

DR. EMMANUEL NAVON: RECOGNIZING PALESTINE WILL NOT BRING PEACE

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The decision by the Irish, Norwegian, and Spanish governments to grant official recognition to a virtual “State of Palestine” has outraged most Israelis because of its timing. The fact that those three governments announced their decision in the wake of October 7 sends to the Palestinians the unmistakable message that terrorism pays. Hamas can claim a diplomatic achievement after committing the worst atrocities against Jews since the Holocaust.

Yet, despite rewarding terrorism, those three governments claim that their move is meant to facilitate peace. They are wrong in their diagnosis and in their prognosis. Hamas did not commit the October 7 massacres because of some frustration over the lack of Palestinian statehood. Hamas rejects the very idea of Arab statehood, which it considers heretical, and which it wants replaced by an Islamic *Ummah* (or religious commonwealth). Hamas strives for the destruction of Israel and the killing of Jews, and it categorically rejects a two-state solution with Israel. Therefore, establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel will neither satisfy Hamas nor defuse its jihadist fervour.

Those who claim that Hamas is not representative of the Palestinians are wrong too. Hamas won the latest and last Palestinian legislative elections of 2006. A poll released by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research in March 2024 revealed that 52% of Gazans want Hamas to rule their territory after the war, and that 71% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza support Hamas’ decision to commit the attacks of October 7.

To claim that establishing a Palestinian state will put an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to assume that the absence of a Palestinian state is the source of that conflict. It is not. The conflict between Jews and Arabs in what became Palestine in 1922 (a British colonial invention that replaced the Turkish *Sanjaks* –or districts– of Jerusalem and Beirut) culminated in the Arab revolt of 1936. To calm the revolt, the British Peel Commission suggested in 1937 the Mandate’s partition between an Arab state and a tiny Jewish one. The proposal was flatly rejected by the Arabs and reluctantly accepted by the Jews. The same scenario repeated itself 10 years later with the UN partition plan. Arab rejection was about the very existence of a Jewish nation-state, not about the borders proposed in 1937 and in 1947.

The Arab armies tried –and failed– to prevent Israel’s independence in 1948. The state of war between Israel and its Arab neighbours continued as the West Bank

and the Gaza Strip were under Jordanian and Egyptian control respectively between 1949 and 1967. Neither Egypt nor Jordan were interested in establishing a Palestinian state in those two territories, nor did they claim that doing so would end the conflict with Israel. The PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) was established in 1964, three years before Israel took control of the West Bank and of the Gaza Strip during the 1967 Six Day War. In 1974, the PLO adopted in Cairo its “phased plan” which declared readiness to establish a Palestinian state in the West Bank and in Gaza as a first step toward the “liberation of Palestine.”

Such was Yasser Arafat’s intention when he signed the “Oslo agreements” with Israel two decades later. Hence did he reject the peace proposals at the Camp David summit in July 2000 and President Clinton’s “parameters” of December 2000, because both conditioned the establishment of a Palestinian state on ending the conflict with Israel. And hence did Mahmoud Abbas reject similar proposals on three occasions: the Olmert offer of September 2008; the Kerry plan of February 2014; and the Kushner deal of January 2020.

Admittedly, the current Israeli government opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state. But on the seven occasions listed above, the establishment of such a state was rejected by the Arabs and accepted by the Jews. After five Palestinian rejections in the past two decades alone, Israelis have good reasons to be sceptical. And after October 7, Israelis have good reasons to be weary. As Israel proved during its 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, its settlements are reversible; and as the past three decades have showed, every territory vacated by Israel has been used by the Palestinians to launch rockets, dig tunnels, and dispatch terror attacks.

This complicated conflict will not be solved, if at all, by empty slogans. Most Israelis will agree to Palestinian self-rule without military capabilities. What is needed to de-escalate the conflict and stabilize the Middle East is to remove the threat of Hamas, to keep a united Western front against Iran and its proxies, to reform the educational system in the West Bank and Gaza, to expand normalization between Israel and the Arab states, and to incentivize both Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate and compromise.