

The Decline of the Arabs

The Arabs ... are in a double state of decay that boggles the minds even of those who expected a hot summer of post-war decadence ... The [Arab] nation will be split between those who dance to the beat of scandal and defeat, and those who blow themselves up in what is turning into a deafening religious ritual.

–Azmi Bishara¹

by Asher Susser

In their half-century of independence, the Arabs have been defeated time and again by their adversaries. Arab armies knew humiliation in the *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 and the six-day defeat of 1967. They saw victory snatched from them by Israel in 1973, and they saw the largest standing Arab army put to flight by the United States in 1991. Arabs have hungered for military success. This past March, many of them thought they could smell one.

In the first few days of the war in Iraq, it appeared as though the Iraqis were admirably holding their own against obviously superior U.S. and British forces and might shatter expectations of a rapid Iraqi collapse. Arab observers lavished praise on the Iraqi forces, which would finally redeem Arab honor. It did not matter that a ruthless dictator ruled Iraq. A “steadfast and resisting” dictatorship was far better than a defeated Iraqi democracy, as one Arab commentator put it.²

But the euphoria did not last long. The Iraqi forces crumbled, undermined by a lack of resolve and poor fighting spirit. Thanks to their pompous minister of information, Muhammad Sa‘id as-Sahhaf, they also became the target of international ridicule. Initial pride turned into despair and shock as the Arabs, like the rest of the world, witnessed the spectacle of relieved Iraqis rejoicing in the overthrow of their leader by a foreign invasion.

And the Arabs, for all their sense of shame, did nothing to prevent this outcome. Some Arab states actually assisted the United States; others did nothing at all. Even the much-vaunted “Arab street” was dumbstruck. There were bigger demonstrations against U.S. war plans in Europe than in the Arab capitals. The Arab media (al-Jazeera, etc.) alone bore the message of Arab solidarity, leading one particularly cynical Arab

¹ *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), May 22-28, 2003.

² Sultan al-Khattab, in *ar-Ra’y* (Amman), Mar. 28, 2003.

observer to the wry conclusion that the Arabs were “nothing more than an acoustic phenomenon (*zahira sawtiya*).”³

This essay might have been titled, “The Decline of the Arab World.” But referring to the Arab world today seems anachronistic. If the term is intended to suggest that the Arab states are a functioning political collective, it is clearly a misnomer. The Arab world, as such, no longer exists, any more than a Latin American world does. There are not even blocks or axes of certain Arab states arraigned against others, as in the past. The Arab collective has become nothing but a motley assortment of states, each fending for itself, most in cooperation with the United States, a few against it. As Arab diplomats themselves concede, it is doubtful if one can refer to anything such as a collective Arab order. The twenty-two Arab states have very little in common other than their language.⁴

The state of the Arab collective is not a consequence of the defeat of Saddam. Rather it is the ignominious defeat of Saddam that is symptomatic of the Arab condition. The Arabs are in deep crisis, politically, socially, and economically. Most have missed the boat of globalization; they are suffering from a leadership vacuum; and they are in no position to determine the regional agenda. After the U.S.-led war against Iraq, the Arabs are in even deeper disarray and sinking further into what Fouad Ajami described over two decades ago as the “Arab predicament.”

The Arabs, for the most part, have no illusions. Arab intellectuals and commentators are the first to recognize the Arab predicament, and it is they who project a mood of profound collective despair. Arab inability to set the region’s course is readily confirmed by Arab writers, who openly express the fear that Israel and the United States will now redraw the map of the Middle East. The Arabs, in their own self-image, are even more vulnerable than they were in the midst of World War I, when Britain and France carved up the Middle East in their secret deal of 1916, known as the Sykes-Picot agreement.

The impotence of the Arab League is but one symptom. After the war in Iraq, Arab foreign ministers opted not to convene at all. After all, they had nothing to decide. Muhammad Sid Ahmad, one of Egypt’s leading intellectuals, lamented the fact that the Arabs were now absent from the international arena, despite the fact that the Middle East was one of the key regions on the globe.⁵

The “Arab predicament” has only worsened since Ajami coined the phrase. The Arabs now stand at an impasse, with no prospect of exiting it any time soon. How they entered it is a cumulative litany of wrong choices, beginning with the hero of Arabism, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Trial and Errors

The Arabs did not always feel themselves so helpless. In the heyday of Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt’s young and promising charismatic president shared the leadership of the awakening third world and the non-aligned movement with Nehru of India and Tito of Yugoslavia. Nasser appeared on the world stage as an equal with the great leaders of his time, and he set the regional agenda. He put paid to the Western

³ Majid Kayyali, in *al-Bayan* (Dubai), Apr. 10, 2003.

⁴ *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Apr. 24-30; May 15-21, 2003.

⁵ *Ibid.*, May 15-21, 2003.

effort to create an anti-Soviet defense pact in the Middle East and precipitated the Suez debacle, coercing the French and the British into accepting his nationalization of the Suez Canal.

As a result, Nasser became the unrivaled leader of the Arab world. For a decade, he spread his messianic vision of Arab unity, Arab socialism, and alliance with the Soviet Union as the panacea for the ills of the Arab world and for the rejuvenation of Arab power. In 1958, he forged a union with Syria, effectively becoming ruler over that country. Nasser's appeal was so magnetic that even the United States seriously considered abandoning its ally Jordan in the face of his onslaught. Washington, like just about everyone else, was convinced that Nasser represented the inevitable wave of the future.

Nasser's position began to come undone in 1961 when the union with Syria broke apart. He slipped further when Egypt became embroiled in a costly civil war in Yemen. But the final blow came in 1967. After six days of warfare with Israel, Nasserism was in tatters. The great promise proved to be no more than an illusion. Since then it has been a steady run downhill for the Arab states.

On the ruins of Nasserism, Islamists offered a supposedly authentic route to modernity, without secularism. But the record of the ayatollahs in Iran, the Islamist-inspired military regime in Sudan, and the Taliban in Afghanistan has been one of repeated failure. (In Iran, where Islamists still rule, the younger generation detests the regime.) The Islamists, an Arab writer observed, offered no realistic policy alternatives other than a totalitarian vision of their own.⁶ Indeed, radical Islam, instead of developing into an alternative route to modernity, has degenerated into a movement of fury and revenge. It has produced horrific acts of terrorism, but has failed to alter the balance of power in the Arabs' favor.

In the 1970s, there were those in the Arab world and elsewhere who believed that the oil weapon would become the guarantor of Arab resurgence. It did not. Declining oil prices in the 1980s sent the Arab economies reeling into crisis from which many have yet to recover. Even the Saudis are finding it ever more difficult to maintain their well-greased political system, in which the loyalty of the middle class was bought with favors bestowed by the state.

The critical centers of power in the modern Arab East are spent forces. Cairo, Riyadh, Baghdad, and Damascus are way past their prime.

Egypt. Egypt, as a poor third world state, is increasingly aware of the widening gap between its self-image as a regional leader and its real power to shape the turn of events in the Middle East. Recognizing that poverty and power do not go together, the Egyptians are complaining yet again of the unequal distribution of wealth amongst the Arabs, on the one hand, and urging Egypt's accelerated economic reform and privatization on the other. Egypt's weakness makes it vulnerable to economic competition from neighbors. Thus, for example, Egypt is concerned that, in the new post-Saddam era, it will have to compete with Iraqi exports of natural gas, or that a new regime in Iraq might be convenient to Israel and thus tip the regional scales even further against the Egyptians.

Politically, Egypt acquiesces in the U.S. will. This, too, is a sign of its weakness. In the aftermath of the 1967 defeat, Nasser remained defiant. Under his aegis, the Arab summit in Khartoum adopted its notorious three "nos," refusing to

⁶ Isam Ikrimawi, in *al-Quds al-'arabi* (London), Apr. 11, 2003.

recognize, negotiate, or make peace with Israel. Shortly thereafter, he launched what became known as the “War of Attrition” against the Israeli forces along the Suez Canal. But in this day and age of U.S. hegemony and Arab lethargy, such a provocative mode of action would be unthinkable. Instead, the Egyptians cooperate. Most recently, they were involved in pressuring Arafat to allow the formation of the Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) government. They have similarly done their utmost to convince the Syrians not to provoke the United States. Generally speaking, the name of Egypt’s game is acquiescence with the powers that be rather than confrontation.

Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are in a state of constant anxiety, if not panic, paying protection to Islamic extremists and suffering their attacks all the same. Riyadh is also worried about oil prices. Strange as that may sound, it is true, nevertheless, and a sign of the times: rising prices might aggravate an already tense relationship with the United States. Since the exposure of the involvement of Saudi nationals in the attacks of September 11, 2001, American public anger against Saudi Arabia is rife. The Saudis would not even think of launching another oil boycott. Instead they have hired public relations specialists to plead the Saudi case and improve their image through television commercials. Saudi external debt is mounting,⁷ and its strategic importance to the United States has declined, now that Washington controls the future of Iraqi oil. The same holds true for Saudi territory for U.S. bases, which are being evacuated.

Iraq. In this overall picture of Arab infirmity, Iraq could have made a difference. Iraq is an extraordinary Arab state, not over-populated, potentially wealthy, and technologically advanced. But Saddam elected to use Iraqi power in futile confrontations with his neighbors, first Iran and then Kuwait. By so doing, he aroused almost the whole world against him. In the 1991 Kuwait war, even the Arab states sided with Washington. The United States intervened to restore the existing regional order, the very order that the Arab states craved.

The more recent Iraqi crisis, however, was very different. The United States invaded Iraq not to save the existing order but to overturn it. Generally speaking, the Arabs, even those who were relieved to see the last of Saddam, were deeply uncomfortable with the thought of the United States bowling over Middle Eastern regimes at will and possibly threatening the territorial integrity of an Arab state. But Washington had its way, and Iraq has become its testing ground for its theories about democracy.

Baghdad was once the capital of the magnificent caliphate empire of the Abbasids and the center of its Arabic-language culture under such illustrious caliphs as al-Mansur (754-75), Harun ar-Rashid (786-809) and al-Ma’ mun (813-33). In modern times it was often the counterweight to Egyptian dominance and an alternative “throbbing heart” of Arabism. Until recently Baghdad was home to Saddam’s regime, the defiant hope of the radicals. Now the United States plans to turn Baghdad into a beacon, but that prospect is distant, and may even be receding. In the meantime, Iraq is out of play as a force in the Arab world.

Syria. Damascus is more isolated than ever, completely surrounded by countries friendly to, allied with, or even occupied by the United States (Turkey, Israel, Jordan, and Iraq). This comes at a time when the new U.S. doctrine of preemptive war has given rise to a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity in the Arab states in

⁷ Eliyahu Kanovsky, “Oil: Who’s Really over a Barrel?” *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2003, pp. 58, 60.

general and in Syria in particular. On what grounds will the United States make its assessments of imminent threat or danger? Who might U.S. forces strike next?

Non-Arab Primacy

Even though Washington's war in Iraq, some Arabs argue, targeted "the Arabs" as a whole, there was not much they could do about it. They have very few levers of influence on the United States. The United States was not compelled to pay any real price to the Arab states in exchange for their reluctant acquiescence in the military action against the Saddam Hussein regime. Present U.S. initiatives in the Middle East peace process are not a payoff to the Arabs to whom Washington owes very little. They are far more of a response to its own domestic requirements and to the political concerns of its one and only real European ally, Britain. The United States has published the Quartet's new roadmap for a Palestinian solution primarily because President Bush seeks broader success in the Middle East, thus vindicating his decision to go to war. But Washington has no apparent desire, or capability for that matter, to impose the roadmap on the parties.

European concern for the Arab states and seemingly pro-Arab European policies are the consequences of Arab weakness, not Arab power or influence. Some on the left of the British Labor party have third-world sympathies that tend to be far more favorable to the Arabs in general, and to the Palestinians in particular, than to the first-world Israelis and their occupation. This holds true for other Europeans, too. But above and beyond the compassion is the hovering Damocles' sword of Arab emigration to Europe. The Europeans, as noted in a recent article by George Papandreou and Chris Patten, seem to be convinced that if only the Palestinian-Israeli issue were put to rest, "the full potential of cooperation in the Mediterranean region" could be achieved. Arab countries would be able to forge ahead towards economic reform and eventual prosperity. Such development would, in turn, reduce the demographic pressure of the Middle East on Europe.⁸ The Europeans are tilting in the Arabs' favor not because of oil power or the strength of Arab markets but because of the wretched state of many Arab societies and the impact emigration from there might have on the ethnic fabric of Europe in the generations ahead.

Arab decline has enhanced the regional stature of the non-Arab Middle Eastern states: Israel, Turkey, and Iran. Israel, because of its military power, economic viability, and technological prowess, is the only Middle Eastern state in the globalized league of Western affluent democracies. Turkey, a former imperial power, has an enormous land mass and is a populous, militarily powerful, geopolitically vital, Westernizing state, with considerable economic potential. Iran, somewhat less Westernized, has many of Turkey's geopolitical attributes as a regional power in addition to oil wealth and a certain influence among Arab Shi'ites who are bidding for power in their countries.

The routing of Saddam's regime in Iraq has crushed the traditional Sunni center of power for the first time in the country's history, elevating the Shi'ites, the majority in

⁸ George Papandreou and Chris Patten, "Sharing the Benefits of EU Enlargement," *Kathimerini* (Athens), May 26, 2003.

Iraq, to a position of unprecedented prominence. This does not mean Iranian control of Iraq or even a desire by the Iraqi Shi‘ites to be governed by Iran. But it does give the Iranians a say in Iraq the likes of which they have not had before. In the Persian Gulf, Iran is the only regional power of consequence. Iraq is out for the count, and the Saudis are a broken reed. Iran’s influence in Lebanon has also increased, through a more assertive and self-assured Hezbollah, ever since Syria’s grip on Lebanon began to loosen under the uncertain, untrained, and indecisive hand of Bashar al-Assad. Iran’s new stature was given symbolic recognition in mid-May 2003 when President Muhammad Khatami made the first visit to Lebanon by an Iranian president since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Some Arabs are talking of modernizing the Arab League while President Bush is pushing a plan calling for a Middle Eastern free trade zone. Nothing may come of these notions, but both envisage the inclusion of Iran and Turkey in new regional associations. It is worthy of note that after the war in Iraq, in late April 2003, it was not the Arab League that convened but a forum of Iraq’s neighbors, including Turkey and Iran, to discuss the new situation. Along with Turkey and Iran were Iraq’s Arab neighbors (including Egypt, in a gesture of respect), but these are all clear indications of the rising fortunes of the non-Arabs as regional players at the expense of the receding Arab collective.

The Self-Centered Arab State

In the annals of the modern Arab state, June 1967 is a crucial watershed. The humiliating defeat that Israel dealt the Arabs was more than just a military setback. The outcome of the war signified the bankruptcy of the world of ideas that Nasser represented at the core of which was his messianic message of pan-Arabism. The erosion of pan-Arabism enhanced the legitimacy of the individual Arab territorial states and the acceptance of the regional state order. Arab politics became more pragmatic and less ideological as the Arab states and their ruling elites all sought to secure their state interests in the naked and unapologetic pursuit of their *raison d’état*.

So devoted was Nasser to the cause of Arabism that during his reign even Egypt’s name was sacrificed: Egypt became one half of the United Arab Republic (UAR), which united Syria and Egypt, and Egypt remained the UAR even after Syria’s secession in 1961. Only after Nasser’s death in 1970 did his successor, Anwar Sadat, restore Egyptian primacy by renaming the country the Arab Republic of Egypt (in Arabic, *Jumhuriyat Misr al-‘Arabiya*—note *Misr* first and Arab second). This was not a semantic exercise but the fundamental reorientation of Egypt’s foreign policy to an “Egypt first” mindset, at the expense of Egypt’s commitment to the overall Arab cause. It was this shift that paved the way first to a limited war against Israel and then to peace, all in the name of the Egyptian state interest—not ideology, whether pan-Arab, socialist, or otherwise.

Just as “Egypt first” became an acceptable political orientation, so could the Palestinians follow suit in the unabashed promotion of Palestinianness. They embarked on the pursuit of a separate peace and then launched their own war against Israel without consulting their Arab brethren. Their brethren, in turn, left the Palestinians to stew in their own juice without so much as batting an eyelash. In this new atmosphere of particularism, the Jordanians can espouse a “Jordan first” (*al-Urdunn awwalan*) policy and wage a domestic public relations campaign under this slogan with no need to explain and apologize. Such behavior would have been unimaginable in the *Zeitgeist*

of the 1950s or early 1960s. It would have been automatically denounced by the guardians of pan-Arabism as “separatist” (*infisali*), “regionalist” (*iqlimi*), or downright treason, and an abandonment of the Arab cause.

But even the territorial state may be in some difficulty as primordial allegiances eat at its fabric. Iraq under the Baath is a case in point. Since 1968, Baathist Iraq followed the regionalist trend just like all the other Arab states. Despite the ruling party’s professed pan-Arab ideology, Iraqi nationalism predominated at home with a dash of populist Islam thrown in for good measure. Arabism had failed to unite Sunnis, Shi’ites (who always suspected Arabism as a guise for Sunni dominance), and Kurds (who are not Arabs), all lumped together by British colonial fiat into what Elie Kedourie called the Iraqi “make-believe kingdom.”⁹ The regime, in inventing an imaginary Iraqi identity, sought to revive the ancient heritage (*turath*) of pre-Islamic Mesopotamia (Babylon) and instructed Saddam’s servile intellectuals to produce folklore, theatre, art, and literature accordingly. The regime set an example. It established a new mouthpiece, the daily *Babil* (Babylon), symbolically akin to the Egyptian *Al-Ahram* (the pyramids), evoking the country’s pre-Islamic past. This was meant to offset the regime’s republican, revolutionary, pan-Arab credentials as represented by titles of older newspapers like *Ath-Thawra* (the revolution) and *Al-Jumhuriyya* (the republic).

This Iraqi identity, however, was very artificial, especially as compared to Egyptianism. Egyptianism preceded Arabism by a few decades. In Egypt, the so-called Pharaonic trend of Egyptian identity was prominent immediately after independence in the 1920s and actively promoted by the country’s most impressive liberal Westernizing elite. Egyptian identity was not imposed from above as a manipulative afterthought by a ruthless dictator after decades of failed Arabism as was the case in Iraq. Moreover, Egypt is a homogenous society with a strong sense of continuity since time immemorial as the people of the Nile Valley and is not the heterogeneous hodgepodge of Iraq. Even so, the Pharaonic trend did not last and was soon to succumb to Arabism, superseded after the 1967 debacle by the Egypto-Islamic mix of the present.

The triangular power structure of the Iraqi state—composed of the party, the army, and the domestic intelligence services—collapsed like a house of cards under the U.S.-led onslaught. The rapid disintegration of the regime revealed the enormous discrepancy between the power of the modern Arab authoritarian state to pulverize its own civil society and its concurrent incapacity to defend itself against severe external pressure. The Iraqi state, faced with American power, broke like glass under a hammer. Yet despite the searing hatred among most Iraqis of the Baath reign of terror, there is no remnant of civil society on which to begin the building of an acceptable substitute to the ancien régime. As an Arab commentator noted, since independence, the Arabs have failed to build viable nation-states. Instead they established police states that exploited every resource to protect their regimes from the peoples they governed. In this they succeeded, but they remain incapable of defending themselves against external threats.¹⁰

⁹ Elie Kedourie, “The Kingdom of Iraq: A Retrospect,” in Elie Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies*, new ed. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 1984), p. 278.

¹⁰ Ikrimawi, in *al-Quds al-‘arabi*, Apr. 11, 2003.

Indeed, nation-states—whose claims on the identity of their inhabitants trump all other identities—have yet to take root in the Arab Middle East. But as already noted, there is an elite interest in the preservation of the regional state system and in the promotion of a loyalty to the territorial state. Moreover, certain other groups have similarly acquired an interest in the existing state order. Thus, the Shi'ites in Iraq, and their brethren in Lebanon, have a vested interest in the preservation of their respective states, rather than seeing them subsumed in an Arab or Sunni Islamic union. Even an Iranian Shi'ite take-over of Iraq, for that matter, would most probably be seen as very disadvantageous to Iraqi Shi'ite sectarian interests. The same kind of interests could be associated with the Druze and the Alawis of Syria. Still, despite the commitment to and political self-interest in the territorial state, it has not become the focus of emotional identity. It has not evolved into the civic religion that supersedes other loyalties—whether sub-national, supra-national, primordial, religious, sectarian, ethnic, or tribal.

The looting in Iraq is a revealing case in point. The National Museum and other public secular institutions of the fallen regime were looted and vandalized. The destruction did not simply reflect a profound desire for revenge and booty. It showed an extremely low level of popular veneration for Iraq's Mesopotamian or Babylonian past, precisely that which the Baath regime had tried so energetically to force-feed the Iraqi people. Simon Jenkins, writing in *The Times* of London, reported on the wanton destruction, such as the decapitation of the famous statues of twenty-six Assyrian kings. This was in stark contradiction, Jenkins continued, even to the Bolsheviks, who protected the Hermitage during the Russian revolution. After all, robbing the museum—the custodian of the identity of a people—was akin to the seizure of the crown jewels of collective memory. Iraqi looters were plundering the raw material of their own history, of the Mesopotamian culture that deepened their historical perspective.¹¹

But this is where Jenkins got it wrong. For the great majority of Iraqis, the contents of the National Museum are *not* the crown jewels of their collective memory. For the Sunnis, it would be the memories of the glorious Abbasid caliphate and for the Shi'ites, their holy shrines of Najaf (the tomb of Ali), Karbala (the tomb of Hussein), and Kazimayn (the tombs of the seventh imam, Musa al-Kazim, and the eleventh, al-Hasan al-'Askari). These are the historical cradles of their suffering and their faith—not the kings of Assyria or the artifacts of Babylon. The massive outpouring of Shi'ite faith in Karbala—disallowed under Saddam—immediately after the U.S. occupation of Iraq, on the occasion of the commemoration of the fortieth day of the anniversary of the death of Imam Hussein, was as good an indication as any of the real cultural components of Iraqi collective memory.

Religious, ethnic, and tribal heritages are the crown jewels of collective memory, and these were left untouched. No one probably even considered the idea of looting the mosques at the holy shrines or anywhere else for that matter. One can easily imagine the punishment that would have been meted out to any such prospective looter by the clerics and their flock. (And when Iraqis did return some of the looted treasures of the National Museum, it was in response to appeals from their religious leaders.) After the disintegration of the regime, the primordial identities have clearly emerged supreme as religion and tribe prove to be more natural collective sanctuaries than territorial nationalism.

Not all Arab states are the same in this respect, and one should be cautious about sweeping generalizations. Thus, Egyptian identity is certainly more solid than

¹¹ *The Times* (London), May 2, 2003.

Iraqi identity. But Jordan and the Palestinians are more problematic. Much is said of the Jordanian-Palestinian cleavage in Jordan. But perhaps this dichotomy has been overstated, considering that Jordanians have more in common with Palestinians culturally and historically than current tensions may reveal. After all, the great majority of them are Sunni Muslims, and the minority who are not are, for the most part, Orthodox Christians. For Muslims and Christians alike, Arabic is their mother tongue. Jordanians and Palestinians mix socially and marry each other all the time—Muslims with Muslims and Christians with Christians. The religious fault line is crossed far less frequently than the secular, national Jordanian-Palestinian one. Territorial nationalism, Jordanian and Palestinian, is sincere and very real but is still a skin-deep modern-day veneer in comparison with the historical depth of religious, ethnic, and tribal identities that have their roots in the seventh century and in some cases even well before then.

The aftermath of the Iraq war, then, represents another instance of the self-centered Arab state acting in its own interests. But Iraq's situation has also shown the fragility of loyalties to the state, and the persistence of corrosive primordial allegiances. These loyalties are yet another source of dissent and weakness.

The Palestinians

As for the Palestinian question, like so many other regional matters, it should be seen through the lens of historical evolution from 1967 until the present—that is, from the zenith of Palestinian national revival through the *fida'i* (armed resistance) movement of the late 1960s to the trough of today. For the Palestinians—defeated, devastated economically, and with no Arab hinterland to back them—it is almost the *Nakba* revisited.

If 1967 was one critical turning point, the war in Lebanon in 1982 was another. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which had been expelled from Jordan in 1971, lost its last autonomous base of operations in Lebanon in 1982. This was a severe setback, forcing the PLO onto a course of gradual decline. The center of gravity of Palestinian politics shifted from the Palestinian diaspora into the West Bank and Gaza, which began to emerge as the effective core of Palestinian political action. This process came to fruition in the *intifada* that erupted in 1987 when the people of the West Bank and Gaza led the Palestinian struggle against Israel for the first time. The PLO watched from the sidelines, fearing for its hitherto unchallenged primacy in Palestinian affairs, yet reaping the international political rewards from the struggle of their brethren against the Israelis. But in the early 1990s, the *intifada* was running out of steam and other simultaneous developments in the international and regional arenas placed the PLO under extreme pressure.

The Cold War came to an end with the disintegration of the Soviet Union; massive Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union threatened to tip the demographic scales in the West Bank and Gaza in Israel's favor; and the United States defeated Iraq in the 1991 Kuwait war. With the initiation of the Madrid process in October 1991, the PLO deeply feared marginalization as the Palestinian question was negotiated in the corridors of international diplomacy in an era of Palestinian and Arab weakness. Yasir Arafat, under the impression that time was working against him and in desperate need of an entrance ticket into the center of gravity of Palestinian politics in the West Bank and Gaza, decided to accept the Oslo accords in 1993. But by the end of the 1990s, the wheels of fortune had seemingly turned again, and Arafat's perceptions of time altered accordingly.

Arafat was now in control of the Palestinian core. Soviet immigration to Israel hardly affected the demographic balance between Jews and Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza where almost all Soviet Jews chose not to settle. Moreover, Soviet immigration hardly affected the overall balance between Jews and Arabs in the entire area between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, other than postponing the eventual Palestinian majority there by only a few years. By the late 1990s, Iraq appeared to be on the verge of regaining acceptance not only into the community of Arab states but by ever-growing segments of the international community. Saddam defied the United States with apparent impunity and emboldened the radicals across the board. In the summer of 2000, Israel withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon, giving the impression that affluent Israel was tiring. Arafat lost his sense of urgency for a deal with Israel and acquiesced in the use of force to coerce Israel to accept conditions more favorable to the Palestinians, particularly on matters relating to Jerusalem and refugees.

The use of force was a catastrophic mistake, the worst the Palestinians have made since 1948. With the Arabs in disarray, Israel effectively crushed the Palestinian armed *intifada*. There can be little doubt in the minds of many Palestinians and most Israelis that the Palestinian effort to coerce Israel to accept the unacceptable has come to a dead end. Israeli society has proved to be more resilient than the Palestinians—and many Israelis, too—would have thought. The Palestinian effort to break the Israeli spirit through terror has failed. The Arabs have let the Palestinians down again. If the Palestinians believed momentarily that their war with Israel would draw the Arabs into the fray, they were mistaken. Even financial aid was but a pittance. Lastly, the Palestinians desperately sought to draw the international community in on their behalf. This did not materialize either. Arafat's terrorist war has discredited him in the eyes of the international community. And though it is true that the vision of President Bush and the Quartet includes an independent Palestinian state, what the Palestinians wanted was not to be included in the international community's vision but for their own vision to be imposed on Israel. That is hardly likely. In sum, then, not one of the major Palestinian war aims has been fully attained. That is the definition of failure.

Arafat, by leading the Palestinians in the present war, lost any residue of credibility he may still have had with the Israelis. His position is reminiscent of the predicament of the first leader of the Palestinian national movement, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem. Husseini's collaboration with the Nazis in World War II cost him his international legitimacy. He then made matters infinitely worse by leading his people headlong into their 1948 disaster. Arafat has done pretty much the same. The Palestinian war against Israel has resulted in massive Israeli retaliation that has crippled the Palestinian Authority (PA), disrupted the Palestinian population's daily life, and devastated their economy. Moreover, the war has also led to the constant rise in the popularity of Hamas at the expense of Fatah. And the Palestinian modus operandi of suicide bombings has earned their struggle unprecedented international opprobrium. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have condemned the bombings as crimes against humanity. These organizations regularly condemn Israel, but their condemnation of Palestinian actions is a novelty.

The appointment of Abu Mazen (Mahmud Abbas) as the PA's "prime minister" has been heralded as a major step toward Palestinian political reform and the long-awaited diminution of Arafat's political supremacy. The pressure on Arafat to stand aside came not only from Israel, the United States, and other members of the Quartet, but from within the young guard of his own Fatah movement. For quite some time there had been rumblings of disaffection with Arafat's handling of affairs and his virtual loss

of control. The Israelis, the Americans, and the Quartet members probably would have preferred a change of the guard in generational terms. After all, one of the most serious disadvantages of dealing with Arafat is the symbolic and substantive significance of his belonging, in the deepest historical and emotional sense, to the 1948 refugee generation. Arafat is driven by the obsession of rectifying what Palestinians of all persuasions see as the historical injustice of 1948, above and beyond independent statehood.

Israelis would prefer to see “insiders,” i.e., people from the West Bank and Gaza, in the saddle, rather than the arch-representatives of the “outsider” refugee constituency. Israel has no real solution for the Palestinian refugee diaspora that would satisfy Palestinian national aspirations. Israel could, however, accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza and would therefore much prefer to negotiate with credible representatives of this insider constituency.

But Abu Mazen is neither an insider nor a member of the young guard. He is Arafat’s veteran deputy and, in his late sixties, is one of the PLO’s old guard. Abu Mazen, born in Safad in the mid-1930s, is (like Arafat) a representative of the diaspora refugee constituency. Abu Mazen is one of the founding members of Fatah, who has also served for many years on the PLO executive committee. Moreover, the procedure of approval of the prime minister, first by the PLO central council and only subsequently by the legislative council of the PA, is highly significant. This deliberately calculated procedure is also of symbolic and substantive importance. It maintains the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of all Palestinians wherever they may be and as the supreme source of political authority of the Palestinian people, insiders and outsiders alike. In contrast, the PA’s legislative council speaks only for the West Bank and Gaza. This is a way of saying that not only the West Bank and Gaza are on the table but the entire cause of historical Palestine.

On the other hand, Abu Mazen’s rise to prominence represents positive change, too. He was one of the few PLO officials who were involved in the secret talks that led to the Oslo accords, and despite his origins, he appears to be a firm believer in the need for a settlement with Israel. Perhaps most importantly in terms of the more recent past, Abu Mazen went on record to an audience of his own people in Gaza in November 2002, with a courageous and scathing critique of the Palestinians’ political conduct in the two years of the latest “militarized” *intifada*. “What have we achieved?” he asked. The Palestinians were well on their way to statehood, and now after two years, they were left with “the total destruction” of all they had built. Instead of drawing Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon to the negotiating table where the Palestinians might have cornered him, they resorted to the use of armed force where the Israelis had the upper hand, not only over the Palestinians but also over the Arabs as a whole. The Palestinian Authority was in desperate need of reform and a “redirection of [its] path,” he concluded.¹²

These were the words of a sober realist, the likes of whom the Palestinians desperately need to extricate themselves from their sorry predicament. And while Abu Mazen does not have an independent power base, he has the firm support of key figures in the Fatah new guard who have had their own differences with Arafat. With allies like these, Abu Mazen could also serve as the bridge between the new and the old guards and between insiders and outsiders.

¹² *Al-Hayat* (London), Nov. 26, 2002.

But Arafat was coerced into this move by a combination of domestic and foreign forces, and he is fighting tooth and nail to preserve his own flagging authority. Arafat is a tenacious, experienced, and crafty political operator. He is not likely to succumb to those who wish to hasten his denouement without seemingly endless maneuvers and manipulations of mental attrition, deliberately calculated to exasperate all contenders and external meddlers alike. Furthermore, he has considerable popular support. There is widespread opposition to the appointment of a prime minister, coming as it does in the wake of external pressure. Hamas is not happy with Abu Mazen's appointment or with what he has done with it so far, especially his relatively conciliatory remarks at the Aqaba summit in early June 2003. After all, he presently stands for everything they flatly oppose.

So long as Arafat is not incapacitated, it will be very difficult to sideline the wily old "Mr. Palestine." Abu Mazen, therefore, has not emerged as a serious leadership rival to the historical Palestinian leader. His appointment is not the end of Arafat by any means. Even if it spells the beginning of the end, it will still be quite a while before Israel can discuss the end of conflict with a reliable Palestinian leadership.

In the meantime, however, the Palestinian war has lost its psychological momentum and the Arab hinterland (Iraq) has been defeated as well. As in 1948, the Palestinians in particular and the Arabs in general are staring at failure. This is why the Palestinians have accepted a cease-fire of sorts that may stop the war, save face, and allow them to catch their breath and regroup. The emerging reality presents an opportunity for a new dynamic of negotiation. But there is also the danger that, for the radicals, this is no more than a breather. While the likes of Abu Mazen are convinced that the Palestinians have lost, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and segments of Fatah, too, are in a state of denial.

Like Usama bin Ladin, they represent the rage and the desire for revenge of a civilization in retreat. Their rebellion against the bleak vision of the future cannot change the world they live in. The ritual of death and destruction can offer momentary satisfaction of the need for retribution, but the focus on the compensations of the next world will do nothing to alter their predicament in this one.

Asher Susser is director and senior research fellow of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University. This essay is based on a lecture delivered in May 2003 to analysts at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.