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The American Jewish Committee

Advancing Religious, Ethnic and Racial Understanding Worldwide

The Middle East: Back to Basics by **David A. Harris, Executive Director**

In the flood of daily news reports coming from the Middle East, too many questions about the broader nature and context of the Arab-Israeli conflict are unasked. Absent the larger picture, however, it is difficult if not impossible to understand what is really going on and how we reached this point. Here are a few of the pertinent questions:

Why did the Arab world categorically reject the UN's 1947 Partition Plan, which would have created both a Jewish and a Palestinian state in what was then British-ruled Palestine, and could have avoided over 50 years of subsequent conflict? *

Did those Arab countries—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria—that spurned Israel's outstretched hand of peace and launched a war of destruction on the very first day of Israel's establishment believe they could do so without being held accountable for helping create a refugee problem for local Arabs? What war in history has not produced refugees either as a goal or a by-product?

Has there been any comparable situation in the world where refugees—as in this case, Palestinians—have not been resettled, but deliberately kept in camps for as long as three generations, so as to incubate hatred and garner world sympathy? Are Palestinians the world's first—or only—refugees? Why do we hear so little about the nearly 25 million other refugees in the world today? Are they any less deserving of sympathy and support?

Why is it that none of the 22 Arab countries—with the single exception of Jordan—who share ethnic, religious, and linguistic ties with the Palestinians, has offered Palestinians citizenship and a new start?

Why has the world completely ignored the other refugee population created by the Arab-Israeli conflict—the 750,000 Jews from Arab countries (more or less equaling the number of Palestinian refugees at the time), many of them with roots in these countries predating by centuries the arrival of Islam, forced to leave their ancestral homes because of second-class status and pogroms? Is it because these refugees were quickly resettled in Israel rather than placed in camps and manipulated as the Palestinians were?

* Palestinian spokesmen today misleadingly claim that they have ceded 78 percent of the original territory to Israel and only seek 22 percent for a Palestinian state, but they overlook one central fact. According to the Peel Commission, set up by Britain in the wake of the 1936 Arab riots against Jews in Palestine, "the field in which the Jewish National Home was to be established was understood, at the time of the (1917) Balfour Declaration, to be the whole of historic Palestine, including Transjordan [today's Jordan]." (Cited in *Myths and Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 28.)

And why did the world conveniently overlook persistent Jordanian violations of the armistice agreement for nearly 19 years (1948-1967), when Amman did not allow Jews any access whatsoever to Judaism's holiest site—the Western Wall—and desecrated dozens of synagogues in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem as well as Jewish cemeteries on the Mount of Olives?

Did Israel come into possession of the West Bank, Gaza, Golan Heights, and eastern Jerusalem—the lands it is now accused of illegally occupying—totally out of the blue?

Is the historical record not absolutely clear that Egypt and Syria threatened Israel with annihilation in the months leading up to the 1967 Six-Day War and closed off the shipping lane to the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat, itself an act of war under international law?

And that Israel urged Jordan, via UN intermediaries, to stay out of the unfolding conflict, which would have meant continued Jordanian control of the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem?

Speaking of these territories, if the Arab world cared so deeply about the Palestinian condition, why were absolutely no steps taken to create a Palestinian state between 1948 and 1967, when the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem were in Jordanian hands and the Gaza Strip was ruled by Egypt?

Has the world forgotten that the PLO was created in 1964, when the only “occupied” land was Israel itself, the target of the PLO's unprecedented campaign of terror that eventually spanned the globe and counted among its many victims not only Israelis but Americans, including the U.S. ambassador to the Sudan, and Europeans as well?

Are we to forget the Arab world's response to the serious Israeli peace overtures after the 1967 Six-Day War, which came most memorably in the “three noes” of the Khartoum Declaration (August 1967)—“no peace, no recognition, and no negotiation?” In the face of such a reply, is history simply supposed to stand still until one side finally gets it right?

Are we to overlook the PLO's record in Jordan, where Arafat agreed to 22 cease-fires with Jordan's King Hussein until he was banished from the country in 1970 after the violence of Black September resulted in the deaths of thousands?

Or subsequently in Lebanon, where the PLO created a state-within-a-state and Arafat helped launch a prolonged and bloody civil war that erupted in 1975—seven years *before* Israeli troops entered Lebanon—and during which he violated more than 70 cease-fires?

Why didn't the Palestinian leadership, if truly serious about peace, take its cue from Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Jordan's King Hussein, who concluded landmark peace agreements with Israel—involving significant territorial compromises on Israel's part—by persuading Israelis that Cairo and Amman were irrevocably committed to peace?

Even after Arafat allegedly recognized Israel in 1988, why was he always so duplicitous about his real intentions toward Israel, saying one thing in English and precisely the opposite in Arabic?

Does the world suffer from amnesia about the implications of Arafat's unbridled support for Saddam Hussein, the American-led coalition's enemy, during the 1991 Gulf War?

And for those who purport to identify with the plight of the Palestinians, where were they when Kuwait summarily expelled 300,000 Palestinians overnight, accusing them of being a fifth column for Saddam Hussein?

Once the 1993 Oslo Accords were signed between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, were we to ignore Arafat's persistent violations of just about every provision, including limitations on the size of a police force, acquisition of weapons, use of violence and terror to achieve political aims, and the teaching of incitement against Israel?

Where is the evidence that, after 1993, Arafat prepared his people for peace with Israel, based on the principle of painful but necessary compromises by both sides, rather than continued armed struggle?

Is it not true, Palestinian claims to the contrary, that the Oslo Accords made *no* reference to Israeli settlements and that the subsequent Mitchell Plan spoke of curtailing settlement activity only *after* Palestinian violence came to a halt—which, of course, has not yet happened—and a cooling-off period ensued?

Are we simply to ignore, as if it never happened, the determined efforts of President Clinton and Prime Minister Barak as recently as January 2001 to achieve an historic breakthrough with Arafat, including painful compromises on such contentious issues as Jerusalem, refugees, and settlements?

Or to wonder why Arafat, rather than seize this extraordinary moment to establish the very *first* Palestinian state in history, sabotaged the talks—and thereby once again betrayed the interests of his own people—by bizarrely dismissing any Jewish historical or religious link to Jerusalem and calling for the so-called Palestinian “right of return,” which would, as he knew so well, lead to the destruction of the State of Israel?

Are we to conveniently overlook the ominous implications of the *Karine-A* affair, the ship laden with 50 tons of advanced weaponry, including lethal rockets with a range of 12 miles, headed for Palestinian territory from Iran, a nation on the record as denying Israel's right to exist and bent on its destruction? Or Arafat's brazen lie when he pleaded ignorance about the ship—not the first such ship, by the way—in a letter to President Bush in January?

But then hasn't a clear pattern of lies, distortions, deceptions, and exaggerations always been part of the modus operandi of Arafat and his spokesmen, too often uncritically reported by a gullible or smitten Western press?

How about the wildly exaggerated casualty figures in Lebanon in 1982 claimed by the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (chaired by Arafat's brother), the libelous accusations about Israeli doctors injecting the HIV virus in Palestinian children made by the Palestinian delegate to the UN in Geneva, the lies about Israeli use of poison gas made by Arafat's wife, and, most recently, the effort by the Palestinian Authority to recast a fierce armed battle in Jenin—involving Palestinian gunmen, booby-trapped homes, and mines placed in the midst of a civilian population—into a massacre?

Or what about the deliberate and macabre use of children—their brainwashing and approved suicide—in the Palestinian war of terror against Israel? Shouldn't this inhuman practice be universally condemned? Why hasn't the UN expressed itself on the matter?

Or what about the cash payments—perhaps, more accurately, incentives—of \$25,000 given by Saddam Hussein's Iraq to the families of each of these so-called martyrs, actually murderers, with additional money coming from Saudi Arabia?

Are we supposed to ignore, as if it has no relevance, the endless revelations of Arafat's direct connection to terror—the smoking-gun documents found in Ramallah, the direct links between Arafat and armed terrorist groups under his control that have claimed responsibility for terrorist attacks against Israeli men, women, and children, and the ties between Arafat and Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah, all groups long committed to Israel's total destruction?

Or Arafat's refusal to arrest known Palestinian terrorists, despite repeated pleas by the United States, or, almost as outrageous, arresting them while the world is watching and then releasing them as soon as he has been given credit for the arrests?

Or the use of summary justice to kill alleged collaborators, while not a peep is heard from the international community?

Or the calculated use of homes, schools, hospitals, ambulances, and religious sites to hide weaponry and shield gunmen, so that when Palestinians shoot at Israelis from behind a church, say, they hope to draw a response and then count on the Western media to report that Israeli troops fired at Christian holy sites?

Speaking of the media, why is that no one exposes some of the dirty, dark secrets known to many reporters covering the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, such as the use of fear and intimidation by Palestinians, or the fact that many of the crews for Western television are recruited from the local Palestinian population?

Did anyone notice the shockingly skimpy coverage of the media angle of the barbaric Ramallah lynching of the two Israeli soldiers in the fall of 2000? Where were the stories about the Palestinian seizure of the films of Western crews or, above all, the startling disclosure by the correspondent for RAI, Italian public television, that the film eventually smuggled out and shown worldwide was not his (it actually came from a private Italian station) because he would *never* do anything to undermine the Palestinian cause?

More recently, why were we once again subject to a virtual media blackout when thousands of Palestinians took to the streets on September 11 to celebrate America's day of agony? Why were we not told that Associated Press had footage of those celebrations but chose not to air it after threats were made on the life of its reporter on the ground?

And when, earlier this year, the media showed the world images of Israel bulldozing homes in Gaza, suggesting the ruthlessness of Israel, why did they not mention that those houses, mostly abandoned, were hiding the access points to tunnels linking Gaza and Egypt and were being used for smuggling weapons?

Moreover, isn't it long overdue for Arab spokesmen—and the world—to face head-on the steady diet of racial and religious incitement against Israel and Jews that has become a permanent feature of government-controlled media in too many countries—replete with Nazi-like images, Holocaust denial, and denigration of Judaism?

Why did it take *The New York Times*, the newspaper of record, until April 19 to write an editorial on the subject, when the problem of virulent anti-Semitism, both in the Muslim world and, as we have now seen so vividly, in Europe—has been festering for 18 months, if not longer?

Didn't it take the same newspaper just about 48 hours to write an editorial condemning the alleged threats against the Brooklyn family of Adam Shapiro, the Jewish-born Palestinian activist, a story, incidentally, that died just as quickly as it surfaced?

How can a true foundation of peace ever be built if the inflammatory language of hate and calls for "holy war" fill the air in mosques and media outlets, as well as in European Union-funded schools?

Or if the Syrian president, in the presence of Pope John Paul II last spring, can reawaken the outrageous deicide charge, and then proceed merrily along his way to warm state receptions in Paris and Madrid and, a few months later, celebrate his country's election to a two-year term on the powerful UN Security Council, a body that Israel has never even been eligible to serve on since its admission to the UN in 1949?

Or if the Syrian minister of defense can proudly claim authorship of a 1983 book that accuses Jews of the infamous blood libel charge?

Or if Saudi censors can approve an article by a prominent medical professor, written on the eve of Vice President Cheney's recent visit, claiming that Jews need the blood of Christians and Muslims for their Purim and Passover ritual foods?

Had today's 18-year-old Palestinian youths been taught peace and mutual respect since the 1993 Oslo Accords rather than hate, would they be blowing themselves up in Israeli cafés and restaurants? Or might they be enjoying the fruits of statehood, side by side with Israel, and the chance for a brighter future that they, like youngsters everywhere, so richly deserve?

Why is that we witness a vigorous and impressive debate in democratic Israel about every aspect of the conflict with the Palestinians, but there is nothing remotely comparable in Palestinian society and, what's more, few stop to note the difference, or its implications?

Why do virtually no Palestinians (or Arabs) have the courage publicly to examine their own role and responsibility for reaching this point in the conflict, and instead contentedly shift the entire blame to Israel, the United States, world Jewry, or any other convenient scapegoat—in other words, anyone other than themselves?

Where are the voices of honesty and good will to expose the unspeakably perverse historical distortions committed by Palestinians and their supporters when they obscenely choose Nazi analogies to describe Israeli leaders and their policies? Or where is the criticism of a noted Portuguese writer who outlandishly compares Ramallah to Auschwitz?

Why is it that non-governmental groups that claim to defend democratic values and human rights are so vocal when it comes to criticizing Israel—a nation committed to those very same values—and so deafeningly silent when it comes to Israel's adversaries, none of whom make even the slightest pretense of respecting either democracy or human rights?

How much do we hear from these groups about the fact that, according to Freedom House, not one of the 22 Arab countries today can be labeled democratic?

Or about the tens of thousands of people killed in the Algerian civil war; the two million—yes, two million—people killed in the war against Christians and animists in Sudan; the complete denial of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, including even the right to drive a car, or the asylum granted by Saudi Arabia to one of the twentieth century's leading butchers, Idi Amin of Uganda; the total suppression of the Baha'i faith in Iran; or the unrelenting persecution of homosexuals in Egypt?

Why have we never heard a peep for 20 years from these groups about the actual perpetrator of the 1982 massacre in Sabra and Shatila – Elias Khobeika, the commander of the Phalange militia and, later, a cabinet member in the Lebanese government?

And what about the ongoing occupation of Lebanon by Syria, a country that does not even recognize Lebanon's independence and sovereignty? For those who allege concern about "occupation," why are they not heard from on this naked act of aggression?

Why is it that Israel so captures the imagination of these groups while other, truly egregious human rights situations do not?

And isn't the situation precisely the same at the United Nations, where, given the simple, unalterable fact that it's all about numbers, Israel doesn't stand a chance against a bloc of 22 Arab countries and a group of 57 countries that form the Organization of the Islamic Conference?

What are the odds on Israel receiving a fair hearing in that world body, when the deck is so overwhelmingly stacked against it? Conversely, how much attention will the UN ever pay to serious human rights abuses in the Muslim world given the organization's make-up?

Are we to ignore the situation on university campuses here at home, where Jewish and pro-Israel students are increasingly harassed and intimidated if they stand up for Israel or, in the case of two students at Berkeley, physically assaulted? Or where the student leader of an Arab group at NYU that distributed a vile, anti-Semitic screed by the infamous David Duke, written shortly after September 11, was honored this month with the university's prestigious President's Service Award?

And last but by no means least, why do so many fail to understand that Israel is facing a threat to its existence and has every right and obligation to defend itself against an enemy that has no compunction about sending suicide bombers to target a Passover Seder or a bar mitzvah celebration?

That Israel, unlike any other nation on the face of this earth, has actually been fighting this war with one hand tied behind its back because of its own democratic and ethical values and because its every action is being scrutinized microscopically by the UN, Europe, the media, and human rights groups? What other country has chosen to expose its troops to far greater risks than might otherwise be the case for these reasons?

Anyone care to remember how our nation fought the war against Serbia? Wasn't it from 35,000 feet up to prevent U.S. casualties, even if some of our bombs inevitably hit civilian targets, including the Chinese Embassy?

Anyone care to remember that, during the British-Argentine war over the Falkland (or Malvinas) Islands, Whitehall deliberately kept the media far away from the war zone, yet no one questioned the British commitment to democratic values?

Isn't it painfully clear that any failure of resolve on Israel's part in the current Palestinian war of terror will only encourage its enemies to believe that the ultimate goal of Israel's destruction is within reach, and thereby diminish still further the chances for a peaceful resolution of the conflict?

And that there is a profound moral distinction, as we in the United States should especially appreciate after September 11, between those terrorist groups that destroy and those armies that seek to prevent the destruction?

Did the United States exercise restraint or rush into negotiations with Al Qaeda and the Taliban after September 11?

Has the United States been willing to enter into face-to-face peace talks with Saddam Hussein since the 1991 Gulf War?

Has our country sat down to negotiate with Cuba's Fidel Castro, positioned just 90 miles off the coast of Florida, since he seized power over four decades ago, much less lifted the economic sanctions we imposed at the time?

Hasn't Israel time and again demonstrated its willingness to take unparalleled risks in the quest for peace, while at the very same time operating with a miniscule margin for error, since the country at its narrowest point (pre-1967) was exactly nine miles—nine miles!—wide and, given its topography and concentrated population, all the more dangerously vulnerable?

As a consequence, shouldn't those critics outside Israel—at least, those whose intentions toward Israel are honorable—show just a bit more intellectual humility about trying to second-guess Israel's life-and-death decisions?

And shouldn't they show just a bit more understanding of the extraordinary dilemmas—and dangers—Israel faces no matter which way it seeks to turn?

And shouldn't they show just a bit more recognition of the fact that Israel today does not have a credible negotiating partner in the Palestinian Authority and can't pretend that it does?

And shouldn't they show just a bit more appreciation of the fact that no people—I repeat, no people—seeks peace more than the Israelis, precisely because they've not known a single day of it since the state's founding in 1948, but that peace at any price, history has painfully taught us, is worse than no peace at all?

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