



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## Prospects for Peace with the Palestinians

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** It is useful to think of the Palestinians as engaged in an internal debate between those who favor keeping the goal of eliminating Israel and those who favor giving up that goal to gain peace and prosperity. Peace can be achieved only when the second group is dominant. The debate depends on two issues. Is there any realistic hope that Israel can really be defeated? Would it be honorable to make peace with Israel? The international movement to delegitimize Israel provides Palestinians the hope of eventually destroying Israel, and Palestinian leadership denial of the existence of a Jewish People with an ancient connection to the Land of Israel contradicts the basis of an honorable peace with Israel. If peace is to have a chance, Western leaders need to disabuse the Palestinians of both fallacies.

A useful way to think about the possibility for peace between Israel and the Palestinians is to consider the Palestinians as being in a long-term internal debate. This complicated debate can be conceptualized as being between those who think they should continue the effort to eliminate the state of Israel, and those who think that the fight to destroy Israel has gone on long enough and that it is time for the Palestinians to pursue their own interests in peace and prosperity by making peace with Israel.

These two groups have constantly shifting memberships, all of whom have particular organizational and political interests which complicate their choice.

To some extent many individuals are divided in their own minds, so that the general debate is replicated within individuals.

It is important to note that the debate usually takes place in an environment where public, and even private, discussion is far from free. Providing certain information or expressing some views can be a risk for Palestinians.

Peace depends on the Palestinians who are ready for peace winning their internal debate. When the Palestinians who prefer to keep fighting are on top there is no chance for a negotiated settlement. Serious negotiations can only begin when the predominant view is that it is necessary to give up the effort to destroy Israel.

There are two dominant issues in the internal Palestinian debate. One is whether they have a serious chance of winning if they keep fighting. The other is whether making peace with Israel is honorable or shameful for them.

Palestinians who prefer peace have no chance of winning the internal argument if they have to admit that continued effort to destroy Israel might succeed. They can only be effective if they believe and can convincingly say, "We have no chance of defeating Israel," "We have tried everything and they are stronger than when we started," or "You have no plausible theory of victory; it is time to get practical." Therefore, a main goal of anyone who wants to promote peace is to understand and counter the theory of victory that sustains those who want to keep fighting.

Currently the Palestinians do not believe that they can militarily defeat Israel, or that the Arab and Muslim countries will send armies to force Israel's surrender. Their willingness to keep fighting is now sustained by two hopes. The lesser hope is that Israel is becoming soft and divided and that if the pressure of hatred and terrorism is maintained, Israel will lose its will to defend itself, or enough Israelis will leave to fatally weaken the country. The greater hope is that their international campaign to delegitimize Israel will lead to international pressure that forces Israel into a series of retreats that ultimately makes it unable to defend itself.

There is a third hope, that an Iranian nuclear attack will lead to so many deaths and desertions that Israel cannot sustain its prosperity and strength. But this hope is not near the top of Palestinian thinking and may be too external to be a critical influence on Palestinian thinking.

Objectively speaking, the “keep fighting” group has a good case now. Given the progress made over the last few years in building anti-Israel sentiment in Europe, the Palestinian “peace camp” certainly cannot confidently argue that there is very little chance that the UN will take decisive measures against Israel. Not only are there very few – if any – voices from Europe or the US telling Palestinians that they are wrong and that they must accept Israel as a permanent Jewish state, but the Europeans are also handsomely paying to support Palestinian “resistance” and show every sign of unwillingness to challenge the Muslim world.

It is true that the US especially continues to insist that it is committed to Israel’s security, and no European government has yet called for Israel to retreat beyond the 1967 borders – although that itself is a retreat that would force 10 percent of Israel’s population to move from where they have lived for a generation. But Palestinians have plenty of basis for thinking that if they do more of what they have been doing, in a few years international opinion will move enough further to act in ways that become fatal for Israel.

In the last year this theory of victory has been bolstered by President Obama’s movement of American policy away from its traditional closeness to Israel and his apparent intention to force Israel to make important concessions without return from the Palestinians.

The second crucial issue is whether the Palestinians believe that it would be honorable to make peace with Israel. This depends upon whether the Jews are colonial thieves stealing Palestinian land solely on the basis of force, or whether the Jews are a people that also historically lived in the land and are attached to it. If the Palestinians understood that there are two peoples with long historical and moral claims to the same land, then it would be honorable for them some day to recognize that fighting is useless and that compromise is an appropriate way to settle the dispute.

Currently, the Palestinian leadership and elite are adamant in insisting that there is no Jewish people, and that there was no Jewish presence in the land before Islam. They officially and energetically deny that there was ever a Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount despite the many Muslim sources from previous generations that recognized the Temple's location in pre-Muslim times. The Palestinian leadership is deliberately making an honorable peace impossible by falsely denying that Jews have any legitimate claim to any of the land.

When free discussion is possible among the Palestinians, it will be impossible to conceal the fact of historical Jewish connection to the land. Those who want peace will be able to argue that peace could be an honorable compromise between two peoples with just claims to the land, and not just a cowardly yielding to force.

This issue, too, is in the hands of Europeans and Americans. If they regularly reminded Palestinian leadership and public of the Jewish moral and historical claims to the land, recognized by the League of Nations in the Palestine Mandate, the Palestinian leadership could not keep the truth from their people. But so long as the Palestinians perpetuate the colonial lie, the rest of the world has an infallible sign that they have not yet become ready for peace. Peace will not become possible until Palestinians say to each other that the Jews also have an historical attachment to the land; they are not just thieves taking by force something to which they have no honorable claim.

The path to peace is clear. Peace will become possible when Palestinians see that there is no chance that Europeans or Iranians will prevent Israel from defending itself, and when they recognize that they are not the only people with a moral and legal claim to the land. In the meantime, negotiations are a charade and Israeli concessions can do nothing to “improve the chances of success.”

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