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**Special  
report  
Israel and  
the Middle  
East**

## Peace? No chance

Benny Morris was the radical Israeli historian who forced his country to confront its role in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Later he was jailed for refusing to do military service in the West Bank. But now he has changed his tune. As the cycle of violence in the Middle East intensifies, he launches a vicious attack on the 'inveterate liar' Yasser Arafat - and explains why he believes a peaceful coexistence is impossible

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[The Guardian](#)

The rumour that I have undergone a brain transplant is (as far as I can remember) unfounded - or at least premature. But my thinking about the current Middle East crisis and its protagonists has in fact radically changed during the past two years. I imagine that I feel a bit like one of those western fellow travellers rudely awakened by the trundle of Russian tanks crashing through Budapest in 1956.

Back in 1993, when I began work on *Righteous Victims*, a revisionist history of the Zionist-Arab conflict from 1881 until the present, I was cautiously optimistic about the prospects for Middle East peace. I was never a wild optimist; and my gradual study during the mid-1990s of the pre-1948 history of Palestinian-Zionist relations brought home to me the depth and breadth of the problems and antagonisms. But at least the Israelis and Palestinians were talking peace; had agreed to mutual recognition; and had signed the Oslo agreement, a first step that promised gradual Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, the emergence of a Palestinian state, and a peace treaty between the two peoples. The Palestinians appeared to have given up their decades-old dream and objective of destroying and supplanting the Jewish state, and the Israelis had given up their dream of a "Greater Israel", stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan river. And, given the centrality of Palestinian-Israeli relations in the Arab-Israeli conflict, a final, comprehensive peace settlement between Israel and all of its Arab neighbours seemed within reach.

But by the time I had completed the book, my restrained optimism had given way to grave doubts - and within a year had crumbled into a cosmic pessimism. One reason was the Syrians' rejection of the deal offered by the prime ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres in 1993-96 and Ehud Barak in 1999-2000, involving Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights in exchange for a full-fledged bilateral peace treaty. What appears to have stayed the hands of President Hafez Assad and subsequently his son and successor, Bashar Assad, was not quibbles about a few hundred yards here or there but a basic refusal to make peace with the Jewish state. What counted, in

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the end, was the presence, on a wall in the Assads' office, of a portrait of Saladin, the legendary 12th-century Kurdish Muslim warrior who had beaten the crusaders, to whom the Arabs often compared the Zionists. I can see the father, on his deathbed, telling his son: "Whatever you do, don't make peace with the Jews; like the crusaders, they too will vanish."

But my main reason, around which my pessimism gathered and crystallised, was the figure of Yasser Arafat, who has led the Palestinian national movement since the late 1960s and, by virtue of the Oslo accords, governs the cities of the West Bank (Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarm and Qalqilya) and their environs, and the bulk of the Gaza Strip. Arafat is the symbol of the movement, accurately reflecting his people's miseries and collective aspirations. Unfortunately, he has proven himself a worthy successor to Haj Muhammad Amin al Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, who led the Palestinians during the 1930s into their (abortive) rebellion against the British mandate government and during the 1940s into their (again abortive) attempt to prevent the emergence of the Jewish state in 1948, resulting in their catastrophic defeat and the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. Husseini had been implacable and incompetent (a dangerous mix) - but also a trickster and liar. Nobody had trusted him, neither his Arab colleagues nor the British nor the Zionists. Above all, Husseini had embodied rejectionism - a rejection of any compromise with the Zionist movement. He had rejected two international proposals to partition the country into Jewish and Arab polities, by the British Peel commission in 1937 and by the UN general assembly in November 1947. In between, he spent the war years (1941-45) in Berlin, working for the Nazi foreign ministry and recruiting Bosnian Muslims for the Wehrmacht.

Abba Eban, Israel's legendary foreign minister, once quipped that the Palestinians had never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. But no one can fault them for consistency. After Husseini came Arafat, another implacable nationalist and inveterate liar, trusted by no Arab, Israeli or American leader (though there appear to be many Europeans who are taken in). In 1978-79, he failed to join the Israeli-Egyptian Camp David framework, which might have led to Palestinian statehood a decade ago. In 2000, turning his back on the Oslo process, Arafat rejected yet another historic compromise, that offered by Barak at Camp David in July and subsequently improved upon in President Bill Clinton's proposals (endorsed by Barak) in December. Instead, the Palestinians, in September, resorted to arms and launched the current mini-war or intifada, which has so far resulted in some 790 Arab and 270 Israeli deaths, and a deepening of hatred on both sides to the point that the idea of a territorial-political compromise seems to be a pipe dream.

Palestinians and their sympathisers have blamed the Israelis and Clinton for what happened: the daily humiliations and restrictions of the continuing Israeli semi-occupation; the wily but transparent Binyamin Netanyahu's foot-dragging during 1996-99; Barak's continued expansion of the settlements in the occupied territories and his standoffish manner toward Arafat;

and Clinton's insistence on summoning the Camp David meeting despite Palestinian protestations that they were not quite ready. But all this is really and truly beside the point: Barak, a sincere and courageous leader, offered Arafat a reasonable peace agreement that included Israeli withdrawal from 85-91% of the West Bank and 100% of the Gaza Strip; the uprooting of most of the settlements; Palestinian sovereignty over the Arab neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem; and the establishment of a Palestinian state. As to the Temple Mount (Haram ash-Sharif) in Jerusalem's Old City, Barak proposed Israeli-Palestinian condominium or UN security council control or "divine sovereignty" with actual Arab control. Regarding the Palestinian refugees, Barak offered a token return to Israel and massive financial compensation to facilitate their rehabilitation in the Arab states and the Palestinian state-to-be.

Arafat rejected the offer, insisting on 100% Israeli withdrawal from the territories, sole Palestinian sovereignty over the Temple Mount, and the refugees' "right of return" to Israel proper. Instead of continuing to negotiate, the Palestinians - with the agile Arafat both riding the tiger and pulling the strings behind the scenes - launched the intifada. Clinton (and Barak) responded by upping the ante to 94-96% of the West Bank (with some territorial compensation from Israel proper) and sovereignty over the surface area of the Temple Mount, with some sort of Israeli control regarding the area below ground, where the Palestinians have recently carried out excavation work without proper archaeological supervision. Again, the Palestinians rejected the proposals, insisting on sole Palestinian sovereignty over the Temple Mount (surely an unjust demand: after all, the Temple Mount and the temples' remains at its core are the most important historical and religious symbol and site of the Jewish people. It is worth mentioning that "Jerusalem" or its Arab variants do not even appear once in the Koran).

Since these rejections - which led directly to Barak's defeat and hardliner Ariel Sharon's election as prime minister - the Israelis and Palestinians have been at each other's throats, and the semi-occupation has continued. The intifada is a strange, sad sort of war, with the underdog, who rejected peace, simultaneously in the role of aggressor and, when the western TV cameras are on, victim. The semi-occupier, with his giant but largely useless army, merely responds, usually with great restraint, given the moral and international political shackles under which he labours. And he loses on CNN because F-16s bombing empty police buildings appear far more savage than Palestinian suicide bombers who take out 10 or 20 Israeli civilians at a go.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) has emerged as a virtual kingdom of mendacity, where every official, from President Arafat down, spends his days lying to a succession of western journalists. The reporters routinely give the lies credence equal to or greater than what they hear from straight, or far less mendacious, Israeli officials. One day Arafat charges that the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) uses uranium-tipped shells against Palestinian civilians. The next day it's poison gas. Then, for lack

of independent corroboration, the charges simply vanish - and the Palestinians go on to the next lie, again garnering headlines in western and Arab newspapers.

Daily, Palestinian officials bewail Israeli "massacres" and "bombings" of Palestinian civilians - when in fact there have been no massacres and the bombings have invariably been directed at empty PA buildings. The only civilians deliberately targeted and killed in large numbers, indeed massacred, are Israeli - by Palestinian suicide bombers. In response, the army and Shin Bet (the Israeli security service) have tried to hit the guilty with "targeted killings" of bomb-makers, terrorists and their dispatchers, to me an eminently moral form of reprisal, deterrence and prevention: these are (barbaric) "soldiers" in a mini-war and, as such, legitimate military targets. Would the critics prefer Israel to respond in kind to a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv? Palestinian leaders routinely laud the suicide bombers as national heroes. In a recent spate of articles, Palestinian journalists, politicians and clerics praised Wafa Idris, a female suicide bomber who detonated her device in Jerusalem's main Jaffa Street, killing an 81-year-old man and injuring about 100. A controversy ensued - not over the morality or political efficacy of the deed but about whether Islam allows women to play such a role.

Instead of being informed, accurately, about the Israeli peace offers, the Palestinians have been subjected to a nonstop barrage of anti-Israeli incitement and lies in the PA-controlled media. Arafat has honed the practice of saying one thing to western audiences and quite another to his own Palestinian constituency to a fine art. Lately, with Arab audiences, he has begun to use the term "the Zionist army" (for the IDF), a throwback to the 1950s and 1960s when Arab leaders routinely spoke of "the Zionist entity" instead of saying "Israel", which, they felt, implied some form of recognition of the Jewish state and its legitimacy.

At the end of the day, this question of legitimacy - seemingly put to rest by the Israeli-Egyptian and Israeli-Jordanian peace treaties - is at the root of current Israeli despair and my own "conversion". For decades, Israeli leaders - notably Golda Meir in 1969 - denied the existence of a "Palestinian people" and the legitimacy of Palestinian aspirations for sovereignty. But during the 1930s and 1940s, the Zionist movement agreed to give up its dream of a "Greater Israel" and to divide Palestine with the Arabs. During the 1990s, the movement went further - agreeing to partition and recognising the existence of the Palestinian people as its partner in partition.

Unfortunately, the Palestinian national movement, from its inception, has denied the Zionist movement any legitimacy and stuck fast to the vision of a "Greater Palestine", meaning a Muslim-Arab-populated and Arab-controlled state in all of Palestine, perhaps with some Jews being allowed to stay on as a religious minority. In 1988-93, in a brief flicker on the graph, Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organisation seemed to have acquiesced in the idea of a compromise. But since 2000 the

dominant vision of a "Greater Palestine" has surged back to the fore (and one wonders whether the pacific asseverations of 1988-1993 were not merely diplomatic camouflage).

The Palestinian leadership, and with them most Palestinians, deny Israel's right to exist, deny that Zionism was/is a just enterprise. (I have yet to see even a peace-minded Palestinian leader, as Sari Nusseibeh seems to be, stand up and say: "Zionism is a legitimate national liberation movement, like our own. And the Jews have a just claim to Palestine, like we do.") Israel may exist, and be too powerful, at present, to destroy; one may recognise its reality. But this is not to endow it with legitimacy. Hence Arafat's repeated denial in recent months of any connection between the Jewish people and the Temple Mount, and, by extension, between the Jewish people and the land of Israel/Palestine. "What Temple?" he asks. The Jews are simply robbers who came from Europe and decided, for some unfathomable reason, to steal Palestine and displace the Palestinians. He refuses to recognise the history and reality of the 3,000-year-old Jewish connection to the land of Israel.

On some symbolic plane, the Temple Mount is a crucial issue. But more practically, the real issue, the real litmus test of Palestinian intentions, is the fate of the refugees, some 3.5-4m strong, encompassing those who fled or were driven out during the 1948 war and were never allowed back to their homes in Israel, as well as their descendants.

I spent the mid-1980s investigating what led to the creation of the refugee problem, publishing *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* in 1988. My conclusion, which angered many Israelis and undermined Zionist historiography, was that most of the refugees were a product of Zionist military action and, in smaller measure, of Israeli expulsion orders and Arab local leaders' urgings or orders to move out. Critics of Israel subsequently latched on to those findings that highlighted Israeli responsibility while ignoring the fact that the problem was a direct consequence of the war that the Palestinians - and, in their wake, the surrounding Arab states - had launched. And few noted that, in my concluding remarks, I had explained that the creation of the problem was "almost inevitable", given the Zionist aim of creating a Jewish state in a land largely populated by Arabs and given Arab resistance to the Zionist enterprise. The refugees were the inevitable by-product of an attempt to fit an ungainly square peg into an inhospitable round hole.

But whatever my findings, we are now 50 years on - and Israel exists. Like every people, the Jews deserve a state, and justice will not be served by throwing them into the sea. And if the refugees are allowed back, there will be godawful chaos and, in the end, no Israel. Israel is currently populated by 5m Jews and more than 1m Arabs (an increasingly vociferous, pro-Palestinian irredentist time bomb). If the refugees return, an unviable binational entity will emerge and, given the Arabs' far higher birth rates, Israel will quickly cease to be a Jewish state. Add to that the Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and you have, almost instantly, an Arab state between the Mediterranean and

the Jordan river with a Jewish minority.

Jews lived as a minority in Muslim countries from the 7th century - and, contrary to Arab propaganda, never much enjoyed the experience. They were always second-class citizens and always discriminated-against infidels; they were often persecuted and not infrequently murdered. Giant pogroms occurred over the centuries. And as late as the 1940s Arab mobs murdered hundreds of Jews in Baghdad, and hundreds more in Libya, Egypt and Morocco. The Jews were expelled from or fled the Arab world during the 1950s and 60s. There is no reason to believe that Jews will want to live (again) as a minority in a (Palestinian) Arab state, especially given the tragic history of Jewish-Palestinian relations. They will either be expelled or emigrate to the west.

It is the Palestinian leadership's rejection of the Barak-Clinton peace proposals of July-December 2000, the launching of the intifada, and the demand ever since that Israel accept the "right of return" that has persuaded me that the Palestinians, at least in this generation, do not intend peace: they do not want, merely, an end to the occupation - that is what was offered back in July-December 2000, and they rejected the deal. They want all of Palestine and as few Jews in it as possible. The right of return is the wedge with which to prise open the Jewish state. Demography - the far higher Arab birth rate - will, over time, do the rest, if Iranian or Iraqi nuclear weapons don't do the trick first.

And don't get me wrong. I favour an Israeli withdrawal from the territories - the semi-occupation is corrupting and immoral, and alienates Israel's friends abroad - as part of a bilateral peace agreement; or, if an agreement is unobtainable, a unilateral withdrawal to strategically defensible borders. In fact in 1988 I served time in a military prison for refusing to serve in the West Bank town of Nablus. But I don't believe that the resultant status quo will survive for long. The Palestinians - either the PA itself or various armed factions, with the PA looking on - will continue to harry Israel, with Katyusha rockets and suicide bombers, across the new lines, be they agreed or self-imposed. Ultimately, they will force Israel to reconquer the West Bank and Gaza Strip, probably plunging the Middle East into a new, wide conflagration.

I don't believe that Arafat and his colleagues mean or want peace - only a staggered chipping away at the Jewish state - and I don't believe that a permanent two-state solution will emerge. I don't believe that Arafat is constitutionally capable of agreeing, really agreeing, to a solution in which the Palestinians get 22-25% of the land (a West Bank-Gaza state) and Israel the remaining 75-78%, or of signing away the "right of return". He is incapable of looking his refugee constituencies in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Gaza in the eye and telling them: "I have signed away your birthright, your hope, your dream."

And he probably doesn't want to. Ultimately, I believe, the balance of military force or the demography of Palestine,

meaning the discrepant national birth rates, will determine the country's future, and either Palestine will become a Jewish state, without a substantial Arab minority, or it will become an Arab state, with a gradually diminishing Jewish minority. Or it will become a nuclear wasteland, a home to neither people.

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