

**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**  
**BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 69*

---

# Arab Imperialism: The Tragedy of the Middle East

Efraim Karsh

© The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies  
Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 52900, Israel  
<http://www.besacenter.org>  
ISSN 0793-1042  
August 2006

### **The Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies**

The BESA Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University was founded by Dr. Thomas O. Hecht, a Canadian Jewish community leader. The Center is dedicated to the memory of Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, who concluded the first Arab-Israeli peace agreement. The Center, a non-partisan and independent institute, seeks to contribute to the advancement of Middle East peace and security by conducting policy-relevant research on strategic subjects, particularly as they relate to the national security and foreign policy of Israel.

*Mideast Security and Policy Studies* serve as a forum for publication or re-publication of research conducted by BESA associates. Publication of a work by BESA signifies that it is deemed worthy of public consideration but does not imply endorsement of the author's views or conclusions. *BESA Colloquia on Strategy and Diplomacy* summarize the papers delivered at conferences and seminars held by the Center, for the academic, military, official and general publics. In sponsoring these discussions, the BESA Center aims to stimulate public debate on, and consideration of, contending approaches to problems of peace and war in the Middle East. *A listing of recent BESA publications can be found at the end of this booklet.*

### **International Advisory Board**

Founder of the Center and Chairman of the Advisory Board: Dr. Thomas O. Hecht  
Members: Prof. Moshe Arens, Mrs. Neri Bloomfield, Mrs. Madeleine Feher, Gen. Alexander M. Haig, Ms. Judy Ann Hecht, Ms. Marion Hecht, Mr. Robert Hecht, Prof. Riva Heft-Hecht, Hon. Shlomo Hillel, Sir Robert Rhodes James, Mr. Isi Leibler, Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, Mr. Robert K. Lifton, Maj. Gen. (res.) Daniel Matt, Rt. Hon. Brian Mulroney, Maj. Gen. (res.) Ori Orr, Mr. Seymour D. Reich, Amb. Meir Rosenne, Hon. Yitzhak Shamir, Lt. Gen. (res.) Dan Shomron, Amb. Zalman Shoval, Amb. Norman Spector, Mr. Muzi Wertheim

### **International Academic Advisory Board**

Desmond Ball *Australian National University*, Eliot A. Cohen *SAIS Johns Hopkins University*, Irwin Cotler *McGill University*, Steven R. David *Johns Hopkins University*, Yehezkel Dror *Hebrew University*, Lawrence Freedman *King's College*, Patrick James *University of Southern California*, Efraim Karsh *King's College*, Robert J. Lieber *Georgetown University*, Jasjit Singh *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*

### **Research Staff**

*BESA Center Director:* Prof. Efraim Inbar

*Senior Research Associates:* Dr. Zeev Bonen, Prof. Stuart A. Cohen, Dr. Gil Feiler, Dr. Jonathan Fox, Dr. Hillel Frisch, Prof. Eytan Gilboa, Dr. Rami Ginat, Eng. Aby Har-Even, Prof. Arye L. Hillman, Dr. Avi Kober, Dr. Zeev Maghen, Prof. Amikam Nachmani, Amb. Itzhak Oren, Maj. Gen. (res.) Avraham Rotem, Prof. Shmuel Sandler, Dr. Dany Shoham, Dr. Shlomo Shpiro, Dr. Max Singer, Prof. Gerald Steinberg

*Research Associates:* Dr. Tsilla Hershco, Dr. Mordechai Kedar, Dr. Jonathan Rynhold, Dr. Ron Schleifer

*Director of Public Affairs:* David Weinberg

*Program Coordinator:* Hava Waxman Koen

*Production Editor (English):* Tamara Sternlieb

*Production Editor (Hebrew):* Alona Briner Rozenman

## Introduction

Since the formation of the contemporary Middle East in the wake of World War I, its political life has been bedevilled by the doctrine of “Arab Nationalism,” which postulates the existence of “a single [Arab] nation bound by the common ties of language, religion and history... behind the facade of a multiplicity of sovereign states.” The territorial expanse of this supposed nation varies according to different exponents of the ideology, ranging from “merely” the Fertile Crescent to the entire territory “from the Zagros Mountains in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west, and from the Mediterranean shores and the Anatolian hills in the north to the Indian Ocean, the sources of the Nile, and the Great Desert in the south.”<sup>1</sup> But the unity of the Arabic-speaking populations inhabiting these vast territories is never questioned. In the words of the Palestinian academic Walid Khalidi: “In pan-Arab ideology, this Nation is actual, not potential. The manifest failure even to approximate unity does not negate the empirical reality of the Arab Nation. It merely adds normative and prescriptive dimensions to the ideology of pan-Arabism. The Arab Nation both *is*, and *should be*, one.”<sup>2</sup>

In reality, the term “Arab nationalism” is a misnomer. It does not represent a genuine national movement or ideal but is rather a euphemism for raw imperialism. There is not and never has there been an “Arab nation” and its invocation has been nothing but a clever ploy to rally popular support behind the quest for dated imperialist ambitions.

If a nation is a group of people sharing such attributes as common descent, language, culture, tradition, and history, then nationalism is the desire of such a group for self-determination in a specific territory

---

Efraim Karsh is Professor and Head of Mediterranean Studies at King’s College, the University of London. He has published extensively and has often served as consultant on Middle Eastern, Soviet, and international affairs. His books include *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (The Free Press, 1991), *The Gulf Conflict* (Princeton, 1993); *Fabricating Israeli History: The “New Historians”* (Cass, 1997); *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East 1789-1923* (Harvard, 1999); and *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (Yale, 2006).

that they consider to be their patrimony. The only common denominators among the widely diverse Arabic-speaking populations of the Middle East - the broad sharing of language and religion - are consequences of the early Islamic imperial epoch. But these common factors have generated no general sense of Arab solidarity, not to speak of deeply rooted sentiments of shared history, destiny, or attachment to an ancestral homeland. Even under universal Islamic empires from the Umayyad to the Ottoman, the Middle East's Arabic-speaking populations did not unify or come to regard themselves as a single nation: the various kingdoms and empires competed for regional mastery or developed in parallel with other cultures formally under the same imperial aegis.

Similarly Arabic, like other imperial languages such as English, Spanish, and French, has been widely assimilated by former subject populations who had little else in common. As Lawrence of Arabia, probably the most influential Western champion of pan-Arabism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, admitted in his later years: "Arab unity is a madman's notion - for this century or next, probably. English-speaking unity is a fair parallel."<sup>3</sup>

This dissonance between the reality of state nationalism and the dream of an empire packaged as a unified "Arab nation" has created a legacy of violence that has haunted the Middle East into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Incessant interventionism under the pretence of pan-Arab solidarity has had the effect of transforming the bilateral Palestinian-Israeli dispute into a multilateral Arab-Israeli conflict, thereby prolonging its duration, increasing its intensity, and making its resolution far more complex and tortuous. This interventionism, however, has been less motivated by a concern for the wellbeing of the Palestinian Arabs, let alone the protection of their national rights, than by an imperialist worldview rejecting the idea of Jewish encroachment on what was considered a part of the pan-Arab imperial patrimony. As Abdel Rahman Azzam, the first secretary-general of the Arab League, told Jewish officials who came to him in September 1947 to plead for peace: "We will try to rout you. I am not sure we will succeed, but we will try. We succeeded in expelling the Crusaders, but lost Spain and Persia, and may lose Palestine."<sup>4</sup>

### **Nationalism or Imperialism?**

According to the received wisdom, articulated most forcefully in George Antonius' *The Arab Awakening* (1938) and accepted at face value by generations of Western and Arab scholars, "Arab Nationalism" ensued in the mid-1850s in modest literary activity in Beirut, gained considerable momentum during the later years of Hamidian despotism (1876-1909) as increasing numbers of Arabs became disillusioned with Ottoman rule, and culminated in the "Great Arab Revolt," launched in June 1916 by Sharif Hussein of Mecca and his four sons, of the Hashemite family, which ended centuries of Ottoman oppression of the Arabs.<sup>5</sup>

Reality, however, was quite different. Unlike Turkey-in-Europe, where the rise of nationalism during the nineteenth century dealt a body blow to Ottoman imperialism, there was no nationalist fervor among the Ottoman Empire's Arabic-speaking subjects. One historian has credibly estimated that a mere 350 activists belonged to all the secret Arab societies operating throughout the Middle East at the outbreak of World War I, and most of them were not seeking actual Arab independence but rather greater autonomy within the Ottoman Empire.<sup>6</sup>

Neither did the "Great Arab Revolt" have anything to do with Arab national aspirations. Notwithstanding his pretense to represent "the whole of the Arab Nation without any exception,"<sup>7</sup> Hussein represented little more than himself as most of the Arabic-speaking Ottoman subjects remained loyal to their imperial master to the bitter end and shunned the revolt altogether. Between 100,000 and 300,000 of them even fought in the Ottoman army during the war. The minimal backing that Hussein received from a few neighboring tribes had far less to do with a yearning for independence than with the glitter of British gold and the promise of booty. Hussein could not even count on the support of his own local constituency. As late as December 1916, six months after the beginning of the revolt, the residents of Mecca were "almost pro-Turks,"<sup>8</sup> and it would not be before the winter of 1917 that the pendulum would start swinging in the Hashemite direction.

Just as the "Arab Nation" did not look to Hussein as their would-be

savior, so the Hashemites, for all their rhetoric of Arab independence, were no champions of national liberation but imperialist aspirants anxious to exploit a unique window of opportunity to substitute their own empire for that of the Ottomans. Hussein had demonstrated no nationalist sentiments prior to the war, when he had generally been considered a loyal Ottoman apparatchik; and neither he nor his sons changed in this respect during the revolt. They did not regard themselves as part of a wider Arab nation, bound together by a shared language, religion, history, or culture. Rather, they held themselves superior to those ignorant creatures whom they were “destined” to rule and educate. In the words of a senior British official who held several conversations with Hussein in January 1918: “Arabs as a whole have not asked him to be their king; but seeing how ignorant and disunited they are, how can this be expected of them until he is called?”<sup>9</sup>

What the Hashemites demanded of the postwar peace conference, then, was not self-determination for the Arabic-speaking subjects of the defunct Ottoman Empire but the formation of a successor empire, extending well beyond the predominantly Arabic-speaking territories and comprising such diverse ethnic and national groups as Turks, Armenians, Kurds, Greeks, Assyrians, Chechens, Circassians, and Jews. As Hussein told Lawrence of Arabia in the summer of 1917: “If advisable we will pursue the Turks to Constantinople and Erzurum - so why talk about Beirut, Aleppo, and Hailo?” His second son Abdullah, future founder of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, put it in similar terms when demanding that Britain abide by the vast territorial promises made to his father: “it was... up to the British government to see that the Arab kingdom is such as will make it a substitute for the Ottoman Empire.”<sup>10</sup>

This regal mindset was vividly illustrated by the frequent Hashemite allusions to Islamic imperial glory, rather than to national rights, which served as justifications for their territorial claims. Thus, for example, Hussein based his objection to British attempts to exclude Iraq from the prospective empire on the fact that “the Iraqi vilayets are parts of the pure Arab Kingdom, and were in fact the seat of its government in the time of Ali Ibn-Abu-Talib, and in the time of all the khalifs [caliphs] who succeeded him.” Similarly, Abdullah

rejected the French occupation of Syria not on the grounds that this territory had constituted an integral part of the “Arab homeland” but because it was inconceivable for the Umayyad capital of Damascus to become a French colony.<sup>11</sup>

When these grandiose ambitions failed to materialize in their full scope, the Hashemites quickly complained of being “robbed” of the fruits of victory promised to them during the war. (They were, as it happens, generously rewarded in the form of vast territories several times the size of the British Isles.) Thus arose the standard grievance leveled by Arab intellectuals and politicians at the Western powers, Britain in particular, and thus emerged the imperialist theory of pan-Arabism, with the avowed aim of redressing this grievance.

Substituting empire-building for national unity, successive pan-Arab ideologues and politicians have continued the region’s millenarian imperial tradition. At times the justification for Arab unification has been based on the more recent imperial past. The Iraqi case for the annexation of Kuwait in August 1990, for instance, was predicated on Kuwait at times having been part of the Ottoman velayet (province) of Basra. Baghdad presented the annexation as a rectification of a historic wrong (European disruption of the alleged unity of the Arab world in the wake of World War I) and claimed this event would “return the part and branch, Kuwait, to the whole root, Iraq.”<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Abu Khaldun Sati al-Husri, perhaps the foremost theoretician of pan-Arabism, lauded the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-70) as “one of the greatest [leaders] in modern Arab history, rivaled perhaps only by Muhammad Ali the Great of Egypt and Faisal I of the Arab Revolt.”<sup>13</sup> The trouble is, neither of these leaders was a nationalist: both were aspiring imperialists seeking to substitute their empires for that of the Ottomans. The Albanian Muhammad Ali did not even speak Arabic and did not identify himself as an Arab.

On some occasions, the invocation of former glories harks back to the distant pre-Islamic Arab past, but most commonly the origin of the “Arab nation” is traced to the advent of Islam and the earliest Arab and Islamic empires. This is not difficult to understand given that it was the Arabs who had revealed this religion to the world and had practiced it

for longer than anyone else. Indeed, the Hashemite claim to represent the “whole of the Arab Nation without exception,” and Britain’s willingness to acquiesce to it, were based on Hussein’s impressive religious credentials as a member of the Prophet’s family and custodian of Islam’s two holiest shrines.

### **Pan-Arabism and the Palestine Question**

It was indeed the Hashemite imperial dream that placed the “Palestine Question” on the pan-Arab political agenda as its most celebrated cause. To begin with, there was the claim that the territory was included in the prospective Arab empire promised to Hussein by Sir Arthur Henry McMahon, the High Commissioner for Egypt, in their wartime correspondence. Actually, McMahon excluded Palestine from such an empire, a fact already acknowledged by Hussein in their correspondence and by his illustrious son Faisal shortly after the war.<sup>14</sup> This nevertheless did not prevent successive generations of pan-Arabists and their Western champions from charging Britain with a shameless betrayal of its wartime pledges.

This claim received its initial firepower from the grandiose ambitions of Faisal and Abdullah. Already during the revolt against the Ottoman Empire, Faisal had begun toying with the idea of establishing his own Syrian empire, independent of his father’s prospective regional empire. In late 1917 and early 1918 he went so far as to negotiate this option with key members of the Ottoman leadership behind the backs of his father and his British allies. As his terms were rejected by the Ottomans, Faisal tried to gain great-power endorsement for his imperial dream by telling the postwar Paris Peace Conference that “Syria claimed her unity and her independence” and that the kingdom was “sufficiently advanced politically to manage her own internal affairs” if given adequate foreign and technical assistance.<sup>15</sup>

Faisal was not averse to courting the Zionist movement by way of promoting his Syrian ambitions. In January 1919, shortly before giving evidence to the peace conference, he signed an agreement with Chaim Weizmann, head of the Zionists, expressing support for “the fullest guarantees for carrying into effect the British Government’s Declaration

of 2 November 1917” and for the adoption of “all necessary measures... to encourage and stimulate immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale.”<sup>16</sup>

When his efforts to gain international recognition for his imperial dream came to naught, Faisal quickly reneged on this historic promise. On March 8, 1920, Faisal’s supporters crowned him King Faisal I of Syria, “within its natural boundaries, including Palestine,” and the newly installed monarch had no intention of allowing the Jewish national movement to wrest away any part of his kingdom. The coronation was followed by riots in Palestine as rumors spread regarding the country’s imminent annexation to Syria. These culminated in early April 1920 in a pogrom in Jerusalem in which five Jews were killed and more than two hundred were wounded.

Although Faisal was overthrown by the French in July 1920, his brief reign in Syria delineated the broad contours of the nascent Arab-Israeli conflict for decades to come. It did so by transforming a bilateral dispute between Arabs and Jews in Palestine into a pan-Arab-Jewish conflict, and, moreover, by making violence the primary instrument for opposing Jewish national aspirations. In May 1921 Arab riots claimed a far higher toll than they had in the whole of the previous year - some ninety dead and hundreds wounded. In the summer of 1929, another wave of violence resulted in the death of 133 Jews and the wounding of hundreds more.

Nor did Faisal abandon the “Greater Syrian” dream after his expulsion from Damascus. In his subsequent position as the first monarch of Iraq, he toiled ceaselessly to bring about the unification of the Fertile Crescent, including Palestine, under his rule. This policy was sustained, following Faisal’s untimely death in September 1933, by successive Iraqi leaders, notably by Prime Minister Nuri Said, who in 1943 published a detailed plan for pan-Arab unification which envisaged that “Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Transjordan shall be reunited into one state.”<sup>17</sup>

This scheme was vigorously opposed by Abdullah, who sought to transform the emirate of Transjordan, which he had ruled since the

spring of 1921, into a “Greater Syrian” empire comprising Syria, Palestine, and possibly Iraq and Saudi Arabia. He was to nurture this ambition until the late 1940s, when it was dealt a mortal blow by the establishment of the State of Israel and by the latter’s ability to withstand the pan-Arab assault of May 1948; and he never tired of reiterating his vision to whoever was prepared to listen. As late as May 11, 1948, three days before the proclamation of Israel and its subsequent invasion, Abdullah sought to convince the prominent Jewish leader Golda Meir to give up the idea of Jewish statehood. “Why are you in such a hurry to proclaim your state?” he asked. “Why don’t you wait a few years? I will take over the whole country and you will be represented in my parliament. I will treat you very well and there will be no war.” Meir’s categorical rejection of the idea failed to impress the king. Even as she was taking her leave, Abdullah repeated his request that she consider his offer, “and if the reply were affirmative, it had to be given before May 15.”<sup>18</sup>

The Arab states were no more amenable to Abdullah’s imperial dream than the Jews. In early December 1947, shortly after the UN General Assembly had decided to partition Palestine into two states - one Jewish, one Arab - the Arab League rejected Abdullah’s request for it to finance Transjordan’s occupation of Palestine.<sup>19</sup> This rejection, however, was less motivated by concern for the protection of the Palestinian Arabs than by the desire to block Abdullah’s incorporation of Palestine, or substantial parts of it, into his kingdom. Similarly, while the subsequent pan-Arab invasion of the newly proclaimed State of Israel in May 1948 superficially seemed to be a shining demonstration of pan-Arab solidarity, in reality, it was a wholesale “scramble for Palestine” in the classic imperialist tradition. Had the Jews lost the war, their territory would not have been handed over to the Palestinian Arabs. Rather, it would have been divided among the invading Arab forces, for the simple reason that none of the region’s Arab regimes viewed the Palestinians as a distinct nation and most of them had their own designs on this territory.

The eminent Arab-American historian Philip Hitti described the common Arab view to an Anglo-American commission of inquiry in 1946: “There is no such thing as Palestine in history, absolutely

not.”<sup>20</sup> A similar view was voiced by the Jerusalem newspaper *al-Wahda* (Unity), mouthpiece of the Arab Higher Committee, the effective “government” of the Palestinian Arabs, which in the summer of 1947 advocated the incorporation of Palestine (and Transjordan) into “Greater Syria.” So did Fawzi Qauqji, commander of the pan-Arab force that invaded Palestine in early 1948. He expressed the hope that the UN partition resolution of November 1947 “will oblige the Arab states to put aside their differences and will prepare the way for a greater Arab nation.” As late as 1974, Syrian President Hafez Assad still referred to Palestine as being “not only a part of the Arab homeland but a basic part of southern Syria”;<sup>21</sup> there is no evidence to suggest that he had changed his mind by the time of his death on June 10, 2000.

The British, who had ruled Palestine since the early 1920s under a League of Nations mandate, recognized this fact. As one official observed in mid-December 1947, “it does not appear that Arab Palestine will be an entity, but rather that the Arab countries will each claim a portion in return for their assistance [in the war against Israel], unless King Abdullah takes rapid and firm action as soon as the British withdrawal is completed.” For his part, the British high commissioner for Palestine informed the colonial secretary that “the most likely arrangement seems to be Eastern Galilee to Syria, Samaria and Hebron to Abdullah [sic], and the south to Egypt.”<sup>22</sup>

This observation proved prescient. Neither Egypt nor Jordan ever allowed Palestinian self-determination in the parts of Palestine conquered by them during the 1948 war. Upon occupying the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria, Abdullah moved quickly to erase all traces of corporate Palestinian identity. On April 4, 1950, the territory was formally annexed to Jordan, to be known henceforth as the West Bank (of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan). Its residents became Jordanian citizens, and they were increasingly integrated into the kingdom’s economic, political, and social structures. For its part, the Egyptian government showed no desire to annex the Gaza Strip but instead ruled the newly acquired area as an occupied military zone. This did not imply support of Palestinian nationalism, however, or of any sort of collective political awareness among the Palestinians. The

refugees were denied Egyptian citizenship and remained in squalid, harshly supervised camps as a means of tarnishing the image of Israel in the eyes of the West and arousing pan-Arab sentiments. "The Palestinians are useful to the Arab states as they are," President Nasser candidly responded to an enquiring Western reporter in 1956. "We will always see that they do not become too powerful. Can you imagine yet another nation on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean!"<sup>23</sup>

Nasser's total lack of empathy with the Palestinian tragedy was indicative of the wider Arab attitude. During the decades of Palestinian dispersal following the 1948 war, the Arab states manipulated the Palestinian national cause to their own ends. In Lebanon, long considered one of the Arab world's most "liberal" countries, the Palestinian experience has been one of marginalization, repression and armed violence. Not only have the Palestinians been denied citizenship for most part of their fifty-five-year exile, but they have been condemned to an inferior existence with little hope of social mobility. Tightly segregated from Lebanese society and prevented from any attempts at integration, they have been denied the right to property and land ownership, except by special permit, have been excluded from the educational system and no fewer than seventy-two professions, and subjected to strict travel and work restrictions. To make matters worse, the authorities have prevented the reconstruction and renovation of the refugee camps, thus leaving 150,000-200,000 people, about half the Palestinian population in Lebanon, in dilapidated and semi-destroyed camps designed to accommodate 50,000 refugees. In the 1998 words of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri (murdered seven years later by Syrian agents): "Lebanon will never, ever integrate the Palestinians."<sup>24</sup>

It is true that since the mid-1970s the oil rich Arab states have disbursed billions of dollars to the PLO's coffers, yet the bulk of this money was channeled to terrorist activities and private bank accounts of the organization's top brass rather than to the humanitarian needs of ordinary Palestinians. Nor have the Arab states ever committed their military and political resources to the Palestinian cause. On the contrary, since the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, far more

Palestinians have been killed at the hands of Arabs (and Palestinians) than by Israel. In the month of September 1970 alone, for example, King Hussein of Jordan, fighting off a PLO attempt to destroy his monarchy, dispatched thousands of Palestinians, many of them civilians - far more than the number of Palestinians killed during the three decades of Israel's control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (1967-97). The same is true of President Hafez Assad when the PLO stood in his way to subjugating Lebanon. In the summer of 1976, to mention a prominent example, some 3,500 Palestinians, mostly civilians, were slaughtered in the refugee camp of Tel Zaatar by Syrian-backed militias. Similarly, the number of innocent Palestinians murdered by their Kuwaiti hosts in the winter of 1991, in revenge for the PLO's support of Saddam Hussein's brutal occupation of Kuwait, far exceeds the number of Palestinian rioters and terrorists who lost their lives in the first *intifada* against Israel during the late 1980s.

### **Nasser's Imperial Dream**

As Hashemite ambitions faded away, following Abdullah's assassination in 1951 and the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy seven years later, the championship of the Arab imperial dream migrated to other leaders. Cairo became the standard bearer of a wider pan-Arab ideal. Egypt's sense of pan-Arabism had already manifested itself in the 1930s but it peaked in the mid-1950s with the rise to power of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

In Arab collective memory Nasser is fondly remembered as the ultimate champion of Arab nationalism, heroically standing up to the machinations of Western imperialism and its regional lackeys, Israel, the Iranian shah, and the "conservative" Arab regimes. In reality, he was an imperialist aspirant, cynically exploiting pan-Arab ideals for his self-serving goals. As he confided to a close friend at the end of 1953: "Formerly I believed neither in the Arabs nor in Arabism. Each time that you or someone else spoke to me of the Arabs, I laughed at what you said. But then I realized all the potential possessed by the Arab states! That is what made me change my mind."<sup>25</sup>

Like most Egyptians, Nasser's basic loyalties and affinities were

parochial and his knowledge of Arab life outside his own country, wholly derivative. He perceived the Arab world as an unpleasant amalgam of disparate groups and communities with little in common: "Iraqis are savage, the Lebanese venal and morally degenerate [‘I picture Beirut as being one big night club,’ he once told an American friend], the Saudis dirty, the Yemenis hopelessly backward and stupid, and the Syrians irresponsible, unreliable and treacherous."<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to his scathing opinion of his Arab peers, Nasser initially viewed Israel and Zionism with deep respect. During the 1948 war, while encircled with his unit in the southern village of Faluja, he struck up a close friendship with an Israeli liaison officer by the name of Yeroham Cohen. According to Cohen, in their conversations Nasser was highly appreciative of the Zionist success in terminating Britain’s presence in Palestine through a combined military and political struggle. He was also impressed by certain aspects of Israeli society, especially the kibbutzim and their “progressive” way of life. Showing little interest in other Arab states, Nasser argued that Egypt had yet to confront the formidable tasks of expelling the British and building a modern and progressive society.<sup>27</sup>

Years after the war, Nasser openly admitted to an American official that while he and his fellow officers had been “humiliated” by the Israelis during the 1948 war, their main grievance was directed “against our own superior officers, other Arabs, the British and the Israelis - in that order.”<sup>28</sup> “Britain is the main cause of the Palestine catastrophe,” he said in a public speech in Alexandria in December 1953. “The Arabs tend to forget this fact and blame Israel and the Jews, but they are afraid to acknowledge that Britain is the cause.”<sup>29</sup>

This benign disposition disappeared overnight when Nasser embraced the pan-Arab cause, as the Egyptian president recognized the immense potential of this doctrine and its most celebrated cause, the “Palestine Question,” for his domestic and international standing. “I do not think of myself as a leader of the Arab world,” he stated. “But the Arab peoples feel that what we do in Egypt reflects their collective hopes and aspirations.”<sup>30</sup>

This recalls Sharif Hussein's 1918 comment that although the Arabs as a whole had not asked him to be their king, he was the only one who stood sufficiently above his peers to become king of pan-Arabia. Though Nasser, unlike Hussein, did not frame his ambition in such blatantly personal terms but rather spoke about Egypt as the only entity capable of leading the Arabs, there is little doubt that he viewed himself as the personification of Egypt, personalizing the national interest and nationalizing his personal interest.

Even the cherished goal of Arab unification - a shibboleth of pan-Arabism - was no more than a tool to promote Nasser's imperial dream. For all his hyped rhetoric about unification's many virtues, Nasser would not tolerate such a development unless it was associated with his own leadership. When in the summer of 1961, following the proclamation of Kuwaiti independence, Iraq demanded the incorporation of the emirate into its territory on account of its having been a part of the Ottoman velayet of Basra, Nasser had no qualms about collaborating with the "reactionary regimes" in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which he had long been seeking to subvert, to prevent an Iraqi action against Kuwait. There was absolutely no way that he would allow Egypt's perennial rival to regional mastery to take any credit for advancing the ideal of pan-Arab unification.

When Nasser eventually established a union with Syria in February 1958, it entailed the imposition of Egypt's domination over Syria rather than a partnership between equals, with power and authority concentrated in Nasser's hands and in Cairo. Indeed, there is little doubt that the Egyptian-Syrian merger was not Nasser's ultimate ambition but rather a stepping stone on the way to the realization of his imperialist ambitions. The United Arab Republic (UAR), as the union was called, would bring together the entire Arab nation "whether they like it or not," he boasted shortly after unification, "Because this is the will of the Arab people." Indeed, the Egyptian weekly *Akhar Sa'a* published a map envisaging the newly established union after thirty years: Lebanon and Israel had disappeared as political entities, and the Arab world and portions of Black Africa were included within the shaded area of the new Egyptian empire.<sup>31</sup>

Given this imperious mindset, it is hardly surprising that when on September 28, 1961, a group of disgruntled Syrian officers mounted a coup and announced Syria's secession from the union, Nasser needed a new success to redeem his hitherto invincible image. As a large-scale intervention in the Yemeni civil war bogged down embarrassingly, Nasser returned to the Palestine Question in a desperate bid to revive his imperial dream. "Arab unity or the unity of the Arab action or the unity of the Arab goal is our way to the restoration of Palestine and the restoration of the rights of the people of Palestine," he argued. "Our path to Palestine will not be covered with a red carpet or with yellow sand. Our path to Palestine will be covered with blood."<sup>32</sup>

This threat was put to the test in early May 1967 by a Soviet warning of Israeli troop concentrations along the border with Syria, aimed at launching an immediate attack.<sup>33</sup> Though anxious to avoid a premature confrontation with Israel, as standard-bearer of the Arab imperial dream Nasser felt obliged to come to the rescue of a threatened Arab ally, tied to Egypt in a bilateral defense treaty. On May 14, the Egyptian armed forces were placed on the highest state of alert and two armored divisions began moving into the Sinai Peninsula, formally demilitarized since the 1956 Suez war. That same day, the Egyptian chief of staff, Lt.-General Muhammad Fawzi, arrived in Damascus to get a first-hand impression of the military situation and to coordinate a joint response in the event of an Israeli attack. To his surprise, Fawzi found no trace of Israeli concentrations along the Syrian border or troop movements in northern Israel. He reported these findings to his superiors, but this had no impact on the Egyptian move into Sinai, which continued apace. "From that point onward," Fawzi was to recall in his memoirs, "I began to believe that the issue of Israeli concentrations along the Syrian border was not... the only or the main cause of the military deployments which Egypt was undertaking with such haste."<sup>34</sup>

Within less than twenty-four hours, Nasser's objective had been transformed from the deterrence of an Israeli attack against Syria into an outright challenge to the status quo established in the wake of the 1956 war. With Fawzi's reassuring findings corroborated both by

Egyptian military intelligence and by a special UN inspection,<sup>35</sup> and the Israelis going out of their way to reassure the Soviets that they had not deployed forces along Israel's northern border, Nasser must have realized that there was no imminent threat to Syria. He could have halted his troops at that point and claimed a political victory, having deterred an (alleged) Israeli attack against Syria. But his resolute move had catapulted him yet again to a position of regional preeminence that he was loath to relinquish. At a stroke he had managed to undo one of Israel's foremost gains in the 1956 war - the de facto demilitarization of the Sinai Peninsula - without drawing a serious response from Jerusalem. Now that the Egyptian troops were massing in Sinai, Nasser decided to raise the ante and eliminate another humiliating remnant of that war, for which he had repeatedly been castigated by his rivals in the Arab world: the presence of a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) on Egyptian (but not on Israeli) territory as a buffer between the two states.

As the UN observers were quickly withdrawn and replaced by Egyptian forces, Nasser escalated his activities still further. Addressing Egyptian pilots in Sinai on May 22, he announced the closure of the Strait of Tiran, at the southern mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, to Israeli and Israel-bound shipping. "The Gulf of Aqaba constitutes our Egyptian territorial waters," he announced to the cheers of an ecstatic audience. "Under no circumstances will we allow the Israeli flag to pass through the Aqaba Gulf." The following day the Egyptian mass media broke the news to the entire world.

Did Nasser consider the possibility that his actions might lead to war? All the available evidence suggests that he did. Initially, when he briefly believed in the imminence of an Israeli attack against Syria, he could not have taken for granted that the Egyptian deployment in Sinai would have deterred such an action, in which case he would have been forced to come to Syria's defense. Moreover, the demilitarization of Sinai was seen by Israel as vital to its national security, which made its violation a legitimate *casus belli*. But Nasser was becoming rapidly entrapped by his imperialist ambitions. He had begun deploying his troops in Sinai out of fear that failure to do so would damage his pan-Arab position beyond repair. He kept on

escalating his activities, knowing full well that there was no threat of an Israeli attack against Syria, because of his conviction that the continuation of the crisis boosted his pan-Arab standing.

It is true that the lack of a prompt and decisive Israeli response to the Egyptian challenge, together with the quick realization that there were no Israeli concentrations along the Syrian border, might have convinced Nasser that the risks were not so great, and that war was not inevitable. Yet, when he decided to remove UNEF and to close the Strait of Tiran, Nasser undoubtedly knew that he was crossing the threshold from peace to war. "Now with our concentrations in Sinai, the chances of war are fifty-fifty," he told his cabinet on May 21, during a discussion on the possible consequences of a naval blockade. "But if we close the Strait, war will be a one hundred percent certainty."<sup>36</sup>

The closer Nasser came to the brink of combat, the more aggressive he became. "The Jews have threatened war," he gloated on May 23, "We tell them: you are welcome, we are ready for war." Four days later he took a big step forward, announcing that if hostilities were to break out, "our main objective will be the destruction of Israel." "Now that we have the situation as it was before 1956," Nasser proclaimed on another occasion, "Allah will certainly help us to restore the status quo of before 1948."<sup>37</sup>

Once again imperialist winds were blowing. The conflict was no longer about the presence of UN forces on Egyptian soil or freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba, let alone the alleged Israeli threat to Syria. It had been transformed into a jihad to eradicate the foremost "remnant of Western imperialism" in the Middle East. "During the crusaders' occupation, the Arabs waited seventy years before a suitable opportunity arose and they drove away the crusaders," Nasser said, presenting himself as the new Saladin. "Recently we felt that we are strong enough, that if we were to enter a battle with Israel, with God's help, we could triumph."<sup>38</sup>

Nasser's militancy was contagious. His former Arab rivals were standing in line to rally behind his banner. On the morning of May 30,

King Hussein, who had mocked Nasser at the beginning of the crisis for “hiding behind UNEF’s apron,” arrived in Cairo where he immediately signed a defense pact with Egypt. He returned to Amman later that day accompanied by Ahmad Shuqeiri, head of the PLO and hitherto one of the king’s archenemies. The following day an Egyptian general arrived in Amman to command the eastern front in the event of war. On June 4, Iraq followed suit by entering into a defense agreement with Egypt, and Nasser informed King Hussein that their pact now included Iraq as well. By this time, Arab expeditionary forces - including an Iraqi armored division, a Saudi and a Syrian brigade, and two Egyptian commando battalions - were making their way to Jordan.<sup>39</sup> The balance of forces, so it seemed to the Arabs, had irreversibly shifted in their favor. The moment of reckoning with the “Zionist entity,” as they pejoratively called Israel, had come. “Have your authorities considered all the factors involved and the consequences of the withdrawal of UNEF?” the commander of the UN force, General Indarjit Rikhye, asked the Egyptian officers bearing the official demand. “Oh yes sir! We have arrived at this decision after much deliberation and we are prepared for anything. If there is war, we shall next meet at Tel Aviv.”<sup>40</sup>

### **A False Start**

This was not to be. Instead of dealing Israel a mortal blow, Nasser saw his air force destroyed on the ground within three hours of the outbreak of hostilities on June 5, 1967, and his army crushed and expelled from Sinai over the next three days. As Syria, Jordan, and Iraq attacked Israel, their armies were similarly routed. By the time the war was over, after merely six days of fighting, Israel had extended its control over vast Arab territories about five times its own size, from the Suez Canal, to the Jordan River, to the Golan Heights.

On the face of it, Nasser remained as intransigent as ever. At an Arab League summit convened in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum between August 29 and September 1, 1967, to discuss the consequences of the defeat, he presided over the drawing-up of a militant final communiqué that underscored the Palestinians’ right to regain the whole of Palestine - that is, to destroy the State of Israel -

and spelled out what came to be known as the “Three Nos”: no negotiation, no recognition, and no peace with Israel. In private, however, Nasser recoiled from his imperial dream. He had always championed the pan-Arab cause, not out of belief in the existence of an Arab nation and its manifest destiny, but as a tool for self-aggrandizement. Now that his delusions of grandeur had backfired, his defiant public rhetoric became a mere fig leaf for an attempt to regain the Egyptian territories lost in the war.

This change of heart was illustrated as early as July 1967, when Nasser rejected a Syrian proposal to merge the two states on the grounds that the liberation of the occupied territories constituted a more pressing need than that of Arab unity.<sup>41</sup> For a person who had built himself into the living symbol of pan-Arab unity this was a major reordering of priorities. So was Nasser’s begrudging acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 22, 1967, which established the principle of “land for peace” as the cornerstone of future Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, accepted Israel’s right to a peaceful and secure existence, and left the door open to Israel’s retention of some land by requiring its withdrawal “from territories occupied in the recent conflict.” (The absence of the definite article “the” before “territories” - which, had it been included, would have required a *complete* Israeli withdrawal - was no accident and reflected the contemporary awareness, even on the part of the Soviet Union, the Arabs’ main patron, of the existential threat to Israel posed by its pre-1967 boundaries.)<sup>42</sup>

Yet it is doubtful whether this disillusionment would have resulted in a complete break with pan-Arabism had Nasser lived longer. About a month before his death on September 28, 1970, Nasser confided in King Hussein that since the Arabs were in no position to destroy Israel by force of arms in the foreseeable future, they should adopt a step-by-step strategy whereby to first regain the territories lost in the 1967 war before launching the final drive to total victory. “I believe that we now have a duty to remove the aggressor from our land and to regain the Arab territory occupied by the Israelis,” he said. “We can then engage in a clandestine struggle to liberate the land of Palestine, to liberate Haifa and Jaffa.”<sup>43</sup>

It was thus left to Nasser's successor to give the imperial dream a ceremonial burial. While paying homage to Nasser's pan-Arab legacy (in April 1971 he even announced the formation of an Egyptian-Syrian-Libyan federation), from his first moments in power, Anwar Sadat adopted an "Egypt first" approach, which subordinated pan-Arab considerations to the Egyptian national interest. In December 1970 he expressed his readiness to recognize Israel "as an independent state" within internationally agreed and secure borders on the basis of a complete withdrawal from Egyptian lands - not from the other Arab territories occupied in the 1967 war. Two months later, in a written response to the UN special envoy Gunnar Jarring, he confirmed that "Egypt will be ready to enter into a peace agreement with Israel" in return for a complete Israeli withdrawal from its territory, as well as the Gaza Strip.<sup>44</sup>

This is not to say that Sadat accepted the legitimacy of Israel, as opposed to merely recognizing the fact of its existence. His perception of peace at the time differed root and branch from the terms of the treaty he would sign toward the end of the decade. It precluded normal diplomatic relations even after the attainment of a comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict and demanded that Israel "put an end to immigration" and "cut its links with world Zionism."<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, Sadat broke the most sacred pan-Arab taboo by publicly acquiescing in the existence of a non-Arab political entity on what Arabs had unanimously held to be an integral part of their patrimony. Sadat did so not because of a yearning for peaceful coexistence with the Jewish state but because of a desire to break with the Arab imperial dream, which he viewed as detrimental to Egypt's national interest, unnecessarily draining Egypt's human and material resources and preventing it from addressing its own weighty problems.

Old habits die hard. When in September 1978, after thirteen days of tough bargaining at the US presidential retreat of Camp David, Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin signed agreements on the "Framework for Peace in the Middle East" and on the "Framework for the Conclusion of a Peace Treaty Between Egypt and Israel" (widely known as the Camp David Accords), many Arab states demanded a harsh retribution. This was carried into effect on March 27, 1979, a day

after the signing of an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. An Arab League summit in Baghdad severed diplomatic and political relations with Egypt, suspended its membership in the League, and moved the organization's headquarters from Cairo to Tunis. Egypt was also expelled from the League's associated economic institutions, funds, and organizations, and was subjected to a comprehensive economic boycott. By the late 1980s, however, Egypt had regained its focal role in the Arab world, with former detractors seeking its friendship and protection, without having renounced its peace treaty with Israel.

The single most important development contributing to this strategic shift was the advent of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979 and the eruption of the Iran-Iraq war a year later. Tehran's relentless commitment to the substitution of the existing status quo with its militant brand of Islamic order, its reluctance to end the war before the overthrow of the Ba'th regime in Baghdad, and its campaign of subversion and terrorism against the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf convinced these neighboring states that the danger of Iranian imperialism far exceeded the Israeli threat and that there was no adequate substitute for Egypt at the helm of the Arab world.

This apparent disillusionment gained further momentum during Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 with the aim of eliminating the PLO as an independent political actor, breaking the Syrian stranglehold over Lebanon, and installing a Christian-dominated regime in Beirut. On the face of it, such a development should have unified the Arabs against their Israeli nemesis. In reality, as on numerous past occasions, the latest Israeli-Palestinian confrontation only served to confirm the hollowness of pan-Arab solidarity since none of the Arab states moved to the rescue of the Palestinians. Even Syria, which was also on the receiving end of the Israeli invasion, failed to cooperate with the PLO and instead used the war as a means to make the Palestinian organization fully subservient to its will. When PLO chairman Yasser Arafat failed to play the role assigned to him by Assad, he was summarily expelled from Damascus and confronted with an armed revolt against his authority by pro-Syrian elements within the PLO.

The other Arab radicals were no more sympathetic to the Palestinians.

Libya's eccentric ruler Muammar Qaddafi urged them to martyr themselves in Beirut rather than evacuate the city. Saddam Hussein was even behind the attempt on the life of the Israeli ambassador in London, made by the then Baghdad-based Abu Nidal terrorist group, which sparked the Israeli invasion. Given the tyrannical nature of Saddam's regime, it is inconceivable that Abu Nidal could have carried out such an operation without his host's approval. It was also common knowledge at the time that any Palestinian attack on Israeli targets was bound to lead to a general conflagration. Israel had publicly announced its determination to remove the Palestinian military threat to its civilian population in the Galilee, and was impatiently looking for an excuse to make good on its promise.

As a result, Arafat saw no choice but to seek Egyptian protection. In December 1983, shortly after his second expulsion from Lebanon, Arafat arrived in Cairo for the first time in six years, for a dramatic meeting with President Hosni Mubarak, who succeeded Sadat in October 1981 following the latter's assassination. This was a diplomatic and public relations coup for Mubarak, and in subsequent years Egypt would increasingly become the PLO's main patron, shielding it from Syrian pressure and providing a vital channel to the US administration. This facilitated the PLO's 1988 acceptance of General Assembly Resolution 181 of November 29, 1947, calling for the creation of Jewish and Arab states in Palestine, as well as Security Council Resolution 242 of November 22, 1967.

The end of the Cold War and the consequent superpower collaboration delivered a body blow to the tottering Arab imperial dream. With Mikhail Gorbachev adopting an even-handed approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict in an attempt to turn Moscow into an impartial broker to both parties in the conflict, up to one million Soviet Jews expected to emigrate to Israel during the 1990s, and the East European regimes crumbling in a rapid succession, the Arab regimes concluded that the Middle East had been left to the mercy of the only remaining superpower, the United States, and its "lackeys" - first and foremost, Israel.

This gloomy assessment led to the further weakening of the Arab

militant camp, illustrated most vividly by the completion of Egypt's reincorporation into the mainstream of Arab politics. A circle had thus been closed. Within a decade of making peace with Israel, Egypt had regained its central place in the Arab world. Its policy, denounced by nearly every Arab chancellery in 1979, had become mainstream. The imperial dream, which like the legendary phoenix had risen time and again from the ashes of the 1967 defeat despite repeated battering, appeared to have been laid to rest at last. Or had it? Just as the Middle East seemed to be coming to terms with its diversity after one of the most violent decades in its modern history, it was yet again thrown into disarray. In the early morning hours of August 2, 1990, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait and within twelve hours had occupied the tiny emirate. Six days later Kuwait officially became Iraq's nineteenth province.

The invasion once again brought the old Middle Eastern skeletons out of the closet. Confronted with an unexpected regional and international backlash to his predatory move, Saddam invoked all of the slogans that had previously been used to inflame Arab sentiments. He was at once an ardent pan-Arabist and a pious Muslim, a champion of the Palestinian cause and modern-day Saladin, and a fellow native of the town of Tikrit. The occupation and annexation of Kuwait, Saddam insisted, had been done for the noblest of causes: to eliminate the "traces of colonialism" in the Middle East so as to expedite the unification of the Arab nation; to promote the liberation of Palestine and Jerusalem, Islam's third-holiest site, from Jewish-Zionist occupation; and to redistribute the mammoth Gulf wealth among the poor and needy Arabs.

These lofty claims had little to do with reality. The invasion of Kuwait was an outcome of Saddam's chronic political insecurity. Saddam was very much the creation of the imperial Arab dream of the 1950s and 1960s and the cruel Iraqi school in which he had learned to survive and defeat all opponents. His sense of insecurity reflected the internal hostility that his repressive government had generated, reinforced by a paranoid perception of being the singular target of hostile foreign powers. At the beginning of 1990, Saddam's anxiety was further aggravated by fear of the repercussions of the collapse of

communism in Eastern Europe for Iraq and - even more so - the severe economic difficulties resulting from the war with Iran. For nearly a year he pressured Kuwait to bail Iraq out of its economic predicament. He demanded that the emirate write off its wartime loans to Iraq, reduce its oil production quota to allow prices to rise, and give Iraq a handsome annual subsidy of some ten billion dollars. When the Kuwaitis failed to give in to his extortionist tactics, Saddam decided to invade.

During these long months of secret pressures, Saddam made no mention of Palestine or other pan-Arab themes. Once confronted with a firm international response, however, he immediately opted to “Zionize” the crisis. His “peace initiative,” as he called it, consisted of a comprehensive solution for “all issues of occupation, or the issues that have been depicted as occupation, in the entire region.” The first item on his list: “the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Israel from the occupied Arab territories in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon.” After this and other problems had been satisfactorily settled, he proclaimed, “an arrangement for the situation in Kuwait” could be reached.<sup>46</sup>

By linking his Kuwaiti venture to the Palestinian problem, Saddam aimed to portray himself as the champion of the pan-Arab cause. If, as he claimed, the “restoration of Kuwait to the motherland” was the first step toward “the liberation of Jerusalem,” how could any Arab leader be opposed to it? What is more, with the Arab world behind him, how could the Western powers think of opposing him by force of arms? As Saddam told Arafat, who came to Baghdad to express his support for the Iraqi invasion: “It’s obvious that as soon as I’m attacked I’ll attack Israel. Israeli involvement in the conflict will change everyone’s attitude in the Arab world, and the aggression against Iraq will be seen as an American-Zionist plot.”<sup>47</sup>

The problem with this logic was that the Arab states refused to play along. They dismissed Saddam’s “peace plan” as the ploy it obviously was and had no compunction about fighting alongside the West to liberate Kuwait. Nor did the anti-Iraq coalition collapse when Saddam, in a desperate bid to widen the conflict, fired thirty-nine

Scud missiles at Israel - a development cheered on by the Palestinians and by demonstrators in marginal states like Yemen but otherwise greeted with conspicuous calm by the proverbially restive Arab "street." There was, moreover, a tacit alliance of sorts between Israel and the Arab members of the anti-Iraq coalition: the Israelis kept the lowest profile possible, even refraining from retaliating against Iraq's missile attacks, while the Arabs highlighted the hollowness of Saddam's pan-Arab pretensions and participated in the war operations against Iraq. This would make it easier for the US to kick off the Madrid peace process shortly after the war.

The Americans were also aided in their peace efforts by the PLO's catastrophic decision to align itself with Saddam during the crisis. Arafat had been striving for decades to entangle the Arab states in a war with Israel on the Palestinians' behalf. Now that the most powerful Arab state was apparently prepared to place its massive war machine in the service of the Palestinian cause, the temptation was too great for Arafat to resist, even if the price was the sacrifice of the ruling Kuwaiti family, or the potential elimination of Kuwait as an independent state.

This folly cost the PLO dearly, as the Gulf monarchies suspended their financial support for the organization. Moreover, following the liberation of Kuwait, most of the 400,000 Palestinians who had been living and working in the emirate were expelled, creating a major humanitarian crisis and denying the PLO the substantial income regularly received from the earnings of those workers. With the additional loss of funds and investments in Kuwaiti banks, the total amount forfeited by the PLO as a direct result of the Gulf crisis exceeded ten billion dollars, bringing the organization to the verge of bankruptcy.<sup>48</sup>

Starved of financial resources, ostracized by its Arab peers, and increasingly overpowered in the West Bank and Gaza by the Hamas militant Islamic movement, the PLO was desperate for political rehabilitation (in an Arab League summit in mid-1991, the organization was not even allowed to raise the Palestinian issue) - and Arafat for a personal comeback. Fortunately for Arafat, a lifeline was suddenly offered from the least expected source: the Israeli

government headed by Yitzhak Rabin and the Oslo accords. According to the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangement (DOP), signed on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993, the Palestinian residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were to be granted autonomy for a transitional period of up to five years, during which Israel and the Palestinians would negotiate a permanent peace settlement. During this period the territories would be administered by a Palestinian council, to be freely and democratically elected after the withdrawal of Israeli military forces both from the Gaza Strip and from the populated areas of the West Bank.

With the subsidence of the initial euphoria it gradually transpired that for Arafat and the PLO leadership the Oslo process had been a strategic means not to a two-state solution - Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza - but to the substitution of a Palestinian state for the State of Israel. Reluctant to accept the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in its ancestral homeland, they viewed Israel as an artificial alien entity created by Western imperialism, and implanted in the midst of the Arab world in order to divide and weaken it. This linked the Palestinian problem to the Arab imperial dream and transformed it into something far more profound than an ordinary territorial dispute between two parties: a Manichean struggle between the "Arab Nation" and the "neo-crusading entity." In Arafat's words:

Our ancestors fought the crusaders for a hundred years, and later Ottoman imperialism, then British and French imperialism for years and years. It is our duty to take over the banner of struggle from them and hand it on untarnished and flying as proudly as ever to the generations that come after us. We shall never commit a crime against them, the crime of permitting the existence of a racist state in the heart of the Arab world.<sup>49</sup>

As early as August 1968, Arafat had defined the PLO's strategic objective as "the transfer of all resistance bases" into the West Bank

and the Gaza Strip, occupied by Israel during the June 1967 war, “so that the resistance may be gradually transformed into a popular armed revolution.” This, he reasoned, would allow the PLO to undermine Israel’s way of life by “preventing immigration and encouraging emigration... destroying tourism... weakening the Israeli economy and diverting the greater part of it to security requirements... [and] creating and maintaining an atmosphere of strain and anxiety that will force the Zionists to realize that it is impossible for them to live in Israel.”<sup>50</sup>

The Oslo accords enabled the PLO to achieve in one fell swoop what it had failed to attain through many years of violence and terrorism. Here was Israel, just over a decade after destroying the PLO’s military infrastructure in Lebanon, asking the Palestinian organization, at one of the lowest ebbs in its history, to establish a real political and military presence - not in a neighboring Arab country but right on its doorstep. Israel was even prepared to arm thousands of (hopefully reformed) terrorists who would be incorporated into newly established police and security forces charged with asserting the PLO’s authority throughout the territories. As the prominent PLO leader Faisal Husseini famously quipped, Israel was willingly introducing into its midst a “Trojan Horse” designed to promote the PLO’s strategic goal of a “Palestine from the [Jordan] river to the [Mediterranean] sea” - that is, a Palestine in place of Israel.<sup>51</sup>

Arafat testified as much as early as September 13, 1993, when he told the Palestinian people, in a pre-recorded Arabic-language message broadcast by Jordanian television at about the same time as the peace treaty-signing ceremony was taking place on the White House lawn, that the DOP was merely part of the implementation of the PLO’s “phased strategy” of June 1974. This stipulated that the Palestinians should seize whatever territory Israel was prepared or compelled to cede to them and use it as a springboard for further territorial gains until achieving the “complete liberation of Palestine.”<sup>52</sup>

During the next seven years, until the September 2000 launch of his terrorist war, euphemistically titled the “al-Aqsa Intifada” after the mosque in Jerusalem, Arafat would play an intricate game of Jekyll-

and-Hyde politics. Whenever addressing Israeli or Western audiences he would habitually extol the “peace of the brave” he had signed with “my partner Yitzhak Rabin,” while at the same time denigrating the peace accords to the Palestinians as a temporary measure to be abandoned at the first available opportunity, and indoctrinating his people, and especially the youth, with an abiding hatred of the state of Israel, Jews, and Judaism.

Nor did Arafat confine himself merely to disparaging the Oslo accords and his peace partner. From the moment of his arrival in Gaza in July 1994, he set out to build an extensive terrorist infrastructure in flagrant violation of the accords, and in total disregard for the overriding reason that he had been brought to the territories, namely, to lay the groundwork for Palestinian statehood. Arafat refused to disarm the militant religious groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad as required by the treaties and tacitly approved the murder of hundreds of Israelis by these groups. He created a far larger Palestinian army (the so-called police force) than was permitted by the accords. He reconstructed the PLO’s old terrorist apparatus, mainly under the auspices of the Tanzim, which is the military arm of Fatah (the PLO’s largest constituent organization and Arafat’s own alma mater). He frantically acquired prohibited weapons with large sums of money donated to the Palestinian Authority by the international community for the benefit of the civilian Palestinian population and, eventually, resorted to outright mass violence. He did so for the first time in September 1996 to publicly discredit the newly elected Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and then again in September 2000 with the launch of his war of terror shortly after Netanyahu’s successor, Ehud Barak, had offered the creation of an independent Palestinian state in 92 percent of the West Bank and the entire Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

What made Arafat’s war all the more significant for the future of the Middle East was not the fact of its occurrence or even its exceptional ferocity, but rather the response of the Arab states. Notwithstanding the general loathing of Arafat by his Arab peers (he had been persona non grata in Syria since the early 1980s and in the Gulf states after the 1990-91 Gulf crisis, while President Mubarak addressed him as a

“dog” at a public event that was covered worldwide), none of these leaders dared voice public criticism of Arafat’s actions despite their private disapproval. Instead, all of them without exception, including Egypt and Jordan - the two Arab states at peace with Israel - unequivocally blamed the Jewish state for the violent outburst.

This position, however, had far less to do with sympathy for the Palestinian struggle than with the continued resilience of the imperial dream. None of the Arab states took concrete measures to help the Palestinian struggle, with the partial exception of Saddam Hussein, who remunerated families of suicide bombers to the tune of \$25,000. Yet as before, anti-Zionism proved the main common denominator of pan-Arab solidarity and its most effective rallying cry, thus underscoring Arab reluctance to accept the legitimacy of a non-Arab state on part of the Arab imperial patrimony.

Peace, according to the great seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, is not merely the absence of war but rather a state of mind: a disposition to benevolence, confidence, and justice. From the birth of the Jewish national movement, that disposition has remained conspicuously absent from the minds of Arab and Palestinian leaders. Even Anwar Sadat, the man who went farther than any other Middle Eastern leader in accepting the existence of a sovereign Jewish state, could tell his foreign minister during the Camp David summit of September 1978, a few days before concluding his historic agreement with Prime Minister Begin, that “we are dealing with the lowest and meanest of enemies. The Jews even tormented their Prophet Moses, and exasperated their God.”<sup>53</sup> While one can only speculate about Sadat’s own ultimate intentions - he was assassinated in October 1981 by a religious zealot - there is little doubt that his successor, Hosni Mubarak, has never had any desire to transform the formal Egyptian peace with Israel into a genuine reconciliation. For Mubarak, peace is of no value in and of itself; rather, it is the price Egypt has had to pay for such substantial benefits as US economic and military aid. As he candidly explained the nature of the Egyptian-Israeli peace:

Against us stood the most intelligent people on earth -  
a people that controls the international press, the world

economy, and world finances. We succeeded in compelling the Jews to do what we wanted; we received all our land back, up to the last grain of sand! We have outwitted them, and what have we given them in return? A piece of paper!... We were shrewder than the shrewdest people on earth! We managed to hamper their steps in every direction. We have established sophisticated machinery to control and limit to the minimum contacts with the Jews. We have proven that making peace with Israel does not entail Jewish domination and that there is no obligation to develop relations with Israel beyond those we desire.<sup>54</sup>

Over the decades, Mubarak has reduced interaction with Israel to the minimum level, while simultaneously transforming the Egyptian army into a formidable modern force. He has also fostered a culture of virulent anti-Semitism in Egypt, a culture whose premises he himself evidently shares, turning his country into the world's most prolific producer of anti-Semitic ideas and attitudes. These are voiced openly by the militant religious press, by the establishment media, and even by supporters of peace with Israel. In countless articles, scholarly writings, books, cartoons, public statements, and radio and television programs, Jews are painted in the blackest terms imaginable.

The traditional "blood libel," that medieval fabrication according to which Jews use Gentile blood, and particularly the blood of children, for ritual purposes, is still in wide circulation in today's Egypt, together with a string of other canards whose tenor may be glimpsed in the title of an 1890 tract recently reprinted by the Egyptian Ministry of Education, *Human Sacrifice in the Talmud*. Jews have been accused of everything from exporting infected seeds, plants, and cattle in order to destroy Egyptian agriculture, to corrupting Egyptian society through the spread of venereal diseases and the distribution of drugs. Similarly popular are *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a virulent anti-Semitic tract fabricated by the Russian secret police at the turn of the twentieth century, which may be in wider circulation in Egypt than anywhere else in the world. In 2002, during the holy month of Ramadan, the state-controlled Egyptian television ran a drama series

based on the *Protocols*. A few months later, a copy of the *Protocols* was saliently displayed alongside a Torah scroll in an exhibition at the new Alexandria Library.

This is the view of “peaceful coexistence” as practiced by the largest and most powerful Arab state, which has been at peace with Israel for nearly three decades. It is hardly surprising, then, if other Arab players, with the partial exception of Jordan, have similarly never felt the need to acknowledge the Jewish state’s legitimacy, and have declined even the most tempting offers in exchange for normalized relations. Four successive Israeli prime ministers, from Yitzhak Rabin to Ehud Barak, were willing to return the Golan Heights to Syria in exchange for peace. Hafez Assad rejected every proposal. He did so not because of petty squabbles over a few hundred yards of territory around Lake Tiberias, as was widely believed at the time, but because of a fundamental reluctance to acquiesce formally in the very existence of the “neo-crusader state,” whose fate, Assad never tired of reiterating, would eventually be that of the medieval crusader kingdom before it. “I regret to say that some of us, as Arab citizens, are seeking the shortest, easiest, and least difficult roads, which at the same time are the most prone to failure,” lamented the Syrian president, whose office was adorned with a huge picture of Saladin.

We view the matter from the perspective of the future of the nation and not that of the next few hours, months, or years in which we shall live... If we, as a generation, fail to do and to achieve what must be done, there will be future generations that will deal with this issue in the proper manner... What I am saying here is not new. I am just reviewing some facts in our history. Let us go back to the crusaders’ invasion. Although they fought us for two hundred years, we did not surrender or capitulate. They, too, were a big power and had scored victories, while we had been defeated. After two hundred years, however, we triumphed. Why are we now expected either to score a decisive victory in approximately thirty years or completely surrender?<sup>55</sup>

## **Epilogue**

With the image of the Arab-Israeli conflict transformed over the past few decades from a territorial dispute between two national movements into a struggle by an indigenous population against a foreign colonial invader, Israel's very existence has come to be seen as the source of the Middle East's endemic violence if not the foremost threat to world security. Such views are not confined to the Arab and Muslim worlds, where Israel and Jews more generally are routinely blamed for virtually all of the world's ills - from the spread of avian flu, to the bombing of Shiite mosques in Iraq, to the 9/11 attacks - but have become commonplace among western audiences and received international codification in the UN's 1975 resolution declaring Zionism "a form of racism and racial discrimination" and the equally infamous Durban 2001 resolutions.

As shown by this paper, these views are not only detached from reality but are the complete inversion of the truth. If there has indeed been an imperialist aspect to the Arab-Israeli conflict, underlying its advent and ensuring its perpetuation, it should be sought on the Arab rather than the Israeli side. Not only does the Jewish people hold the longest title deed to Palestine, based as it is on uninterrupted presence in the country from biblical times to the present day, often against the most incredible odds, but it was the Arab imperial dream that sparked the conflict as early as 1920 and has fanned the conflict's flames ever since. Only when this imperialist mindset is banished from the Middle East's political scene and replaced by general acceptance of the region's diversity, only when the Arabic-speaking populations of the Middle East stop imagining themselves as "Arabs" and acknowledge their distinct nationalisms (Palestinian, Syrian, Egyptian, and so on), can the inhabitants of the Middle East look forward to a better future.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Abu Khaldun Sati al-Husri, *al-Uruba Awalun* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm li-l-Malain, 1955), pp. 11-13; Walid Khalidi, "Thinking the Unthinkable: A Sovereign Palestinian State", *Foreign Affairs*, July 1978, pp. 695-96; Hisham Sharabi, *Nationalism and Revolution in the Arab World* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1966), pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Khalidi, "Thinking the Unthinkable", pp. 695-96.

<sup>3</sup> T.E. Lawrence to his Biographers Robert Graves and Liddell Hart (London: Cassell, 1963), p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Aharon Cohen, *Israel and the Arab World* (London: W. H. Allen, 1970), p. 381.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Amin Said, *al-Thawra al-Arabiyya al-Kubra* (Cairo: Isa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1951); Suleiman Musa, *al-Haraka al-Arabiyya: Sirat al-Marhala al-Ula li-l-Nahda al-Arabiyya al-Haditha, 1908-1924* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1970); Zaki Hazem Nuseibeh, *The Ideas of Arab Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1956); Zeine N. Zeine, *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism with a Background Study of Arab-Turkish Relations in the Near East*, 2nd. rev. ed. (Beirut: Khayat's, 1966); George Kirk, *A Short History of the Middle East: from the Rise of Islam to Modern Times* (London: Methuen, 1961), Chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup> Eliezer Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), Chapter 28.

<sup>7</sup> "Correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon, His Majesty's High Commissioner at Cairo, and the Sherif of Mecca July 1915 - March 1916, presented by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Parliament by Command of His Majesty", Cmd. 5957, London, 1939, p. 3 (hereafter "Hussein-McMahon Correspondence").

<sup>8</sup> "Intelligence Report", December 28, 1916, FO 686/6, p. 176; *Arab Bulletin*, June 23, 1916, p. 47 and February 6, 1917, pp. 57-58, FO 882/25; McMahon to Grey, October 20, 1915, FO 371/2486/154423.

<sup>9</sup> David Hogarth, "Mission to King Hussein", *Arab Bulletin*, January 27, 1918, pp. 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence, July 30, 1917, FO 686/8; Mark Sykes, "Notes on Conversations with the Emirs Abdullah and Faisal", May 1, 1917, FO 882/16, p. 233.

<sup>11</sup> Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, p. 10; Munib Madi and Suleiman Musa, *Ta'rikh al-Urdunn fi-l-Qarn al-Ishrin* (Amman: Maktabat al-Muhtasab, 1959), pp. 132-36.

<sup>12</sup> *Baghdad Radio*, August 8, 1990; *Iraqi News Agency*, August 28, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Abu Khaldun [Sati] al-Husri, review of Anthony Nutting's *Nasser*, *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, Winter 1972, p. 135.

<sup>14</sup> Hussein's letter of November 5, 1915, Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, p. 8; McMahon's letter of December 14, 1915, *ibid.*, pp. 11-12; CO 732/3, fol. 366.

<sup>15</sup> "Secretary's Notes of a Conversation Held in M. Pichon's Room at the Quai d'Orsay, Paris, on Thursday, 6 February 1919, at 3 p.m.", *Foreign Relations of the United States - Peace Conference*, Vol. 3, pp. 889, 890, 892.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Laqueur (ed.), *The Israel-Arab Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 37.

- <sup>17</sup> Nuri Said, *Arab Independence and Unity: A Note on the Arab Cause with Particular Reference to Palestine, and Suggestions for a Permanent Settlement to which are attached Texts of all the Relevant Documents* (Baghdad, 1943), p. 11.
- <sup>18</sup> Golda Meir's verbal report to the Provisional State Council on May 12, 1948, Israel State Archives, *Provisional State Council: Protocols, 18 April - 13 May 1948* (Jerusalem, 1978), p. 40.
- <sup>19</sup> Haza al-Majali, *Mudhakkirati* (Amman: n.p., 1960), pp. 63-64.
- <sup>20</sup> Hearing before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, Washington, D.C., State Department, January 11, 1946, Central Zionist Archive (Jerusalem), V/9960/g, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>21</sup> *New York Times*, August 25, 1947 and January 19, 1948; *Damascus Radio*, March 8, 1974.
- <sup>22</sup> "Fortnightly Intelligence Newsletter No. 57, issued by HQ British Troops in Palestine for the period 6 Dec - 18 Dec 1947", WO 275/64, p. 2.
- <sup>23</sup> John Laffin, *The PLO Connections* (London: Corgi Books, 1983), p. 127.
- <sup>24</sup> Simon Haddad, "Palestinians in Lebanon: Towards Integration or Conflict?" in <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/MEPP/PRRN/papers/haddad.html#The%20Palestinian%20Community%20in%20Lebanon>.
- <sup>25</sup> Jean Lacouture, *Nasser: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1973), pp. 183-84.
- <sup>26</sup> Miles Copeland, *The Games of Nations* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), pp. 56-57; Nejla Abu Izzedin, *Nasser of the Arabs: An Arab Assessment* (London: Third World Centre, 1981), p. 327; Lacouture, *Nasser*, pp. 190, 386.
- <sup>27</sup> Yeroham Cohen, *Leor Hayom Uvamahshah* (Tel Aviv: Amikam, 1969), pp. 212-13.
- <sup>28</sup> Copeland, *The Games of Nations*, p. 56.
- <sup>29</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser, *Filastin* (Cairo: Maslahat al-Isti'lamat, 1964), p. 11.
- <sup>30</sup> *Look Magazine*, June 14, 1957.
- <sup>31</sup> Akhar Sa'a, March 12, 1958, as quoted in Keith Wheelock, *Nasser's New Egypt* (London: Stevens, 1960), p. 262.
- <sup>32</sup> *President Gamal Abdel Nasser's Pre-Election Speeches in Asiut, Minia, Shebin el Kom, Mansura* (Cairo: Information Ministry, 1965), pp. 28-29, 68.
- <sup>33</sup> Anwar Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 171-72; *al-Ahram*, May 23, 1967.
- <sup>34</sup> Muhammad Fawzi, *Harb al-Thalath Sanawat, 1967-1970* (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, 1980), pp. 71-72.
- <sup>35</sup> Abdel Muhsin Kamel Murtagi, *al-Fariq Murtagi Yarwi al-Haqa'iq: Qaid Jabhat Sinai fi Harb 1967* (Cairo: Dar al-Watan al-Arabi, 1976), p. 64; Indar Jit Rikhye, *The Sinai Blunder* (London: Cass, 1980), pp. 11-12.
- <sup>36</sup> Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, p. 172.
- <sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, May 27 and 30, 1967.
- <sup>38</sup> Nasser's speech to Arab trade unionists, May 26, 1967, in Laqueur, *The Israel-Arab Reader*, pp. 215-18.
- <sup>39</sup> Samir A. Mutawi, *Jordan in the 1967 War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 11-12; Moshe Dayan, *Story of My Life* (London: Sphere Books, 1978), p. 314.

<sup>40</sup> Rikhye, *The Sinai Blunder*, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Mahmoud Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East* (London: Quartet, 1981), p. 48.

<sup>42</sup> For Soviet acceptance of the need for Israel's retention of some of the territories occupied during the 1967 war see, for example: *Pravda*, February 18, June 6, 21, August 19, 1968; *Izvestiya*, February 2, 1968.

<sup>43</sup> Abdel Magid Farid, *Nasser: The Final Years* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1994), p. 202. Farid served as secretary-general of the Egyptian presidency for eleven years until 1970.

<sup>44</sup> *New York Times*, December 28, 1970; Arab Republic of Egypt, *White Paper on the Peace Initiatives Undertaken by President Anwar Sadat [1971 - 77]* (Cairo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.), pp. 5-16; "UN Document S/10070/Add. 2", March 5, 1971.

<sup>45</sup> *New York Times*, December 28, 1970; Mohamed Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (London: Fontana, 1976), p. 206.

<sup>46</sup> E. Lauterpacht, C. J. Greenwood, M. Weller, and D. Bethlehem (eds.), *The Kuwait Crisis: Basic Documents* (Cambridge: Grotius Publications, 1991), p. 281.

<sup>47</sup> Pierre Salinger and Eric Laurent, *Secret Dossier: The Hidden Agenda behind the Gulf War* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 160.

<sup>48</sup> *New York Times*, March 16, 1991; "A New Beginning", *US News & World Report*, September 13, 1993, p. 30.

<sup>49</sup> Arafat's interview with *al-Anwar* (Beirut), August 2, 1968.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Al-Arabi* (Cairo), June 24, 2001.

<sup>52</sup> "Political Program for the Present Stage Drawn up by the 12th PNC, Cairo, June 9, 1974", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Summer 1974, pp. 224-25.

<sup>53</sup> Muhammad Ibrahim Kamel, *The Camp David Accords* (London: KPI, 1986), p. 321.

<sup>54</sup> Ephraim Dowek, *Israeli-Egyptian Relations 1980-2000* (London: Cass, 2001), pp. 120-21.

<sup>55</sup> *Damascus Radio*, December 13, 1981.