep making it.

This history of the Oslo negotiations and their failure is very difficult to comprehend on the assumption that the PLO in fact signed the Oslo Accords in 1993 as part of a sincere, good-faith effort to make permanent peace with Israel. It becomes much more comprehensible, however, if we see Oslo as part of a grand deception to insert a Trojan horse into the heart of historic Palestine, in the form of an "independent combatant national authority" that would serve as a base for the ongoing struggle to destroy Israel.

Implications of the Foregoing Analysis

The foregoing analysis of the Al Aqsa Intifada and its origins is relevant, first of all, for understanding the recent history of Israel, and second, for drawing conclusions about the most prudent path forward for Israeli policymakers and for the US politicians who invariably are called upon to express positions on Israeli government actions.

Implications for Understanding

Understanding the Al Aqsa Intifada helps us to understand the shift in the balance of power from left to right in Israeli politics over the past three decades. As early as 2003, Barry and Judith Colp Rubin pointed out that "Arafat ensured the failure of Israeli politicians most willing to work with him [i.e., Labor party leaders] and the success of those most hostile [i.e., Likud party leaders]" (Rubin and Rubin, 2001: 240).

Arafat managed to discredit the Israeli Labor party, which has largely collapsed after dominating Israeli politics for decades. The inability of the Oslo Accords to enhance Israelis' sense of security and make progress toward resolving the conflict has significantly eroded trust in left-wing parties, particularly Labor and Meretz, which were strongly associated with the accords (Lee, 2019). Karsh (2023) argues that just as Labor's inability to foresee the October 1973 war resulted in its loss of power for the first time since Israel's founding, the failure of the Oslo process initiated a persistent decline for the party, bringing it to the brink of political extinction. Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and the author, most recently, of *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, asserts:

If you believe that your side genuinely tried to make peace, and received, in return, the worst wave of terrorism in Israel's history, then your first conclusion is going to be that the Israeli left, which promised us peace now, are simply fools. And that's exactly what happened. The Israeli left collapsed immediately after the second intifada began. And it never recovered. The Labor Party today is the smallest party in Parliament, four seats. The Zionist

party to the left of Labor, called Meretz, isn't even in Parliament. That was the shift of the second intifada. (Klein Halevi, 2023)

Simultaneously, Arafat managed to set the stage for the rise of the Israeli right. When a right-wing politician like Bezalel Smotrich asserts that "there is no room in the Land of Israel for two conflicting national movements" (Smotrich, 2018), we must see this claim not only as emerging from Zionist ideology but also as a reaction to the uncompromising, violent, duplicitous irredentism of Yasser Arafat and the PLO, manifested most virulently in the bloody violence of the Al Aqsa Intifada.

A related point is the shift in Israeli public opinion that Palestinian violence helped to effect, a shift that paved the way for the political rise of the Israeli right noted above. To quote the Rubins again:

Yossi Beilin, an architect of the Oslo Agreement and the most important Israeli politician still friendly toward him, told Arafat during an April 2001 visit that even the leftists now believed that "the Oslo Agreement was a plot and not a historic program of conciliation. At the critical moments of test – at Camp David, at Sharm al-Sheikh, and at Taba – Arafat's true face was revealed. What he wanted was not a peace treaty but the implementation of the Palestinian 'plan of stages' for annihilating Israel." (Rubin and Rubin, 2001: 261; note omitted)

Recent polling data shows declining levels of support for the two-state solution among Israeli Jews and Palestinians alike, combined with very low levels of trust by each side in the other, with 86 percent of Palestinians and 85 percent of Israeli Jews saying the other side is not trustworthy.¹³ This loss of trust on the Jewish Israeli side is, in part, the legacy of the Al Aqsa Intifada.

13 Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research and Tel Aviv University, "The Palestine/ Israel Pulse: A Joint Poll," January 24, 2023, <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/928>; see also Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Public Opinion Poll No. 88, June 14, 2023, <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/940>.

Although the Al Aqsa Intifada was preplanned by the PLO leadership and not spontaneous, that leadership did reflect the values and beliefs of Palestinian society. Palestinians, after all, sustained the violence for nearly five years when summoned and incited by their leaders. In a meta-study of 330 surveys of Palestinian public opinion carried out over years by four major Palestinian research centers, Daniel Polisar reached the following conclusion:

In sum, when the Palestinians look at Israel, they see a country of enormous power and influence that has done great harm to them, that seeks to displace them entirely from historical Palestine, and whose people are deficient as individuals and also lacking any collective rights to the land in general or to Jerusalem in particular. (Polisar, 2015)

Arafat's refusal to accept Israel's right to exist on what he saw as Palestinian land, including within its pre-1967 borders, was rooted in the values of Palestinian society (Spoerl, 2006, 2012, 2018, 2020, 2021).

Implications for Policy

The first lesson that US policymakers should draw is humility about past failures and diffidence about putting any pressure on Israel to make peace with unreliable "peace partners." The worst predictions about Arafat proved accurate, and the belief that he had become a statesman in the vein of Nelson Mandela or Anwar Sadat proved inaccurate.

This diffidence should also extend to any pressure on Israel to withdraw its military forces from the West Bank (though settlement by Israeli civilians is a separate question). The Israeli withdrawals from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and from southern Lebanon in May 2000 illustrate the problems that arise when there is no peaceful neighbor to fill the vacuum and maintain order on the border without threatening Israel. Egyptian leaders from Sadat onward have worked to prevent terrorist attacks on Israel from the Sinai Peninsula (Frantzman, 2023), while, in contrast, Hezbollah and Hamas pose ongoing grave threats to Israel from Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. In

particular, the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip strengthened Hamas and paved the way for its takeover there (Milton-Edwards and Farrell, 2010). Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell observe how, in contrast to Gaza, in the West Bank, "Israel's ever-present troops, tanks, helicopters, and snatch-squads would never tolerate an overt Hamas armed presence" (Milton-Edwards and Farrell, 2010: 283). By the same token Israel can limit the violence and lethality of terrorist groups other than Hamas in the West Bank, including those linked to Fatah, e.g., the Tanzim and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, as well as Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which has armed itself freely in the Gaza Strip with aid from its patron Iran under the protective wing of Hamas. As a recent report in the *New York Times* notes: "While militant groups in the Palestinian coastal territory of Gaza have been launching rockets into Israel for more than 20 years, groups in the West Bank have not yet developed the same capabilities" (Kershner, 2023).

Iranian backing of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad makes this security threat especially serious for Israel (MEMRI, 2022, 2023d; Schanzer, 2022; Foundation for the Defense of Democracy, 2023; Tasnim News Agency, 2022), as does Iran's announced intention of expanding its operations in the West Bank (Abu Amer, 2019; Abu Toameh, 2023; Karmon, 2014; Vazirian, 2023; Yaari, 2023b).

Fatah, the ruling party of the PA and the largest party in the PLO, continues to launch terror attacks against Israel and boasts openly of doing so as it competes with Hamas for popular approval among Palestinians (Marcus, 2023; Marcus and Zilberdik, 2023). The PLO's failure to unambiguously affirm Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, its history of embracing and inciting violence against Israeli civilians, and Iran's ongoing efforts to arm and fund the most violent anti-Israel Islamist groups make it a virtual certainty that an Israeli military withdrawal from the West Bank would have disastrous implications for Israel's security and for the peace and stability of the entire region.

Conclusion

In 1993, the PLO leadership signed the Oslo Accords, thereby committing themselves to resolving their disagreements with Israel by peaceful means only, above all by negotiation. We must presume they understood the significance and legal implications of their actions. Arafat's decision to prepare for and launch the armed Second Intifada, and to enlist violent opponents of Oslo such as Hamas in doing so, was a blatant violation of his obligations under international law that he took on by signing the Oslo Accords. Moreover, a great deal of evidence shows that Arafat and many PLO leaders never intended to abide by the Oslo Accords in the first place but saw them merely as a temporary stage in a multi-front, long-term war to destroy the State of Israel by any means, including terrorist violence. Arafat and his PLO colleagues have made it politically impossible and strategically unwise for any Israeli government to trust Palestinian leaders to keep their word in any peace agreement for the foreseeable future. Other world leaders, especially US politicians, must understand this reality and not push Israeli leaders to do the impossible or (what is the same) the suicidal.

Conventional wisdom among Western journalists, politicians, and academics identifies two main obstacles to the "two-state solution": the ongoing Israeli presence in the West Bank and the rise of the Israeli right over recent decades. The implication is that if only Israeli (Jewish) voters would behave more responsibly, by electing the left and demanding an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, the path would be clear for achieving the "two-state solution." This view ignores altogether the Palestinian role in sabotaging peace and treats the Palestinians like passive children while placing all responsibility with the Israeli side. In fact, it is Palestinian duplicity and violent irredentism that have (a) fueled the collapse of the Israeli left and the rise of the Israeli right; (b) made it impossible for Israeli Jews to trust any Palestinian "peace partner"; (c) made it unwise for Israel to relinquish its grip on the West Bank; and thus (d) rendered the "two-state solution" unachievable.

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