

How Arab Rulers Undermined a Palestinian State

by Roie Yellinek and Assaf Malach

While the “Palestine question” has long dominated inter-Arab politics, not only have the Arab states been driven by their own ulterior motives, but they also have shown little concern for the wellbeing of the Palestinians, let alone their demand for a state of their own. This pattern dates back to the mandate years (1920-48) when the self-styled champions of the nascent pan-Arab movement—King Faisal of Iraq, Transjordan’s Emir Abdullah, and Egyptian King Faruq—

viewed Palestine as part of their would-be empires. This situation culminated in the 1948 war when the all-Arab assault on Israel was launched in pursuit of the invading states’ imperialist goals—not in support of Palestinian self-determination. In the words of the Arab League’s secretary-general Abdel Rahman Azzam:

Abdullah was to swallow up the central hill regions of Palestine, with access to the Mediterranean at Gaza. The Egyptians would get the Negev. [The] Galilee would go to Syria, except that the coastal part as far as Acre would be added to Lebanon.¹

In the decades following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the Arab states continued



¹ Efraim Karsh, *Palestine Betrayed* (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 233.

to use the Palestinians to their own ends, exploiting the newly created “refugee problem” to tarnish Israel’s international standing and channel their oppressed subjects’ anger outwards. They did practically nothing to relieve this problem, let alone to facilitate the crystallization of Palestinian nationalism and the attainment of statehood.

This consistent lack of recognition of a separate Palestinian nationality by the Arab states was perpetrated by the main parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict: Jordan, Egypt, and Syria.

Jordanian National Identity

Jordan has ruled over more Palestinians than any other Arab state, especially during its occupation of the West Bank between 1948 and 1967. In these years, the kingdom became home to some 368,000 Palestinians who fled the 1948 Arab-Israeli war,² and the government systematically erased all traces of a distinct Palestinian identity in an attempt to create a wider Jordanian national identity.

Even during the 1948 war, King Abdullah made a brief visit to Jerusalem on November 15 where he proclaimed himself the ruler of Palestine as well as Jordan, and in April 1950, Jordan formally annexed the area it occupied in the war and designated it the “West Bank of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.”³ A decade later, Abdullah’s grandson and successor King

Jordan’s King Abdullah visited Jerusalem in 1948 and proclaimed himself ruler of Palestine.

Hussein declared his firm opposition to the idea of a separate “Palestinian entity,” convening a conference in January 1960 of Hashemite loyalists to denounce the “despicable innovation” of the establishment of a Palestinian entity.⁴

The Palestinian residents of the east and west banks were incorporated into Jordan’s social, economic, and political fabric to a far greater extent than their brothers in any other Arab state, primarily due to the kingdom’s dire need to boost its scarce population and because of the high ratio of Palestinian refugees vis-à-vis the original Bedouin population. This explains why Jordan was the only Arab country to integrate fully the Palestinian refugees of 1948. Following the Israeli capture of the West Bank during the Six-Day War in June 1967, about 240,000 Palestinians were displaced for the first time and some 190,000 were refugees who had been displaced in 1948, increasing Jordan’s Palestinian population to more than half of the kingdom’s total inhabitants.⁵

Tension between the Hashemite regime and its Palestinian subjects grew steadily in the wake of the 1967 war as the Palestinian terror organizations established a state within a state in the kingdom, transforming its territory into a springboard for attacks on Israel. Matters erupted in September 1970 with an attempt on King Hussein’s life as part of a wider Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) bid to subvert

2 Efraim Karsh, “The Privileged Palestinian ‘Refugees,’” *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2018.

3 Joseph Nevo, *Abdullah ve-Arviyei Eretz Israel* (Tel Aviv: Shiloah Institute for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1975), p. 111.

4 Emile Touma, *Ha-Tnua ha-Leumit ha-Falestinī veva-Olam ha-Arvi* (Tel Aviv: Mifras, 1990), p. 85.

5 Jalal Al Hussein, “Jordan and the Palestinians,” in Myriam Ababsa, ed., *Atlas of Jordan* (Beyrouth: Presses de l’Ifpo, Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2013), p. 230.

the Hashemite monarchy and take over the state. This led to an all-out confrontation that came to be widely known as Black September. Amid heavy fighting with massacres of thousands of innocent civilians (including many of Palestinian descent) and a limited Syrian invasion in support of the PLO, the group was expelled from Jordan, a process completed in July 1971. And while this military routing failed to deal a mortal blow to the PLO, which quickly substituted Lebanon for Jordan as its home, Hussein continued his tireless efforts to weaken and marginalize the organization and by extension Palestinian nationalism. This was vividly illustrated by his March 1972 plan of a united Arab kingdom under his headship comprising Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, in which the Palestinians were to enjoy autonomy.⁶ To the king's frustration, the plan, conceived with Israel's blessing, met with widespread Arab outrage, particularly in Egypt, where the government responded by severing diplomatic relations with Jordan.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War boosted the PLO's inter-Arab stance as most Arab states sought to empower the organization as a means of advancing their own positions vis-à-vis Israel. The Arab League would have recognized the PLO as the "sole representative of the Palestinian people" during its



Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (center) brokers a ceasefire during Black September between Yasser Arafat (left) and Jordan's King Hussein (right), Cairo, Sept. 27, 1970. Following a PLO attempt to subvert the Hashemite monarchy, Jordan expelled the PLO from its territory.

November 1973 Algiers summit had Jordan not derailed the initiative at the last moment. But this was but a Pyrrhic victory as the pan-Arab recognition of Palestinian nationalism (and the PLO as its sole champion) was passed a year later—in the October 1974 Arab League summit in the Moroccan capital of Rabat.

This set in motion a process of Jordanian-Palestinian disengagement culminating in Hussein's July 1988 renunciation of Jordan's claims to the West Bank, in favor of the PLO, following the failure of three initiatives to institutionalize relations between Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis. But the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza (December 1987-September 1993), or the intifada, drove the final nail in the king's hopes to regain the West Bank: The Palestinian population did not support this option while his Bedouin subjects feared the uprising would spill over into the East Bank and subvert the Hashemite kingdom.⁷

⁶ Said Aburish, *Arafat: From Defender to Dictator* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. 127.

⁷ Hassan A. Barari, "Four Decades after Black September: A Jordanian Perspective," *Civil Wars*, Sept. 2008, pp. 231-43.

The uprising seemed to have closed the lid on the idea of a unified kingdom reincorporating the West Bank's Palestinians as Jordanian subjects as did the September 1993 launching of the Israel-PLO Oslo "peace process" and the conclusion of a Jordanian-Israeli peace agreement a year later.

But calls for the resurrection of the "Jordanian option" resurfaced over the following decades, reflecting growing disillusionment with the Oslo process. On the Israeli side, the realization grew that the PLO leadership (let alone those of Hamas and Islamic Jihad) viewed Oslo not as the means to a two-state solution—Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza—but for the substitution of a Palestinian state in place of Israel. This understanding of PLO motives kindled warm memories of the Zionist movement's long-standing collaboration with the Hashemite dynasty dating back to the early 1920s.

Similar sentiments were aroused on the Palestinian side by the widespread disillusionment with the corrupt and oppressive nature of the PLO-dominated Palestinian Authority, with 51 percent of respondents to a 2013 poll supporting the "Jordanian option"—roughly 10 percent more than in a similar poll five years earlier.⁸ This mindset was reflected in the June 2016 suggestion by al-Quds University president Sari Nusseibeh—who had previously gone to great lengths to disengage himself from his late father's legacy as the 1950s Jordanian defense minister—for reconsideration of a Jordanian-Palestinian federation. More

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importantly, former Jordanian prime minister Abdel Salam Majali voiced support for the idea, stating, "Jordan cannot exist without Palestine, and Palestine cannot exist without Jordan."⁹

And while Nusseibeh's and Majali's ideas are hardly representative, they indicate that prominent figures and substantial public opinion still support the blurring of Palestinian distinctiveness and the creation of a collective identity on both sides of the Jordan River.¹⁰

Egypt as Intermediary

While Egypt's government indicated no desire to annex the Gaza Strip after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, it was no more amenable than Jordan to the development of Palestinian national identity or Palestinian statehood. Instead, it subjected the residents of the Gaza Strip to a harsh military regime and did not offer them Egyptian citizenship. As Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser told a Western journalist:

The Palestinians are useful to the Arab states as they are. We will always see that they do not become too powerful. Can you imagine yet another nation on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean!¹¹

⁸ "Palestinian Public Opinion Poll No. 48," Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Ramallah, June 2013, p. 1.

⁹ *Walla News* (Tel Aviv), [June 3, 2016](#).

¹⁰ Michael Sharnoff, "Does Jordan Want the West Bank?" *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2020.

¹¹ Efraim Karsh, "The Palestinians' Real Enemies," *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2014.

Despite this view, Nasser was paradoxically instrumental in the development of Palestinian nationalism by instigating the formation of the PLO in 1964. He did so not out of concern for Palestinian wellbeing but as a means, Edward Said explains, of “institutionalizing (perhaps even containing) Palestinian energies” and using them to promote his ultimate goal of pan-Arab leadership.¹² To this end, he selected Ahmad Shukeiri to head the PLO. Shukeiri was a Lebanon-born politician loyal to the Egyptian president who in turn helped install Shukeiri as deputy secretary-general of the Arab League. This ensured the PLO’s subservience to Nasser’s will and prevented it from pursuing undesirable directions, particularly those based on Palestinian nationalism.¹³

In yet another paradox, it was the Six-Day War that gave a major boost to Palestinian national identity by loosening the grip of the Egyptian chokehold. When the Gaza Strip (and West Bank) populations came under Israel’s rule, the Arab states’ direct control over these Palestinians weakened, allowing the PLO to break from Egyptian dominance. This was illustrated by the election of a PLO chairman, Yahya Hamuda, who was not personally beholden to Nasser. More importantly, this



Photo: William Fitz-Patrick
 (Left to right) Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, U.S. president Jimmy Carter, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, Camp David, Sept. 5, 1978. To placate Palestinian supporters, Sadat insisted that the Egyptian-Israeli treaty recognize the Palestinians’ right to autonomy for five years with their final status negotiated with Israel.

loosening of the Arab states’ domination allowed for the creeping takeover of the PLO’s decision-making organs by the Fatah terror group, which had previously vied with the PLO for Palestinian leadership. By 1969, with Yasser Arafat at its head, Fatah and its satellite factions had gained 45 of the Palestinian National Council’s 105 seats; in contrast, the veteran pro-Egyptian Palestine Liberation Army dropped sharply from 20 to 5 seats. With the support of the 28 independent representatives, Fatah managed to win a majority on the council, and on February 3, 1969, Arafat became PLO chairman, a post he held until his death in November 2004, and which he would use to free the organization from the Arab states’ domination.¹⁴

¹² Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 134.

¹³ Said Aburish, *Nasser: The Last Arab* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), pp. 222-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-96.

Small wonder that Arafat's relations with Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat were no warmer. Sadat's outright rejection of King Hussein's federation, which led to a brief severance of Egyptian-Jordanian diplomatic relations, fully coincided with the PLO's ambitions. But Sadat's stance reflected no sympathy with the organization or with Palestinian nationalism; rather, it indicated a reluctance to see a surge in Jordan's inter-Arab prestige as a result of such a move as well as fear of the corresponding loss of Egyptian control over the Palestine issue, which had started to play a growing role on the international agenda.

For this reason, Sadat insisted that the crystallizing Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, negotiated at the September 1978 Camp David summit, must include recognition of the Palestinians' right to autonomy for an interim period of five years, after which the West Bank and Gaza Strip's final status would be negotiated with Israel. Yet this was as far as he was prepared to go in placating supporters of the most celebrated pan-Arab cause. When the autonomy plan was contemptuously dismissed by Arafat, who also declined U.S. president Jimmy Carter's personal appeal to join the peace process,¹⁵ Sadat had no qualms about breaking the Arab taboo and signed a separate peace agreement with Israel.

Palestinian-Egyptian relations improved significantly after Sadat's assassination, largely due to the PLO's 1982 expulsion from Lebanon and its deteriorating relations with Syria, but neither Egyptian presidents Hosni

Damascus advocated for a Greater Syria comprising present-day Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel, under Syrian reign.

Mubarak (1981-2011) nor Abdel Fattah Sisi (2013 to date) cancelled the peace treaty with Israel or made a real effort to promote Palestinian statehood. Instead, they used their relationship

with Israel as a lever to enhance their regional and international position, especially vis-à-vis successive U.S. administrations, by playing an intermediary role between Israelis and Palestinians without seeking resolution.

Syrian Claims

The Syrian political elite was no more sympathetic to Palestinian national self-determination than its Jordanian or Egyptian counterparts. In the decade-and-a-half following its independence in 1946, the unambiguous political line advocated the unification of Greater Syria comprising the territory of present-day Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel, under Damascus's reign (Transjordan's King Abdullah also strove for the creation of this entity under his headship).¹⁶ Even the pan-Arab Baath party, which seized power in a military coup in 1963 and which espoused the vision of a unified "Arab nation" from "the [Persian] Gulf to [Atlantic] Ocean," continued to view Palestine as an integral part of "southern Syria." This view was especially strong during the 30-year reign (1970-2000) of

15 Efraim Karsh, *Arafat's War* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), pp. 49-50.

16 Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Philip S. Khoury, "Factionalism among Syrian Nationalists during the French Mandate," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Nov. 1981, pp. 441-66; Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 13-4, 54.

Hafez Assad, who claimed that “a state by the name of Palestine has never existed.”¹⁷

Two years after the Arab League had formally recognized the PLO as the “sole representative of the Palestinian people,” Assad met with Arafat and Lebanese Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt. In the April 1976 meeting, Assad had no qualms about telling the Palestinian leader that

you do not represent Palestine as we do. Never forget this one point; there is no such thing as a Palestinian people, no such thing as a Palestinian entity, there is only Syria! You are an integral part of the Syrian people. Palestine is an integral part of Syria.¹⁸

It is no surprise, then, that the Syrian president attempted to use Israel’s 1982 expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon to impose Syria’s hegemony on the organization, preventing the PLO’s return to the country and instigating an internecine war among the Palestinian factions in Lebanon that raged for years and cost thousands of lives. He was no less vehemently opposed to any attempt by the PLO to assert an independent course—notably by embarking on the Oslo process—going so far as to threaten Arafat with death.¹⁹

This outlook prevailed under the rule of Bashar Assad, who succeeded his father upon the elder’s death in June 2000. The lukewarm Syrian position was manifested at

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inter-Arab conferences in the 2000s that adopted resolutions backing the Palestinians over a host of key issues at the center of their relationship with Israel (e.g., sovereignty over the Temple Mount

and Jerusalem).²⁰ No less important, in March 2002, Syria opposed Security Council Resolution 1397—the first binding resolution on the need for an independent Palestinian state as part of “a region where two States, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognized borders.”²¹ And while Damascus justified its position by the resolution’s failure to “take into account any Arab concerns” and to “deal with the root question at the heart of this issue—the Israeli occupation,”²² the fact remains that it withheld public support for an international resolution on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.²³

Conclusion

The 1967 Six-Day War placed the “Palestine question” at the forefront of international attention with the PLO gaining worldwide prominence as “the sole representative of the Palestinian people” while maintaining its terrorist ways. But, the Arab states have shown no real interest in Palestinian statehood beyond the customary lip service.

17 Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Fatah ba-Estrategia ha-Aravit* (Tel-Aviv: Maarachot, 1969), p. 30.

18 Kamal Jumblatt, *I Speak for Lebanon* (London: Zed Press, 1982), p. 78.

19 Karsh, “The Palestinians’ Real Enemies.”

20 Eyal Zisser, *Be-Shem ha-Av. Bashar Assad: Shanim Rishonot ba-Shilton* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004), p. 177.

21 [Res. 1397](#), U.N. Security Council, New York, Mar. 12, 2002.

22 News release, Department of Public Information, Security Council, New York, [Dec. 3, 2002](#).

23 Zisser, *Be-Shem ha-Av*, p. 178.

Despite Jordan's 1988 renunciation of claims to the West Bank, the Hashemite monarchy has neither shown any desire for the establishment of a Palestinian state, which it fears might subvert its rule, nor shied away from making peace and closely collaborating with Israel with the kingdom's possible return to the West Bank occasionally mooted by both sides. Similarly, while Anwar Sadat went to great lengths to attach the Palestinian issue to the Egyptian-Israeli peace negotiations, the agreed formulation spoke about a transient autonomy without specifying statehood as the end result, let alone insisting on its attainment. Nor was Sadat deterred from opting for a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace once Arafat rejected his overture. Add to this the Assad regime's adamant subscription to its perception of Palestine as Syria's southern province and its outright rejection of "peace" that did not entail Israel's destruction.

This half-hearted approach toward Palestinian nationalism notwithstanding, decades of staunch anti-Zionist propaganda have entrenched the "Palestine question" in the collective regional psyche to the extent of

making it exceedingly difficult for the Arab states to conclude functional peace treaties with Israel without a pro forma Palestinian-Israeli agreement. Yet while this state of affairs gives the Palestinians some veto power over inter-Arab politics, it is unlikely to derail the intensifying, multifaceted, and increasingly overt Arab-Israeli collaboration even in the event of severe deterioration in Israeli-Palestinian relations, as the 2020 normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco show.

Roie Yellinek is a research associate at the BESA Center and a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute. **Assaf Malach** is the founder and head of the Jewish Statesmanship Center, a lecturer at Shalem College, and a research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute.

