



PERSPECTIVES

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Mahmoud Abbas's Speech: Who Was the Real Audience?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Mahmoud Abbas's blatantly skewed account of the nature of Zionism and the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict should bring Israel's policymakers and opinion shapers to enunciate anew the story they tell their own people and the world at large.

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas's speech at the January 14 meeting of the PLO's Central Council lasted two hours. Apart from the phrase "May your house be destroyed," which became the headline for the speech, Abbas's "historical" survey of the chronicle of Zionism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has drawn most of the Israeli criticism. According to Prime Minister Netanyahu, the survey underscored the root of the conflict: "The Palestinians' rejection of the existence of a Jewish state in any borders."

For the Palestinians, too, particularly the younger among them, much of the speech must have sounded like a tiresome history lesson. Yet political speeches of this kind often have more than one audience in mind. In this case, Israeli society with its various factions and leaders, along with the international community, was the main audience. Appealing to fashionable legal and moral fads, particularly in Western Europe, Abbas again set forth the supposedly problematic aspects of Zionism. His "historical survey" undoubtedly fails the minimum test of facts, but it is uncritically accepted in many circles. This poses a real challenge to Israeli policymakers and opinion shapers.

By every historical account, the Zionist revolution – the incredible ingathering of the exiles and the establishment of the flourishing and highly successful state of Israel – is a unique and unprecedented phenomenon. Those who insist on viewing it as yet another immigration wave among the 20th century global population movements fail to grasp the real nature of this revolution. In this

respect, Abbas touched the key issue that, in his eyes, made the Palestinians the main victim of Zionism: if the Jews yearn for a safe haven, and the international community wants to provide them with one, why does it have to be in Palestine, at the Palestinians' expense?

Of all the leaders of the Zionist movement, it was Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, who dealt most extensively with the kinds of claims made by Abbas. Below are several passages from Abbas's address followed by statements by Ben-Gurion on the same topic.

Abbas: "How did the problem in our region begin? They talk about the Balfour Declaration, promulgated a hundred years ago. They criticize us – why do we talk about something that happened a hundred years ago? And we say: 'We will keep talking about the declaration until Britain apologizes and recognizes a Palestinian state'."

Ben-Gurion: "Our right to the Land of Israel does not stem from the Mandate and the Balfour Declaration. It precedes those. The Bible is our mandate... I can state in the name of the Jewish People: The Bible is our mandate, the Bible that was written by us in our Hebrew language, and in this land itself, is our mandate. Our historical right has existed since our beginnings as the Jewish People, and the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate recognize and confirm that right" (testimony to the Peel Royal Commission, January 1937, *Bama'archa*, vol. 1, pp. 77-78).

"A homeland is not given as a gift and is not acquired by means of political rights and contracts. It is not purchased with gold and is not conquered by force, but is built with sweat. This homeland is a historical creation and a collective endeavor of a people, the fruit of its physical, spiritual, and moral labor down through the generations. ... The Land of Israel will be ours not when the Turks, the English, or the next peace conference agrees to it, and it is undersigned in a diplomatic treaty – but when we, the Jews, build it. We will not attain the real, true, and lasting right to the land from others, but from our labor. For the Land of Israel to be ours, we must build it; the mission of our revival movement is the building of the land" (New York, September 1915, *Mema'amad Le'am*, p. 10).

Abbas: "The Egyptian thinker Abd al-Wahab al-Masri described the Zionist entity in this way: 'The goal of Israel's creation is to establish a colonial state that has no connection to Judaism' - that is, it exploits the Jews to its end."

Ben-Gurion: "The Jewish religion is a national religion, and it encapsulates all the historical experiences of the People Israel from its inception to the present;

hence it is not easy to distinguish between the national side and the religious side" (*Kochavim Ve'afar*, p. 128).

"Zionism is a faithful striving for the eternity of Israel, and in these years the eternity of Israel is embodied in the state of Israel and in the Book of Books" (*Kochavim Ve'afar*, p. 155).

"Zionism – as the faith of the People Israel down through the generations – determined that the Land of Israel would solve the 'question of the Jews' in its entirety. Not a partial solution for a people, and not a solution for part of the people, but a full solution for an entire people. That is, for every Jew who needs and desires to live in the ancestral homeland... The People of Israel never believed in a duality of matter and spirit. Without the physical presence of the people in the land, its spiritual presence will not be built. The spiritual center of the Jewish People can exist only in the worldly center" (Speech to the 20th Zionist Congress, August 1937, *Bama'archa*, vol. 1, p. 238).

"The state of Israel is the fruit of the vision of the Jewish People's redemption down through the generations... and with the establishment of the state, the redemption vision was not realized. Because the overwhelming majority of the Jewish People are still dispersed among the nations, and the Jewish state is still not the fulfillment of the Jewish redemption, it is only the main tool and means to its redemption" (*Kochavim Ve'afar*, p. 92).

Abbas: "Herzl was an educated person who dealt with theater and poetry and did not have a connection to the Zionist story. He dealt with the issue only because the Jewish question began to arise in Europe. The Jews were desperate because of general problems and a crisis within their communities, not because of their religion."

Ben-Gurion: "From a Jewish standpoint Zionism is not just a flight from persecution and restrictive laws, but primarily love of a homeland and a vision of the rise of a nation-state. Our Zionism is composed of a national ideology, a feeling of love for the land, an aspiration to political independence. And of a desire and a need to settle in the Land of Israel. Take away from Zionism the hundreds-years-long love for the ancestral homeland, take away from Zionism the political aspiration to independence – and Zionism is emptied of its content" (*Bama'archa*, vol. 2, p. 48).

"The definition of Zionism's 'ultimate goal' is nothing but the full and complete redemption of the People Israel in its land, the ingathering of the exiles, national sovereignty" (February 1937, *Bama'archa*, vol. 1, p. 190).

“What happened in the Land of Israel last year, what is happening every day to the Jews of Yemen, casts a cruel light on the chances for the ‘spiritual center’ of a Jewish minority in an Arab environment. But some of the champions of ‘the majority’ and the Jewish state, too, distort the true content of Zionism. A Jewish majority – is that indeed the goal? Let’s assume that there are a million Arabs in the country. Do a million-plus-one Jews constitute a solution for the question of the Jewish People? The realization of Zionism does not depend on the number of non-Jews in the country – but on the number of Jews who have the ability and the desire to settle there. It is not the number of non-Jews that is decisive – it is the desire and the need of the Jewish People and the capability of the country that is decisive, and this capability, too, is not predetermined but depends on the creative energies of the Jewish People” (February 1937, *Bama’aracha*, vol. 1, p. 158).

In the winter of 2008, while commanding the National Defense College, I met in Moscow with Deputy Foreign Minister Sultanov. In a conversation about the question of why, if the Jews want to live in security, it should have to be in the Land of Israel rather than, say, in Brooklyn, he said: “I cannot deny that for you it is the ancestral homeland. But why have your leaders stopped talking about this historical connection, and have instead been talking only about security?” Abbas’s speech should bring Israel’s policymakers and opinion shapers to enunciate anew the story they tell their own people and the world at large.

This article appeared in Hebrew in The Liberal in February 2018.

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