

# COMMENTARY

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## The Palestinians Must Wake Up To Their Bitter Reality

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**A**lthough repeated polls taken in the West Bank and Gaza consistently show that a majority of Palestinians support a two-state solution, their leadership has miserably failed to capitalize on this unmistakable consensus. Instead, Fatah, Hamas and a score of other small factions have over several decades been engaged in unending infighting, political intrigue, corruption and blind ideological rivalry while feeding the public false information about Israel, promising what they know they were and still are unable to deliver. The question is: for how much longer must the Palestinians live with subterfuge, humiliation and the indignities of occupation before their leaders wake up to the reality that an Israeli-Palestinian peace requires significant concessions, uncompromised credibility and an unshakable commitment to enduring peace?

Although Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas has demonstrated consistency and keenness in the search for peace, he too remains a prisoner of a decades-long Palestinian narrative insisting on, among other demands, the “right of return of the refugees,” which is a complete non-starter for any Israeli government. Concurrently, Hamas continues to resist the existence of Israel, knowing full well that seriously threatening Israel will be at its own peril. By way of example, Hamas’ political guru Khaled Mashaal said the following in Gaza early last December on the occasion of Hamas’ founding celebration: “Palestine is ours from the river to the sea and from the south to the north. There will be no concession on any inch of the land.”

Many Palestinians and Israelis dismiss such a statement as nothing more than political posturing designed for domestic consumption. Even if this was the case, however, there is a much larger Palestinian constituency whose anti-Israeli sentiment and hatred tends to become more potent as a result of such statements. Moreover, this gives right-of-centre Israelis further ammunition to justify their increasing entrenchments in the territories, making matters worse for both sides. The fact that Mashaal, in an earlier interview with Christiane Amanpour, said “I accept a Palestinian state according to 1967 borders with Jerusalem as the capital, with the right to return” is of little

comfort to the Israelis who view Hamas as an irredeemable terrorist organization bent on Israel's destruction.

Caught in the cycle of this viciously irresponsible and destructive public narrative, President Abbas, who undoubtedly seeks a peace agreement based on the 1967 borders, is unfortunately a victim of the acrimonious rhetoric and violent actions promoted by reckless militant Palestinian leaders. Following a visit to the city of Safed in Israel in November 2012, Abbas was vehemently condemned by Palestinians from all quarters when he said: "I visited Safed before once but I want to see Safed. It's my right to see it, but not to live there." Referring to the internationally-recognized pre-1967 border, he went on to say: "Palestine now for me is '67 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. This is now and forever ... This is Palestine for me. I am a refugee, but I am living in Ramallah. I believe that the West Bank and Gaza is Palestine and the other parts are Israel." Abbas' courage is admirable but sadly he does not have the public support and the mandate he needs to change public perception on issues such as "the right of return," which has over the decades become embedded in the public psyche, even though it will never come to pass.

To make matters worse, the Palestinians in the West Bank, especially on the local level and in Gaza, continue to characterize Israel as the ultimate enemy and malign it in schools and in many public places. Moreover, they offer nothing but empty slogans and false hope to the young and old about Israel's ultimate demise while prolonging the miserable existence of millions of Palestinians with no end in sight.

The PA's successful efforts to obtain observer state status at the UNGA and the emergence of Hamas' politically advantageous stance in the wake of the latest flare up with Israel, coupled with the current negotiations between the two sides to form a unity government, all offer Hamas a momentous opportunity to abandon violent resistance from a relative position of strength. In any event, should the unity discussions prove successful under the leadership of Abbas, he should not expect to enter into peace negotiations with Israel until the "united Palestinian government" commits itself to nonviolence in order to achieve a peace agreement.

The collective body of the Palestinians needs to demonstrate its commitment to a peaceful resolution. They must enhance their credibility in the eyes of the Israeli public. Indeed, even Israeli liberal/centrist governments led by Barak and Olmert respectively could not conclude peace because of the Palestinians' lack of credibility and unwillingness to sign a final agreement to permanently end the conflict. The Israelis point to Yasser Arafat, who refused to do so when the opportunity presented itself at Camp David in 2000.

Just as much as the Israelis must stop the settlement enterprise to establish their credibility and commitment to a two-state solution, the Palestinians must also disabuse the Israelis of their belief that the Palestinians ultimately seek the destruction of their state. Here is where the big dilemma lies, although it is not insurmountable. On the one hand, the Palestinian public has been indoctrinated to view Israel as a temporary phenomenon, that its demise is inevitable and that the continuing suffering and sacrifices will eventually be handsomely rewarded. It does not appear, however, that this day of redemption will come any time soon, if ever. In the interim, Israel continues to expand current as well as build new settlements and the Palestinian refugees

continue to languish in camps while their leaders keep asking them to make more and more sacrifices, as if three generations of suffering is not enough.

Khalid Mashaal, Hamas' Prime Minister Haniyeh and other lost souls continue to preach the gospel of death. They should know that there is no glory in martyrdom, no salvation in death, no hope in illusions and no future in a bankrupt ideology. It is time for the Palestinians to rise up against this madness and the mendacity of their so-called leaders who have led them astray, using and abusing them solely for self-gratification under the guise of a higher purpose. Truth and human decency have been lost to the zealots, the bloodthirsty militant Palestinians who robbed their own brothers and sisters of a life with dignity.

The Palestinian people must decide if they want to live in peace and freedom or if they want to continue to despair for another 65 years. Israel is a reality; it exists and will continue to exist for as far as the eye can see. Only peace, genuine and lasting, will end the indignities and deprivation and usher in a prosperous future that the Palestinians deserve. As I have advocated to the Israeli academic community and student bodies to rise up against their misguided leaders and reach an agreement with the Palestinians, I believe it is time for young Palestinian men and women to also engage in collective peaceful civil disobedience and demand from their leaders an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to stop misleading the public by making promises that they can never deliver. Palestinian women can be of special importance if they resolve en masse to defy through peaceful demonstration the debilitating and unforgiving status quo, akin to the protests led by Catholic and Protestant women in Northern Ireland that changed the face of the conflict and ultimately helped lead to its resolution.

It is time for Palestinian youth, especially those affiliated with Hamas, to heed the example of such figures as Gandhi, Mandela (after abandoning armed struggle), and Martin Luther King Jr. to forsake violence as a political tool and protest by the hundreds of thousands to proclaim their right to human decency, to a better future, and to a life with dignity. It is time for young and innocent Palestinians to have a real sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, to feel safe and secure, and to grow up as free men and women with all the potential that a free society can offer. It is time to end the invocation of religion as a tool to subjugate and to enslave; rather, it should be used to liberate and offer guidance for a better and more wholesome life. President Abbas, the most moderate and courageous Palestinian leader, needs the public to rally behind him to provide him with the political cover and mandate to make the necessary concessions to achieve peace and in so doing, force Israel's hand to seek a genuine and viable two state-solution.

In the final analysis, all sides from militant to moderate must take a hard look at what they are doing and preaching to avoid a major confrontation with Israel from which neither side can expect to emerge with any significant gains. The situation has fallen to an alarmingly low point that has allowed minority extremists to assume and steer the political agenda while marginalizing moderate voices.

It is imperative, therefore, for the Palestinians to begin to develop a culture of civil disobedience and collective non-violent resistance. They must demand the truth from their leaders, and no

longer fall prey to the cynicism and double-talk of militant leaders who have been riding on their backs in the name of national salvation while ravaging their lives for so long.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/the-palestinians-must-wake-up-to-their-bitter-reality/>

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