



Israel, the Arabs and Palestine: Facing Crucial Decisions

Asher Susser

Prof. Asher Susser is the director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University and teaches in the university's Department of Middle Eastern History. Professor Susser's research and teaching has focused on modern Middle Eastern history, religion and state in the Middle East and Arab-Israeli issues, with special reference to Jordan and the Palestinians.

The Regional Context – The Arab Predicament

For years it was common practice to refer to the Middle East and the Arab world as if these terms were synonymous. This is no longer true. Of course the Middle East is home to 300 million Arabs, and most of the countries in the Middle East are Arab. The Arabs are the predominant ethnic group in the Middle East, and this will always be the case. However, politically, the Middle East is no longer synonymous with the Arab world in the sense that Arab countries set the regional agenda. Today the Middle Eastern agenda is set by various, primarily non-Arab, countries, such as the US and the other non-Arab Middle Eastern players: Iran, Turkey and Israel. In fact, these three Middle Eastern states together exert more influence than all the Arab states combined.

This is not a result of the war in Iraq, although that war, in which the US captured Baghdad as the Arab world stood idly by, is symptomatic of this reality. More than twenty years ago, it was Fouad Ajami who spoke of the "Arab predicament."¹ This predicament is political and socioeconomic, as recent UN Arab Human Development Reports have demonstrated very specifically. The Arab world is in an historical state of retreat.

Israel's "second Lebanon war" in the summer of 2006 was, therefore, not another round in the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was actually between Israel and Iran via its Lebanese Shia proxy Hizbullah, as the Arab states stood idly by yet again.

The ousting of Saddam Hussein and the capture of Iraq left the countries in the Arab East (the *Mashriq* – the region of Arab countries to the east of Egypt) with a leadership void and with no competing centers of power. For years there had been lively discussion of the competition between the Syrian and the Iraqi Ba'ath parties vying for supremacy in the Fertile Crescent. Today the Iraqi Ba'ath is extinct, and the Syrian Ba'ath is nothing but a pale shadow of its former self.

Generally speaking, the historical centers of power in the Arab world no longer exist as they once did. There are no Arab hegemonies today. Whereas in the past, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia were hegemonic powers at various times – Egypt in the Middle East in general and the others at least in certain parts of the region – today this is no longer true.

Egypt is an overpopulated, poor, Third World country which has, to a large degree, lost its regional influence. It no longer sets policy on the critical issues of the region or of its immediate neighborhood – neither in Palestine on the one side, nor in Sudan on the other. Just 50 years ago, the Egyptians considered Sudan to be an integral part of their own country whereas today, even as a genocidal conflict rages in Darfur, Egypt has virtually no influence over what happens there. In Palestine, Fatah and Hamas ignore Egypt's advice and, in December 2003, when the Egyptian foreign minister visited Jerusalem, protesting Palestinians pelted him with shoes. One could hardly imagine such a humiliating scene taking place in the heyday of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir.

Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir, on the other hand, did indeed set the regional agenda for more than a decade. Today there is no one of his stature in the Arab world. Syria, recently forced out of Lebanon, has a weaker leadership, governing a country isolated by the US and its allies, an army which is numerically powerful but facing modernization problems, and an economy that is sorely underdeveloped. Iraq is under American occupation and on the verge of a bloody civil war and possible disintegration. Saudi Arabia does not shape events in the Arabian Peninsula, or anywhere else. Its relations with the US are unstable and, even though oil prices are skyrocketing, it is not as wealthy a country as it once was. The gross national product (GNP) per capita in Israel is considerably higher than that of Saudi Arabia, though Israel has no oil at all. Jordan, which has never shaped events in the region, is lodged between two zones of chaos – Iraq and the West Bank – and suffers, therefore, from acute strategic anxiety, in a region over which it has little or no control.

Samuel Huntington, in his renowned *Clash of Civilizations*, notes that Muslims are “convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.”² Islamic fundamentalism was supposed to have been a remedy for this asymmetry via an alternative, non-Western, route to modernity. But, in actual fact, all that remains of this alternative route is the rage and fury of a civilization in retreat. Rising oil prices will not change this sad reality. As high as they might be, oil prices cannot change the balance of power between the Arab world and the West. The oil weapon has lost much of its muscle and is no longer the effective means of political pressure on the industrialized states that it once was.

The Preeminence of the non-Arab States

Consequently, the real powers in the Middle East are the US (although its status erodes the longer it is mired in Iraq) and the non-Arab Middle Eastern countries: Iran, Turkey and Israel. The limitations of the US are becoming more obvious but, in the meantime, it still projects a superpower presence in the region. For the purposes of this analysis, the local, rather than the external, powers are more important, primarily Iran. The collapse of Iraq, Syria's deterioration and the leadership void in the *Mashriq* create a situation whereby Iran has more regional influence than ever in the modern era. That was certainly not the intention of the US when it invaded Iraq. But, by emasculating that country, it has destroyed the most effective barrier to Iran's influence in the Arab East.

Iraq's transformation to a country under Shia control (despite the ethnic tensions between the Arab Shia in Iraq and the Persian Shia in Iran) gives it a broader scope of influence than it enjoyed in the past. The difficulties of the US in Iraq are also eroding its power to deter Iran, which can seemingly defy it with impunity by taking an uncompromising and bellicose stand on the nuclear issue or with regard to Israel, on the assumption that the US will not be able to respond with excessive force. An Iranian-Shia arc of influence has emerged, stretching all the way from Teheran via Baghdad to Syria and Lebanon, where the Lebanese Shia, by far the largest community in that country, backed up by their powerful militia Hizbullah, were, until the recent war with Israel, very much on the march.

Another regional power is Turkey. Since it shares none of Iran's political or ideological hostility towards Israel, an increase in Turkey's relative importance is unquestionably a positive development from Israel's point of view, and a counterweight to Iran's evolving might. Turkey is a country of immense proportions, extending from Greece to Iran – a regional giant and former imperial power which towers above the political void of the Arab *Mashriq*, controlling the water sources of Iraq and Syria, and with the greatest military might in the Middle East at its disposal. The US will one day withdraw from Iraq, probably after having failed to put into effect the political order it seeks to establish in that country. But Turkey and Iran will remain Iraq's powerful neighbors forever, and it is they who will influence the future of Iraq and that of the *Mashriq* in general, more than the Americans and all the Arab states combined.

The third non-Arab regional power is Israel, owing to its relative strength in military, economic and technological terms. Between Cairo and Baghdad there are no countries other than Israel, Iran and Turkey which can meaningfully influence the Middle Eastern agenda.

Israel and the Palestinians – The Balance of Power, the Time Factor and “the End of Conflict”

If, indeed, the balance of power with the Arabs has changed so markedly in Israel's favor in recent years, it would seem odd that the Palestinians, perhaps the weakest of all the Arab players, would have chosen to go to war with Israel. It would appear illogical, especially at a moment in history when Israel was seemingly at the peak of its relative power, to prefer the option of armed struggle over peaceful settlement, as other Arab players, such as Egypt and Jordan, have done. More powerful players than the Palestinians would not have opted for armed confrontation with Israel. The Palestinian choice, therefore, requires explanation. To do so, we shall examine the unique characteristics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and identify its distinctive features, as compared with those of the inter-state Arab-Israeli conflicts.

These are two very different kinds of conflicts determined by very different components of power. The balance of power between Israel and the Arab states is usually judged by the accepted measures of military power, economic strength and technological advancement and, in each of these, Israel is still ahead of its Arab neighbors. But, in the Palestinian-Israeli equation, these are factors of limited importance. The conflict with the Palestinians will not be decided by Israel's military, economic or technological superiority, because none of these can fully be brought to bear in the Palestinian arena, for both ethical and political reasons.

Israel's overwhelming power advantage cannot be maximized in the kind of civil war which is fought in densely populated residential areas, or the sub-conventional type of war against Hizbullah, for that matter, as it could in the conventional battlefields where Israel once fought its far more powerful neighbors, such as Egypt and Syria. Moreover, in the balance of power between the Israelis and the Palestinians, there are other factors at play than those relevant to the inter-state conflicts, and these actually work in the Palestinians' favor and against Israel.

The Palestinians have advantages in their conflict with Israel in areas that are irrelevant to the inter-state conflicts. The Palestinians' main advantages lie in demography and international legitimacy and, as a result, in the time factor as well. Consequently, taking into account the above Israeli limitations and Palestinian advantages, the Palestinian decision to engage in armed struggle becomes quite understandable.

In the Israeli-Egyptian equation, for example, demography is of no concern because Israelis and Egyptians do not occupy the same territorial-geographic space. But Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Arabs live in the same confined space – the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Demographic forecasts vary: according to some, in approximately five years the Palestinians will constitute the majority in this area. Others say that the Arabs will comprise no more than 40 percent of the total population. In actual fact, there is no practical difference between these two opinions. In either case, the State of Israel will not be able to maintain itself, within these boundaries, in the long run, as the state of the Jewish people, which by definition requires a solid, longstanding, Jewish majority. Therefore, the continuation of the status quo is bound to ensure the failure of Zionism and its historical *raison d'être*.

Moreover, the continuation of the status quo and the perpetuation of Israel's occupation of millions of Palestinians are constantly eroding Israel's international legitimacy. They also provide the justification for a significant body of world opinion to support the Palestinians' use of force against Israel.

This combined erosion of both Israel's demographic power and its international legitimacy is turning the time factor against Israel as well.

There are other difficulties in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which are similarly irrelevant to the inter-state conflicts – such as the particular problem of clearly defining “the end of conflict” with the Palestinians. How, and at what point, can it be said that the conflict has indeed ended? The attempt to define agreed criteria on these issues at Camp David in the summer of 2000 not only ended in failure, but that failure led to the most severe armed conflict in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict since 1948. Since the Palestinians' subjective assessment is that time is working in their favor, an assessment which might not be devoid of objective justification, they feel no urgent need to come to a final agreement. Moreover, it is especially complicated to define finality in regard to some of the key components of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

What are the territorial dimensions of Palestine and Israel? What is Palestinian-ness? And what is the territorial definition of this Palestinian-ness? What are the accepted boundaries which will determine that the conflict has finally ended? There is a known, defined, international boundary between Israel and all of its neighboring Arab states. This is not the case with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The territorial issues that were relevant in Israel's peace negotiations with Egypt and Syria arose from its conquests in the 1967 war. They related to Israel's expansion, not to its very existence. With the Palestinians, on the other hand, there are key issues which originated not in 1967 but in 1948, including two issues which are probably the most intractable. One is the issue of the return of the Palestinian refugees, and the other is the issue of the collective rights of the Palestinian minority in Israel, both of which have a decisive influence over Israel's very existence as the state of the Jewish people. Therefore, in the Palestinian-Israeli context, the Arab predicament and the time factor do not exert the same kind of influence that they did in the inter-state conflicts. And the

results speak for themselves. The two parties have not achieved an agreement; nor, of course, have they arrived at an “end of conflict.” Instead, they have experienced one of the most horrific bloodbaths this conflict has ever known.

The War with the Palestinians – An Interim Assessment

In the war which erupted in 2000, the Palestinians failed to achieve their goals. They had set three main objectives:

- 1) To break the spirit of the Israeli people and to force them to accept terms they would never have otherwise accepted;
- 2) To draw other Arab states into the conflict; and
- 3) To erode Israel’s international stature. With regard to the first two objectives, their failure is clear.

As for the international arena, the situation is more complicated and balanced – the Palestinians had both successes and failures. The war made the Israeli occupation (and, increasingly, Israel itself) less acceptable to the international community. Palestinian tactics and combat style, however, especially the suicide bombings deliberately aimed at civilians, were perceived by most of the international community as immoral and illegitimate. The bombings were even defined as crimes against humanity by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The Israeli-Palestinian war is not yet over. But it would seem fair to say that, with offensive measures such as “targeted killings,” and defensive measures such as the security fence, to date Israel has had the upper hand militarily. Yet, if Israel has indeed had the upper hand, why did it decide to withdraw unilaterally from Gaza, with more withdrawals probably to come?

The withdrawal can only be understood in the wider Palestinian and regional context. In the Palestinian context, it is actually weakness on the part of Israel that is apparent, despite its military achievement, and this weakness is manifested in Israel’s demographic Achilles’ heel. Because of the changing Israeli-Palestinian demographic balance, not only is there no advantage to maintaining control over the territories, but, rather, these territories have clearly changed from being a potential asset into an obvious liability. In the regional context, since there is no immediate eastern front and no western front, and Israel has less fear of a sudden conventional attack, as in the Yom Kippur War, the actual importance of this territory, as opposed to the Golan, for conventional self-defense is less critical than it used to be. Thus, for both of these reasons – demography and the needs of conventional self-defense – these territories are not as important a factor as they once were in Israeli perceptions of security.

Responsibility for decision-making rests pretty much with Israel, because it alone is capable of making decisions of regional consequence and actually

carrying them out. Israel has no real partners in the immediate Arab vicinity to initiate the reshaping of the regional political environment. Moreover, not only can Israel act decisively but, it must do so, because, as noted, time is working against it.

And what about the Palestinian partner? Two historical changes have recently taken place: Arafat died in November 2004 and was succeeded by Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), and Hamas won the Palestinian Authority's parliamentary elections in January 2006. Undoubtedly, Abu Mazen is not a replica of Arafat, neither in policy nor in character or relative charisma. Abu Mazen will probably not follow Arafat's complicated path of calculated ambivalence and deception. He is also more pragmatic and genuinely interested in a two-state solution. Abu Mazen regards the war launched in 2000 and the terrorist onslaught on Israel as both a failure and a tragic miscalculation. But on the crucial historical issues, such as the refugee question, his views are no different from those of Arafat. And even if he did have different views, it is doubtful whether he would have the power to rally public support for them.

Abu Mazen's rise to power also points to change in other spheres. One of these is inter-generational transition. Abu Mazen is probably the last Palestinian leader from Arafat's generation. His tenure signals the transition from the generation of 1948 to the intermediate generation that has matured under Israeli occupation since 1967. This is an internal, socio-political, Palestinian transformation that goes far beyond the issue of generation and age. It represents the completion of a process whereby the center of gravity of the Palestinian national endeavor has shifted from the diaspora to the "inside," to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The leadership is no longer based on "outsiders," but on people who originate from the areas of the Palestinian Authority, Fatah and Hamas alike. The PLO, in essence, was an organization born in the Palestinian diaspora, where it functioned, flourished and fought in the refugee camps of Jordan and then Lebanon. As such, it represented first and foremost the Palestinian refugee constituency and its single-issue political agenda of return. Israel had virtually no foundation upon which to build a constructive dialogue with the PLO, as long it primarily represented this diaspora constituency for which Israel has no real, acceptable answers.

The inter-generational transition represents the final stage in this shift of the center of gravity of national Palestinian life from the diaspora to the "inside." The beginnings of this process go back to the loss of the PLO's autonomous base of operations in the 1982 war in Lebanon, the first intifada and the Oslo accords, and which is now approaching its final stage of fruition with the transition to leadership coming from the West Bank and Gaza. This is not simply an issue of geography, but, rather, a fundamental matter of political, historical and even potentially ideological proportions.

The entire Palestinian national endeavor is presently focused on the West Bank and Gaza, where the Palestinian national movement is engaged in the establishment of its national-political institutions – the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, its government and ministries, the Palestinian legislature and local government – all these are the institutions of a state-in-the-making in the West Bank and Gaza, elected solely by the people of the West Bank and Gaza.

The Palestinian Authority has inherited the PLO, at least in practice, if not in theory, as the supreme Palestinian representative institution. But it, too, represents only the West Bank and Gaza. In fact, this entails a kind of condensation of Palestine into the confines of the 1967 boundaries, while relegating the diaspora to a position of secondary importance. The contours of a two-state reality are being crafted – not a negative development from the Israeli standpoint. Quite the opposite is true.

Disengagement, the decline in the intensity of Palestinian warfare against Israel and the development of Palestinian institutions, even if they do not explicitly affirm their willingness to solve the problems of 1948 in an amicable manner acceptable to both sides, can in the meantime institutionalize and accelerate the two-state dynamic. This remains true even after the Hamas election victory. After all, Hamas took part in and won an election for a legislative council in which only the people of the West Bank and Gaza participated. This council also represents only the areas of the Palestinian Authority, and neither all of Palestine nor all Palestinians. This does not at all correspond with Hamas ideology, which is bent on the unequivocal re-conquest of all of Palestine. But even Hamas has no choice but to take reality into consideration from time to time, albeit a two-state reality, which in principal it rejects outright.

The Two-State Dynamic and its Significance

Will disengagement and the two-state dynamic lead to peace, or war? Will unilateral disengagement bring about more, or less, security? Will terrorism cease, or continue? It would be unrealistic to assume that organizations such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, or even significant segments of Fatah, would be satisfied with a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and from much of the West Bank, and would simply lay down their arms for Israel's sake. But these are not the only critical questions.

Another equally critical question is if withdrawal will bring about a two-state settlement that would ensure the historical objective of Zionism – that is, the existence of the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people. This is the key question, and other questions (such as whether more, or fewer, Qassam rockets are launched over the fence), though not unimportant, are still secondary to the major historical priority of the Zionist enterprise. The decisive historical question is therefore whether the process of disengagement reinforces Israel's survivability as the state of the Jewish people, and the answer to that is "yes,"

provided Israel does find effective political and military means to deter or prevent continued warfare of all kinds after withdrawal, short of reoccupation.

Where does all this lead? Well before the Hamas electoral victory, there were those who argued in favor of Israel returning to the US-inspired Road Map to negotiate with the Palestinians. But the chances of reaching a final-status agreement with the Palestinians on the basis of the Road Map, or on any other basis for that matter, and thus resolving the hitherto insoluble issues, were not great even with Abu Mazen. After the Hamas victory, those slim chances have become minuscule. With or without Hamas, it is difficult to imagine that, after the past five years of mutual bloodshed, Israeli society would become more, rather than less, flexible than it was before with regard to the 1948 questions, especially on refugee return.

If a final status settlement remains a remote possibility, what options are left? The continuation of the status quo is not a desirable choice for Israel. There is no gain for Israel in marking time. In fact, it represents a net loss because of the cumulative damage caused to its national interests by the perpetuation of the occupation.

According to conventional wisdom, there is a built-in asymmetry in favor of Israel in its relationship with the Palestinians. This asymmetry stems from the fact that Israel is immeasurably superior to the Palestinians in all components of power: military, political, economic, technological and so on. However, the more critical asymmetry in the Israeli-Palestinian context actually favors the Palestinians in the areas of demography and international legitimacy, where time is clearly working for them.

Consequently, the Palestinians are not in a position of inferiority when negotiating with Israel. Due to the pressure of time, a paradoxical situation has arisen whereby Israel actually has a more urgent interest than the Palestinians in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. To maintain its *raison d'être* as the state of the Jewish people, Israel has been forced into the same conclusion that the Jordanians reached in 1988, when King Hussein disengaged from the West Bank. At that time, he explained that Jordan's disengagement was essential to clarify to all and sundry beyond any shadow of doubt that "Jordan is Jordan and Palestine is Palestine." Jordan was not Palestine and had no intention of becoming so.

Demography and time compel Israel to eventually do the same, and for the same reason: Israel has no intention of becoming Palestine either. Israel, therefore, must withdraw despite its definitive military superiority over the Palestinians, and despite the fact that it had the upper hand in the recent armed conflict with them.

In the absence of a two-state dynamic and a two-state reality, time and demography will drag Israel and the Palestinians into a one-state reality. This one-state reality, unfolding before our eyes due to continued occupation and settlement, could in the future see the Jews becoming a minority in their own homeland. Then the Palestinians would change the rules of the game: no more two-state solution for two peoples, but a one-state solution with a Jewish minority living under an ever-growing Arab majority.

This is not a figment of the imagination of someone lodged in an ivory tower, detached from reality. One need only follow the intellectual discourse in Palestine, in the corridors of international academe, and in certain segments of the Israeli left to recognize the increasing salience of the one-state idea. Under these circumstances, the two-state dynamic has actually become an Israeli vested interest and, fortunately for Israel, the regional context and the Arab predicament allow it to make territorial concessions that would not have been possible in the past, when the Arab world was more powerful.

Israel, therefore, until the recent war in Lebanon, was moving towards unilateralism rather than negotiation. This was not an ideal, but a necessity driven by the inability to achieve an “end of conflict” by negotiation. Unilateralism will not resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and was only intended to manage it, for the meantime, until resolution became possible. But, in so doing, Israel sought to preserve its historical purpose as the state of the Jewish people, without which it has no *raison d’être* at all.

However, unilateralism, by the admission of the Israeli government itself is no longer on the table, at least in the meantime. But in the absence of a negotiated final settlement with the Palestinians, and even if required to deal with Lebanon and Syria in the north, Israel will still have to manage its conflict with the Palestinians in a manner that preserves the reality, relevance and dynamic of the two-state option. This may call for long-term interim arrangements, if attainable by negotiation, or even some revived form of unilateralism. After all, the status quo of occupation does not serve Israel’s long-term interests.

Conclusion

Israel has to make some fateful decisions. It must do so against a backdrop of new types of challenges. The challenges presently facing Israel are serious and dangerous, but they are not the challenges of the past that were based on an assessment of Arab conventional power. They are sub-conventional (terror), non-conventional (nuclear) and unconventional (demography):

- 1) Terrorism, in all shapes and forms, guerrilla warfare and rocketry, from the Palestinian territories and Lebanon, and possible Syrian support for “resistance” on the Golan, in the aftermath of the recent war in Lebanon, which might lead to full-scale war with Syria.

- 2) The nuclear threat of Iran, coupled with its regional hegemonic designs and explicit threats against Israel.
- 3) The erosion of the cohesion of the Arab state – the danger of chaos in the Arab east that could be created by the undermining of the internal unity of multi-ethnic and multi-communal Arab states (such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon). In Iraq's case, this is not an assessment but rather a reality.
- 4) Demography, on two levels:
 - a) Internally, where Israel has to strive to maintain its *raison d'être* as the state of the Jewish people;
 - b) Regionally, where the Middle East cannot sustain its population. This is true today and will be true in the near future as well. Millions of Arabs will continue to immigrate to Europe and thus change its character. The manifestations of this process are already evident.
- 5) International legitimacy – in the current circumstances, whether Israelis like it or not, it is Western Europe that determines the contours of international legitimacy and Israel, as an occupier, does not meet its criteria. The continuation of the status quo, therefore, not only erodes the demographic balance, but also undermines the legitimacy of Israel as an accepted member of the family of nations. The combination of these two factors militates in favor of a one-state solution to the conflict, rather than a two-state solution.

All of the above present Israel with existential challenges that require decisive action, coupled with the reformulation of the necessary balance between the needs of demography and those related to security (nuclear capabilities, terrorism, rocketry and missiles and possible regional chaos). The ideal situation Israel thought it had inherited in 1967, in which it seemingly had all the time in the world to decide not to decide, has ended. Israel must now redefine the relationship between territory and security. What was perhaps once appropriate is no longer valid, in an era of the aforementioned array of threats. Palestinian territories have become more of a liability than an asset. Israel must also understand the constraints of time, and thus the need for critical decisions. Failure to meet this challenge could eventually spell the end of Israel as the State of the Jewish People, no more and no less.

Notes

1 Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge, 1984).

2 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York, 1996), p. 217.