



## Running Away from Statehood, Again

by Prof. Efraim Karsh

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Palestinian Authorities' decision to strike an agreement with Hamas instead of with Israel is of little surprise. Since before 1948, the Palestinian leadership has continually rejected any possibility of attaining statehood, in favor of a commitment to violence and promoting their self-inflicted plight for their own financial benefits. With the possibility of another failed round of peace talks, one wonders whether the Palestinian leadership is even interested in independent statehood of any kind.

The "historic" agreement of last week between The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas, to form a united government casts a serious doubt not only on the Palestinian leadership's commitment to a two-state solution, but also on its interest in the attaining of statehood at all.

Not that this should have come as a surprise to anyone. For nearly a century, Palestinian leaders never have missed an opportunity to impede the development of Palestinian civil society and the attainment of Palestinian statehood.

Had the Jerusalem mufti Hajj Amin Husseini, who led the Palestinian Arabs from the early 1920s to the late 1940s, chosen to lead his constituents to peace and reconciliation with their Jewish neighbors, the Palestinians would have had their independent state over a substantial part of mandate Palestine by 1948, and would have been spared the traumatic experience of dispersal and exile.

Had Yasser Arafat, who dominated Palestinian politics from the mid-1960s to his death in November 2004, set the PLO from the start on the path to peace

and reconciliation instead of turning it into one of the most murderous and kleptocratic terrorist organizations in modern times, a Palestinian state could have been established on numerous occasions: In the late 1960s or the early 1970s; in 1979, as a corollary to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty; in May 1999, as part of the Oslo process; or more recently at the Camp David summit of July 2000.

Had Mahmoud Abbas, who succeeded Arafat as PLO chairman and PA president, abandoned his predecessors' rejectionist path, a Palestinian state could have been established after the Annapolis summit of November 2007, or in June 2009, during President Obama's first term when Benjamin Netanyahu broke with the longstanding Likud precept by publicly accepting the two-state solution and agreeing to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

But why should the Palestinians engage in the daunting tasks of nation-building and state creation if they can have their hapless constituents run around in circles for nearly a century while they bask in international sympathy and enrich themselves from the proceeds of their self-inflicted plight?

The Palestinian leadership in Mandate Palestine (1920-48) had no qualms about inciting its constituents against Zionism and the Jews while lining its own pockets from the fruits of Jewish development and land purchases. So too, the cynical and self-seeking PLO "revolutionaries" have used the billions of dollars donated by the Arab oil states and the international community to lead a luxurious lifestyle in sumptuous hotels and villas, globe-trotting in grand style, acquiring properties, and making financial investments worldwide – while millions of ordinary Palestinians scramble for a livelihood, many of them in squalid and overcrowded refugee camps.

This process reached its peak following the September 1993 signing of the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (DOP, or Oslo I) and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. For all his rhetoric about Palestinian independence, Arafat had never been as interested in the attainment of statehood as he was in the violence attached to its pursuit.

In the late 1970s, he told his close friend and collaborator, the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, that the Palestinians lacked the tradition, unity, and discipline to become a formal state, and that a Palestinian state would be a failure from the first day.

Once given control of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza as per the Oslo accords, Arafat made this bleak prognosis a self-fulfilling prophecy, establishing a repressive and corrupt regime in the worst tradition of Arab dictatorships. The rule of the gun prevailed, and huge sums of money donated by the international community for the benefit of the civilian Palestinian population were diverted to funding racist incitement, buying weaponry, and filling secret bank accounts.

Not only has Abbas done nothing to clean up the Palestinian Authorities' (PA) act, but he seems to have followed in his predecessor's kleptocratic footsteps, reportedly siphoning at least \$100 million to private accounts abroad and making his sons at the PA's expense. In the words of Fahmi Shabaneh, former head of the Anti-Corruption Department in the PA's General Intelligence Service:

*"In his pre-election platform, President Abbas promised to end financial corruption and implement major reforms, but he hasn't done much since then. Unfortunately, Abbas has surrounded himself with many of the thieves and officials who were involved in theft of public funds and who became icons of financial corruption. ... Some of the most senior Palestinian officials didn't have even \$3,000 in their pocket when they arrived [after the signing of the Oslo accords]. Yet we discovered that some of them had tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars in their bank accounts. ..."*

The attainment of statehood would have shattered the paradise established on the backs of the long suffering public in the West Bank and Gaza. It would have transformed the Palestinians in one fell swoop from the world's ultimate victim, into an ordinary (and most likely failing) nation-state, thus terminating decades of unprecedented international indulgence. It would have also driven the final nail into the PLO's false pretense of being "the sole representative of the Palestinian people" (already dealt a devastating blow by Hamas's 2006 electoral rout) and would have forced any governing authority to abide, for the first time in Palestinian history, by the principles of accountability and transparency.

Small wonder, therefore, that whenever confronted with an international or Israeli offer of statehood, Palestinian leaders will never take "yes" for an answer.

*Professor Efraim Karsh is a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, and a professor of Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at Bar-Ilan University, Kings College London, and the Middle East Forum (Philadelphia). His books include Arafat's War and Palestine Betrayed.*

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