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Why does the West misunderstand Abbas?

By EMMANUEL NAVON
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People insist on theorizing about how the Palestinians will react to the terms of a peace proposal; in doing so it becomes apparent that they are simply not listening to what the Palestinians themselves are saying loud and clear.

“So now here is the question,” Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu posited in his masterly address to the US Congress, “if the benefits of peace with the Palestinians are so clear, why has peace eluded us?” Netanyahu’s provided an astute answer to what seemed to be a rhetorical question: the Palestinian leadership has always refused, and continues to refuse, to sign a peace agreement that entails the acceptance and permanence of the Jewish state, regardless of its borders.

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Hence the PA’s rejection of the offers by former prime ministers Ehud Barak (in 2000) and Ehud Olmert (in 2008) to establish a Palestinian state on virtually all of the West Bank and Gaza. Former PLO leader Yasser Arafat said no, and PA President Mahmoud Abbas followed suit for these reasons: They refused to recognize the Jewish past of the Temple Mount and they couldn’t abandon the fantasy of invading Israel with the descendants of the 1948 Arab refugees. Ultimately, they could not commit to ending the conflict once they achieved statehood.

So then here is another question: If Abbas refused to establish a Palestinian state within borders that were practically identical to the 1949 armistice lines, why would he now accept establishing a state on reduced territory (that will provide Israel with defensible borders)?

The claim that Israel will eventually achieve peace by reoffering the Palestinians the same terms that in the past they’ve rejected is a lively example of Albert Einstein’s definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. And the extended claim that Abbas will now agree to a downgraded version of a Palestinian state brings to mind the famous spat between former British prime minister Winston Churchill and MP Lady Nancy Astor: “Winston, if you were my husband, I’d poison your tea.” To which Churchill responded, “Nancy, if I were your husband, I would drink it.”

The standard response is that all Israel needs to do in order to achieve peace with the Palestinians is to withdraw to “the 1967 border.” But there never was such a border. What existed between 1949 and 1967 upon Jordan’s insistence was an armistice line specifically defined as “temporary” in the Rhodes Agreements. This line was not a border and nor was it ever meant to become one.

UN Security Council Resolution 242 was specifically worded so as not to convert the armistice line into a

border. There is therefore no legal basis for “demanding” an Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 armistice line.

Legalities notwithstanding, the claim that withdrawing to the those lines will produce peace with the Palestinians simply defies logics. Why would turning the clock back to 1967 bring about a peace that never existed, not before or after?

The reason that Israel was able to extract a peace agreement (though not real peace) from former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, was because Sadat wanted Sinai and the American financial largess that came with a pact. If all the Palestinians wanted were the West Bank and Gaza, the “rewind to 1967” formula could very well work with them also.

But since what they actually want is all of Palestine, settling on a pre-1967 scenario will continue to fail as it has done in the past. You only need to listen to what the PA is educating Palestinian children to know that this is true: Jaffa and Haifa, according to them, will eventually be liberated from the Zionist invaders and that the only purpose of signing agreements with infidels is to achieve the ultimate goal of “liberating” all of Palestine. The message is getting through. A [poll conducted](#) by Stanley Greenberg in November 2010 reveals that 60% of Palestinians view the two-state solution as a mere step on the way to replacing Israel with an exclusively Arab state.

Another claim that neglects the facts is that the Palestinians have abandoned this goal of liberating all of Palestine. It chooses to ignore what they themselves keep on saying (albeit in Arabic). On May 28 in Doha, [Abbas declared](#) that he will never recognize Israel as a Jewish state, that he will never give up on the “right of return,” and that the future Palestinian state will be “clean” (or “empty,” depending on the translation) of any Israeli presence - including civilians. The State of Israel would thus lose its Jewish majority, while the Palestinian state will be “clean” of any Jew. According to Abbas’ vision, Jews would become a minority between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, and be ruled by the Arab majority. Over and over, Abbas has made his intentions explicit and unequivocal.

Why, then, is it so difficult for people to believe him?

What would the world’s reaction be if Netanyahu declared that the State of Israel should be “clean” of any Arab? A two-state solution does not exclude the presence of minorities on both sides. India was partitioned in 1947, yet there are still Muslims in India and Hindus in Pakistan. This is what Netanyahu meant in his speech to Congress when he said that “in any real peace agreement that ends the conflict, some settlements will end up beyond Israel’s borders.” Contrary to what *The Economist* mistakenly - or mischievously - [wrote](#), this doesn’t mean that some Jewish towns would “by implication, have to be removed.”

For true peace to occur there should be the option of having a Jewish minority in the Palestinian state in the same way that there is an Arab minority in the Jewish state. Either the Palestinian state is willing to tolerate a Jewish minority with equal civil rights similar to the ones enjoyed by Arabs in the State of Israel, or it is committing itself to ethnic cleansing. If the latter is true, there should be a mutual population transfer - as suggested back in 1937 by the Peel Commission - between the two states.

Accepting the principle that there should be an Arab minority in the Jewish state but no Jewish minority in the Palestinian state would set an unprecedented double-standard. Not only does it absolve the Palestinians of any intolerance towards minorities, it also implicitly endorses the idea that the Arabs have stronger rights than the Jews over the land.

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