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To cite this article: Efraim Karsh (2023): The Oslo disaster 30 years on, Israel Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/13537121.2023.2247637](https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2023.2247637)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2023.2247637>



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Published online: 18 Aug 2023.



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The Oslo disaster 30 years on

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ABSTRACT

Thirty years after its euphoric launch, the 'Oslo peace process' between Israel and the PLO stands as the worst calamity to have afflicted Israelis and Palestinians since the 1948 war, and the most catastrophic strategic blunder in Israel's history. By replacing Israel's control of the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians with corrupt and repressive terrorist entities that indoctrinated their subjects with burning hatred of Jews and Israelis, as well as murdered some 2,000 Israelis and rained thousands of rockets and missiles on their population centres, the Oslo process has made the prospects for peace and reconciliation ever more remote. By deflating the combative ethos of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), it has weakened Israel's national security and made the outbreak of a multi-front war a distinct possibility. By transforming the PLO (and, to a lesser extent, Hamas) into internationally accepted political actors without forcing them to shed their genocidal commitment to the Jewish state's destruction, it weakened Israel's international standing. And by deepening Israel's internal cleavages and destabilising its sociopolitical system, it has created a clear and present danger to the Jewish State's thriving democracy, indeed to its very existence.

KEYWORDS Yitzhak Rabin; Shimon Peres; Yasser Arafat; Israel; PLO; Oslo process; terrorism; Hezbollah; Hamas; al-Aqsa Intifada; Ehud Barak; Ariel Sharon

In his thank you address upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres lauded the 'Oslo peace process' between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) for which he won the distinguished prize together with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, not only as the end of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but as the harbinger of a 'New Middle East' that would serve as 'a spiritual and cultural focal point for the entire world':

A Middle East without wars, without enemies, without ballistic missiles, without nuclear warheads. A Middle East in which men, goods, and services can move freely without the need for customs clearance and police licenses ...

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A Middle East where living standards are in no way inferior to those in the world's most advanced countries . . . in which no hostile borders bring death, hunger, and despair . . . A Middle East that is not a killing field but a field of creativity and growth.¹

Viewed from a 30-year vantage point, this euphoric prediction could not be further removed from reality. Far from resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Oslo 'peace process' stands as the worst calamity to have afflicted Israelis and Palestinians since the 1948 war, substantially worsening their situation and making the prospects for peace and reconciliation ever more remote.

For the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians, it has brought about subjugation to corrupt and repressive PLO and Hamas regimes – regimes that have reversed the hesitant advent of civil society in these territories, shattered their socioeconomic well-being, and perpetuated the conflict with Israel while keeping their hapless constituents in constant awe as their leaders lined their pockets from the proceeds of this misery.

For Israel, it has been the starkest strategic blunder in the country's history – establishing ineradicable terror entities on its doorstep, denting its military and strategic posture, deepening its internal cleavages, destabilising its political system, and weakening its international standing. It is on these setbacks that this article focuses.

Ending occupation

The Oslo process had, however, one major achievement that has gone virtually unnoticed. Its founding document – the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (DOP or Oslo I), signed on the White House lawn on 13 September 1993 – provided for Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for a transitional period not to exceed five years. During this interim period, the territories' Palestinian residents would be ruled by a democratically-elected Palestinian Council while Israel and the PLO negotiated a permanent peace settlement.²

While the PLO viewed the transitional period as a corridor to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza (as a first step to the 'complete liberation of Palestine' – i.e. Israel's destruction – envisaged by its 1974 'phased strategy'³), Rabin viewed the Oslo process as culminating in 'an entity short of a state that will independently run the lives of the Palestinians under its control' within narrower boundaries than the pre-1967 lines.⁴

Rabin's vision was effectively realised within months of his 4 November 1995 assassination by a Jewish zealot. By January 1996, Israel had withdrawn its forces from the West Bank's populated areas with the exception of Hebron where redeployment was completed in January 1997;

withdrawal from Gaza's populated areas had been completed by May 1994 when control passed to the newly-established PLO-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA). On January 20, elections to the Palestinian Council were held, and, shortly afterwards, the Israeli civil administration and military government were dissolved.

'As of today, there is a Palestinian state', gushed Ahmad Tibi, Arafat's Arab-Israeli advisor, a day after the January 1996 elections. This upbeat prognosis was echoed by the Israeli minister of the environment, Yossi Sarid, while Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin – chief architect of the Oslo process – proclaimed the elections to have irreversibly ended Israel's occupation of Palestinian populated areas. 'We have been freed of a heavy burden', he said. 'I never believed in the possibility of an enlightened occupation. It was necessary to lift that burden so as to avoid becoming a target for organizations throughout the world that viewed us as oppressors'.⁵

This optimistic forecast was fully justified. In one fell swoop, Israel effectively ended its 30-year-long control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip's populace. Since January 1996, and certainly after the completion of the Hebron redeployment, 99% of the Palestinians in these territories have not lived under Israeli 'occupation' but under PLO/PA rule (in Gaza, since 2007, under Hamas's rule). Recognised in December 2012 as a 'non-member observer State' by a UN General Assembly resolution,⁶ this effectively independent entity (or Palestine as it calls itself) is virtually irreversible as it is wholly inconceivable for Israel to retake full control of the West Bank and Gaza's Palestinian populace under any circumstances.

But then, as noted above, for Arafat and the PLO leadership, the Oslo process has not been a pathway to a two-state solution – Israel and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza living side by side in peace – but a 'Trojan Horse' (to use the words of prominent PLO official Faisal Husseini) designed to promote the PLO's strategic goal of 'Palestine from the [Jordan] river to the [Mediterranean] sea' – that is, a Palestine in place of Israel.⁷

Hence, rather than use the end of occupation as a springboard for bringing the Oslo process to fruition through bilateral negotiations on the future of *the largely unpopulated West Bank territories* still under Israel's control, or Area C as they were defined by the September 1995 Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II),⁸ the PA/PLO (let alone Hamas) has sought to damage its 'peace partner' at every turn, both politically and physically. For its part, Israel has totally failed to alert the international community (or indeed its own population) to the end of its 'occupation' of the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians, leaving itself open to sustained international pressure and de-legitimisation campaigns on the one hand, and to incessant terrorist attacks emanating from these territories on the other.

Unreconstructed terrorist entities

Having envisaged as early as August 1968 the transformation of the West Bank and Gaza into ineradicable terrorist hotbeds that would disrupt Israel's way of life and 'force the Zionists to realize that it is impossible for them to live in Israel', Arafat viewed the Oslo accords as highly conducive to this goal. As he told a sceptical associate shortly before moving to Gaza (in July 1994) to take control of the newly established PA:

I know that you are opposed to the Oslo accords, but you must always remember what I'm going to tell you. The day will come when you will see thousands of Jews fleeing Palestine. I will not live to see this, but you will definitely see it in your lifetime. The Oslo accords will help bring this about.⁹

Hence, no sooner had Arafat made his triumphant entry to Gaza than he began constructing an extensive terrorist infrastructure in the territories under his control in flagrant violation of the DOP. He refused to disarm Hamas and Islamic Jihad as required by the Oslo accords and tacitly approved the murder of hundreds of Israelis by these terror groups. He created far larger Palestinian security forces than permitted by the accords, reconstructed the PLO's old terrorist apparatus, and frantically acquired prohibited weapons with large sums of money donated to the PA by the international community – money that had been intended to benefit the civilian Palestinian population. As a result, terrorism in the territories spiralled to its highest level since their capture by Israel in the 1967 war.

In the two-and-a-half years between the signing of the DOP and the fall of the Labour government in May 1996, 210 Israelis were murdered – nearly three times the average annual death toll of the previous 26 years. In September 1996, Arafat further escalated the conflict by exploiting the opening of a new exit to an archaeological tunnel under the Western Wall to unleash widespread riots (dubbed the 'tunnel war') in which 17 Israelis and some 80 Palestinians were killed. And while the PA quickly dropped the tunnel issue from its agenda once it had outlived its usefulness, Arafat was to repeat this precedent on several occasions. The most notable instance was the launch of the September 2000 terror war (euphemised as the 'al-Aqsa Intifada') shortly after being offered Palestinian statehood by Israeli PM Ehud Barak. By the time of Arafat's death four years later, his war – the bloodiest and most destructive confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians since 1948 – had exacted 1,028 Israeli lives: nine times the average death toll by terrorism of the pre-Oslo era. Of these, about 450 people (or 43.8% of victims) were murdered in suicide bombings, which were a practically unheard of tactic in the Palestinian-Israeli context prior to Oslo. All in all, nearly 2,000 were murdered, and

over 9,000 were wounded from the signing of the DOP to date – more than four times the average death toll of the preceding 26 years of the conflict.¹⁰

Worse: while Israel managed to destroy the West Bank's terror infrastructure in a sustained four-year counterterrorism campaign beginning with Operation Defensive Shield (29 March–10 May 2002), Hamas managed to keep its Gaza infrastructure largely intact despite the targeted killing of many of its top leaders, including founding leader Ahmad Yasin and his immediate successor Abdul Aziz Rantisi. Moreover, by way of compensating for its dwindling capacity for suicide bombings, the Islamist terror group reverted to massive, high-trajectory attacks from Gaza. In 2004, 309 home-made Qassam rockets and 882 mortar shells were fired at Jewish villages in the strip as well as at towns and villages within Israel (compared to 105 and 514, respectively, in 2003). The following year saw 401 and 854 respective attacks despite Hamas's acceptance of a temporary suspension of fighting. These activities left little doubt among Palestinians as to who spearheaded the 'armed struggle', and when, in the summer of 2005, Israel unilaterally vacated the 21 Jewish villages in the south of the strip and removed their 8,000 residents, the move was widely viewed as a Hamas victory. Consequently, on 25 January 2006, Hamas reaped the political fruits of its terrorist prowess when, in its first electoral showing since the DOP (it had boycotted the first parliamentary elections in 1996), it won a landslide victory, taking 74 of Parliament's 132 seats. Fatah (the PLO's largest constituent organisation), which had dominated the PA since its creation in May 1994, was roundly defeated, winning only 45 seats.

As the PLO/PA would not accept this result, in 2007 relations between the two groups deteriorated into violent clashes, especially in Gaza. Scores were killed and many more wounded as Hamas seized full control of the strip. Flushed with success and encouraged by Israel's unilateral withdrawal, Hamas intensified its rocket/missile attacks on the Jewish state's population centres. Within a year of the withdrawal, there was a 430% increase in the number of rockets and missiles fired from the strip (from 401 to 1,726); and while this pace ebbed slightly in 2007 (to 1,276 attacks), it peaked to a whopping 2,048 attacks in 2008 (in addition to 1,668 mortar shells), or ten attacks per day.

In an attempt to stem this relentless harassment of its civilian population, in December 2008–January 2009, Israel launched a large ground operation in Gaza (codenamed Cast Lead). But while the operation eroded Hamas's military capabilities and led to a vast decrease in rocket and missile attacks, it failed to curb the organisation's military might and political ambitions. In subsequent years, Israel was forced to fight three more inconclusive wars against the Islamist terror group (in November 2012, July–August 2014, and May 2021), in addition to two major confrontations with Hamas's Gaza

sidekick – the Iranian-armed and financed Palestinian Islamic Jihad (in August 2022 and May 2023).¹¹

The IDF's dwindling fighting spirit

The relentless Palestinian terrorist campaign was greatly facilitated by the growing fatigue of Israeli society and its yearning for calm and normalcy, starkly illustrated by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's 2005 lamentation, 'We are tired of fighting; we are tired of being courageous; we are tired of winning; we are tired of defeating our enemies'.¹² Even Rabin, widely known as 'Mr. Security', seemed to have been persuaded by the Palestinian *intifada* (December 1987–September 1993) of the limits of Israel's military power and its ability to impose its peace vision on its Arab enemies.

In contrast to Peres's idyllic view of Oslo, Rabin was largely driven to the process by the belief that since Israeli society had lost much of its stamina and ability to withstand a protracted conflict, the attainment of peace was imperative for forestalling future existential threats – first and foremost Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons¹³: hence Rabin's eagerness for a peace agreement with Damascus and his readiness to surrender the Golan Heights to Syria in contravention of his longstanding position and electoral pledges, and hence his dogged persistence in the Oslo 'peace process' despite his deep distrust and loathing of Arafat.

Rabin's pessimism did not fail to penetrate the IDF. As early as January 1989, just over a year after the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising, Chief-of-Staff Dan Shomron told the cabinet (in which Rabin served as minister of defence): 'There is no such thing as eradicating the *intifada* because, in its essence, it expresses the struggle of nationalism'. In other words, seven years after destroying the PLO's military infrastructure in Lebanon and expelling it to faraway Tunisia from where it posed no real terrorist threat, the IDF's top commander effectively eschewed the notion of victory, insisting that rather than defeat the popular uprising, the IDF had to buy time for the government to find a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.¹⁴

This timid mindset gained considerable momentum under Shomron's successor, Ehud Barak. One of Israel's most politicised chiefs of staff whose perpetual ambition for the premiership had long been an open secret, Barak was confrontational to Likud's defence minister Moshe Arens (who appointed him against the view of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir) and far more deferring to Rabin. Having participated in Rabin's July 1992 electoral victory party (together with his deputy and would-be successor Amnon Shahak), Barak enthusiastically endorsed the government's conciliatory line vis-à-vis Damascus, describing the Syrian tyrant Hafez Assad as a man of peace whose word could be trusted.¹⁵ And while he reportedly criticised the

DOP upon its conclusion as ‘full of [security] holes like Swiss cheese’, Barak had no qualms about persuading (together with Shahak) Sash’s spiritual head Rabbi Ovadia Yosef of the agreement’s security merits so as to prevent the ultra-Orthodox party from leaving the Rabin government.¹⁶ In subsequent years, Barak, and all the more so Shahak who replaced him in January 1995, staunchly supported the Oslo process – with far reaching strategic and operational implications for the IDF’s combative ethos and fighting spirit.

As early as September 1993 – a mere fortnight after the DOP’s conclusion – Barak was reported to have been ‘quietly and persistently’ transforming the IDF into ‘an army of peace’. The underlying assumption of this sea change was that since security was a corollary of peace rather than the other way around as had been commonly believed, the IDF had to be rebuilt in a way that would first and foremost promote the attainment of peace. ‘Had it not been for the peace agreement [i.e. the DOP] that gave Israel a respite to rebuild the IDF, a great catastrophe might have ensued’, a retired general opined.¹⁷

At the organisational level, this rationale led to the reduction of the IDF’s ground forces in favour of overwhelming reliance on airpower and sophisticated armaments (Barak’s so called ‘small and smart army’). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union deprived the radical Arab states of their foremost patron and attendant ability to make war on Israel, Tehran’s possible attainment of nuclear weapons was seen as the only potential existential threat to Israel – a threat that could only be thwarted by a massive air campaign.

Conceptually, the transformation of the Arab-Israeli conflict from recurrent interstate wars to sustained ‘low intensity warfare’ against terrorist organisations led the IDF to discard its perennial striving for a swift victory in favour of a strategy that would contain and wear down these organisations: not merely because of the belief that they represented deep-rooted ideals (whether nationalist or Islamist) that could not be defeated by force of arms, but because ‘the future planning and execution of counterterrorist campaigns will not only need to provide greater security for Israel’s citizens but also to secure the positive direction of the political dialogue’.¹⁸

Even when Arafat launched his all-out war of terror in September 2000, two months after then-PM Barak (July 1999–March 2001) agreed to the establishment of a Palestinian state in virtually the entire West Bank and the Gaza Strip and made breathtaking concessions over Israel’s capital city of Jerusalem, the IDF did not seek to destroy the Palestinian terror infrastructure but rather to steer the PLO back to the negotiating table. As late as 21–27 January, 2001, a fortnight before losing the premiership to Likud’s leader Ariel Sharon, Barak made even more astounding concessions to Arafat in a hastily convened summit in the Egyptian resort site of Taba, only to be blatantly rebuffed yet again.

But then, despite being swept to power on the crest of his reputation as Israel's most illustrious military commander, who had eradicated Gaza terrorism in the early 1970s and expelled the PLO from Lebanon a decade later, Sharon pretty much sustained his predecessor's containment strategy in the face of spiralling suicide bombings on Israel's streets and buses. Criticised for this unexpected restraint, Sharon explained that 'restraint is power' and that 'what can be seen from here [the PM's office] cannot be seen from there'. It was only on 29 March 2002, over a year after assuming the premiership and two days after 29 Israelis were murdered by a suicide bomber while celebrating the Passover meal at a seaside hotel, that the IDF launched Operation Defensive Shield to destroy the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank – but not in the Gaza Strip.

Moshe Yaalon, former IDF chief-of-staff (2002–05) and minister of defence (2013–16), and one of the foremost practitioners of the containment approach, explained the underlying logic of this strategy:

Israel and the Palestinians are Siamese twins attached by their navels. Israel is the stronger of the two, yet is tied to its weaker twin. The two are in the process of separating. The path to separation is cast like a tunnel. Oslo paved the road to the tunnel and the international community wrapped it in concrete . . . But Arafat is not interested in all of this. Arafat doesn't want to separate at the end of the tunnel, but to blow it up. This will lead to war, in which our task will be to block Arafat's attempt to blow up the tunnel and get out of it. Our role in the war will be to force Arafat to return to the tunnel, against his will . . . to abandon the path of violence and return to the political path.¹⁹

As Arafat failed to live up to this expectation and sustained his war of terror to his dying day (on 11 November 2004), Sharon decided to withdraw all IDF forces from Gaza and to uproot the Jewish villages in the south of the strip and their 8,000-strong population. The idea was that the move would prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the end of Israel's 'occupation' – though control of the strip's Palestinian population had already ended in May 1994 – and would give it international legitimacy to respond in strength to Gaza-originated terror attacks. A similar logic had driven Barak (on 24 May 2000) to hurriedly vacate Israel's self-proclaimed security zone in south Lebanon while leaving behind heavy weapons and military equipment and abandoning the South Lebanon Army, which had aided the IDF's counterterrorist operations for decades and which collapsed upon the withdrawal with many of its fighters and their families seeking asylum in Israel.

Rather than 'drain the terrorist swamp', as Barak gloated after the flight,²⁰ the withdrawal served to expand Hezbollah to gargantuan proportions and to transform south Lebanon into an ineradicable terrorist stronghold criss-crossed with fortified defences designed to serve as a springboard for attacks on Israeli territory, to shelter Hezbollah's burgeoning rocket and missile arsenal (which grew to a whopping 150,000), and to exact a high cost from

attacking forces in the event of a general conflagration. The result was the IDF's inconclusive ground operations in the Second Lebanon War (12 July–14 August 2006), which hardly ventured more than a few miles from the border during the 34 days of fighting – in contrast to the 1982 invasion that swiftly swept across this area and reached Beirut within five days – as well as the war's relatively high human toll: 164 fatalities, or 70% of those killed in the security zone during the 15 years preceding the 2000 withdrawal.

No less importantly, the Lebanon flight's humiliating nature helped convince Arafat that the pros of reverting to wholesale violence far exceeded the potential cons since Israel no longer had the stomach for a protracted conflict. If Israelis could not bear 20–25 fatalities per year (less than a tenth of the death toll on their roads) in the fight against Hezbollah, surely they would not be able to stomach the much heavier death toll attending a protracted all-out Palestinian 'resistance campaign'. At the July 2000 Camp David summit that sought to bring an end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Arafat explicitly warned his Israeli counterparts that 'we can see to it that the Hezbollah precedent is replicated in the territories', and the threat was amplified by his top henchmen after the summit. A Palestinian public opinion poll found two-thirds of respondents eager to see their leadership follow in Hezbollah's violent footsteps.²¹

The Lebanon flight and the inconclusive war it produced six years later has led to the evolution of a 'balance of terror' between Israel and the state that had been its weakest neighbour for decades. Indeed, Hezbollah's terrorist threat – via both its rocket and missile arsenal that can hit any part of Israel and its ability to invade the Galilee and occupy Israeli localities – something that never happened since the 1948 war – has confronted Israel with unprecedented security challenges.

This in turn drove successive Israeli governments, and the IDF, to turn a blind eye to Hezbollah's massive military build-up in flagrant violation of the post-2006 UN resolutions for fear of an all-out conflagration. This timidity was most starkly illustrated by Jerusalem's acceptance (in October 2022) – at the IDF's prodding – of Beirut's demands regarding the demarcation of the Lebanese-Israeli maritime border and the ownership of the substantial gas deposits believed to be in the disputed area, for fear of war with Hezbollah.²² Similarly, the Gaza withdrawal allowed Hamas to transform the strip into an ineradicable terrorist hotbed that harassed Israel for nearly two decades without the IDF even entertaining the thought of destroying the terrorist organisation and disarming the strip as stipulated by the Oslo accords.

International de-legitimation

A central assumption underlying these unilateral withdrawals, or indeed the entire Oslo process, was that Israel's concessions would boost its

international standing and strengthen its ability to fight the formidable security threats confronting it. What this line of thinking failed to consider is that since Israel, as the world's only Jewish state, attracts the full brunt of anti-Jewish bigotry and hatred that has hitherto been reserved for individuals and communities, the Palestinians have become 'untouchable' in their role as the latest rod to beat the Jews.

Hence, not only did Israel receive no credit whatsoever for ending its 'occupation' of the Palestinians – not even after making the Gaza Strip *Judenrein* in 2005 – but whenever it responded in strength to Palestinian terrorism, it was accused of using 'disproportionate force' and hordes of demonstrators flocked onto the streets of Western cities throughout the world – not to condemn the indiscriminate terror attacks on hapless civilians but to demonise a sovereign democracy for daring to protect its citizens. At the same time, the PLO surged to unprecedented international heights without shedding its genocidal commitment to Israel's destruction, surrendering its weapons, or abandoning its terrorist ways. Not only did the donor states fail to use their massive economic aid to force the PLO to abide by its contractual peace obligations, but when Arafat waged his full-blown terror war in September 2000, media outlets, commentators, and politicians throughout the world blamed this premediated act of aggression on the supposed 'provocation carried out at al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem on 28 September 2000 [i.e. Sharon's visit to Temple Mount]', to use the words of a special Security Council resolution, which the US failed to veto.²³ Even President Clinton, who publicly chided Arafat for failing to seize Barak's generous offer of statehood during the Camp David summit, swiftly changed tack once the latter launched his terror war and pressured the Israeli government for further concessions (which it made), only to be rebuffed yet again by the long-indulged Palestinian leader.

The European Union (EU) was far more scathing of Israel's self-defence measures. Making no distinction between terror attacks and counterterrorism measures aimed at their deflection, it blamed both sides for the continuation of violence, criticised Israel at every turn, and increased financial aid to the PLO/PA despite incontrovertible evidence that much of these funds were being channelled to terror activities. So did the International Court of Justice, 'the principal judicial organ of the United Nations', which condemned Israel's attempt to stem the tidal wave of suicide bombings through the construction of a security barrier between its territory and the West Bank as 'contrary to international law'.²⁴

To make matters worse, the counterterrorist fight against Hamas, which subjected Israel's population centres to thousands of missile and rocket attacks since the 2005 withdrawal, and all the more so since its 2007 violent takeover of the Gaza Strip, came under scathing international criticism. Thus it was Israel, rather than the Islamist terror organisation that came under

intense international censure in the wake of the 2008/9 and 2014 Gaza wars, including two major UN ‘fact-finding’ reports and a string of indictments by ‘humanitarian’ organisations.

It is true that both UN reports condemned Hamas’s attacks on Israel’s population centres as the war crimes they were. But this was little more than lip service that received paltry international attention. The reports’ object was to create a thick veneer of moral equivalence that not only made no distinction between a terrorist group seeking to maximise civilian casualties (through the indiscriminate targeting of population centres and the use of its own constituents as human shields) and a besieged democracy going out of its way to avoid such casualties, but also emphasised that ‘the extent of the casualties and destruction in Gaza wrought by Israeli forces far exceeded those caused by Palestinian attacks on Israel’. (By this logic, Nazi Germany must be considered the aggrieved party in World War II as far more Germans were killed during the conflict than their British, French, or American enemies, among many other war victims.) And while Justice Richard Goldstone, who chaired the UN ‘fact-finding’ mission on the December 2008–January 2009 war, would later concede that ‘If I had known then what I know now [i.e. “that civilians were not intentionally targeted (by Israel) as a matter of policy” while “the crimes allegedly committed by Hamas were intentional”], the Goldstone Report would have been a different document’, the report and its 2014 successor played a key role in the rapid institutionalisation of the ‘disproportionate force’ calumny hurled at Israel whenever it tries to defend itself from terror attacks by its ‘peace partner’.²⁵

As late as July 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed ‘deep concern’ over Israel’s limited counterterrorist operation in the West Bank town of Jenin in which 12 terrorists were killed, stressing that ‘all military operations must be conducted with full respect for international humanitarian law’. The UN’s Special Rapporteur for Palestine, Francesca Albanese, went a step further and accused ‘Israel’s military occupation’ of transforming ‘the *entire* occupied Palestinian territory into an open-air prison, where Palestinians are constantly confined, surveilled and disciplined’. Not surprisingly, Hamas swiftly applauded the latter slander, which, like the Secretary-General’s reprimand, failed to mention that ‘Israel’s military occupation’ had ended nearly three decades earlier, that Jenin was a major terror hotbed that had produced scores of attacks against Israeli civilians, and that not a single non-combatant was killed in the Israeli operation – a remarkable feat of military restraint and an extremely rare demonstration of ‘full respect for international humanitarian law’.²⁶

But the story doesn’t end here. For not only did the Oslo process establish unreconstructed terror entities on Israel’s doorstep and constrained its capacity for self-defence, but it also unleashed a growing assault on its very

existence coupled with a tidal wave of anti-Semitism throughout the Western world. Using its newly gained international prominence to besmirch and delegitimize its official peace partner with a view to facilitating its ultimate demise, the PLO failed to abolish the numerous clauses in the Palestinian National Charter advocating Israel's destruction as required by the Oslo accords, and spread the most outlandish anti-Semitic calumnies so as to depict Israel as heir to the Nazis, a 'colonialist-settler apartheid society' that must be ostracised and eventually emasculated. With the apartheid canard taking root among many educated Westerners, including such luminaries as Nobel Prize laureates Desmond Tutu and Jimmy Carter, Israel found itself confronted with a rapidly intensifying campaign of de-legitimation.

Nowhere was this process more starkly demonstrated than at the UN's World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (31 August–7 September 2001), held in the South African town of Durban, where delegates from numerous countries and thousands of NGOs indulged in a xenophobic orgy of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic incitement that made mockery of the conference's original purpose. This hate fest was to be replicated on countless occasions and in numerous forums: from the follow-up conferences of 'Durban II' (Geneva, 20–24 April, 2009) and 'Durban III' (New York, 21 September 2011); to the swelling tide of anti-Semitism throughout Europe and the US, largely fuelled by the rapidly snowballing Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement; to the EU's decision to mark products coming from Israeli West Bank localities. Time and again, year after year, the UN's Commission on Human Rights discussed Israel's supposed human rights abuses while turning a blind eye to scores of actual atrocities around the world, dedicating nine of its 36 special sessions to Israel's 'oppression' of the Palestinians compared to one session each devoted to the Darfur and Congo conflicts, where millions of innocent civilians perished.²⁷

The United Nations has 193 member nations, but its Security Council has devoted about a third of its activities and criticism to only one state – Israel. The General Assembly rarely holds emergency special sessions and didn't see any reason to do so to discuss the genocides in Rwanda and Darfur, the ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, or the horrific massacres in East Timor. Yet it saw it fit to dedicate six of its eleven emergency sessions to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict while its annual sessions regularly feature numerous anti-Israel resolutions. The 59th Session (2004–05), for example, enacted 19 anti-Israel resolutions but not a single one on Sudan's ongoing genocide in Darfur. In a UN-sponsored 'International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People', held on 29 November 2005 – the fifty-eighth anniversary of the Partition Resolution – Secretary-General Kofi Annan, flanked by senior UN officials, sat on the podium beside an Arabic-language 'Map of Palestine' that showed Palestine replacing Israel.²⁸

In November 2012 the PLO obtained General Assembly recognition of Palestine as a ‘non-member observer state’. It followed this success by joining a string of international bodies and agencies, most importantly the International Criminal Court (ICC). On 2 January 2015, the ‘State of Palestine’ acceded to the Rome Statute, the ICC’s founding treaty, and a fortnight later the court opened a preliminary probe into alleged crimes committed ‘in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, since 13 June 2014’. Nine months later, on 30 September, PLO Chairman and PA President Mahmoud Abbas joined UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for an official ceremony in which the Palestinian flag was hoisted for the first time outside the international organisation’s New York headquarters. The significance of these developments cannot be overstated. Twenty-four years after its exclusion from the US-orchestrated Madrid peace conference and its wall-to-wall ostracism by the Arab world due to its support of Iraq’s brutal occupation of Kuwait (August 1990–February 1991), the PLO had recast itself in the eyes of the international community as the legitimate, peaceable, and democratically disposed ruler of the prospective Palestinian state – against all available evidence to the contrary. Painting Israel as the main obstacle to peace despite its ending of the ‘occupation’ and consistent support for the two-state solution, it also laid the groundwork for its indictment for supposed ‘war crimes’ and ‘crimes against humanity’: in February 2021 an ICC decided that ‘the Court’s territorial jurisdiction in the Situation in Palestine extends to the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, namely Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem’.²⁹ And all this without ever accepting the Jewish state’s right to exist as stipulated by the November 1947 UN partition resolution, and remaining committed to its eventual destruction.

Radicalising the Israeli Arabs

Oslo’s adverse international consequences were matched by no less devastating domestic setbacks. By recognising the PLO as ‘the representative of the Palestinian people’, the Rabin government effectively endorsed the organisation’s claim of authority over a fifth of Israel’s citizens and gave it *carte blanche* to interfere in its domestic affairs. Such a concession would be an assured recipe for trouble even under the most amicable of arrangements. Made to an irredentist party openly committed to the destruction of its ‘peace partner’ it proved nothing short of catastrophic as Arafat set out from the moment he arrived in Gaza to indoctrinate not only the residents of the territories but also the Israeli Arabs with an ineradicable hatred of Israel, Jews, and Judaism. The fruits of this incitement were not late in coming: if in the mid-1970s less than half of Israeli Arabs defined themselves

as Palestinians, and one in two repudiated Israel's right to exist, by 1999 more than two-thirds identified as Palestinians and four out of five repudiated Israel's right to exist.³⁰

By the 2000s, open calls for Israel's destruction had substituted for the 1990s' euphemistic advocacy of this goal, alongside visits by Israeli Arab politicians to enemy states (notably Syria, Libya, and Lebanon) in flagrant violation of Israeli law. Jamal Zahalka, whose ultranationalist Balad Party (with seats in the Knesset since 1999) was predicated on making Israel 'a state of all its citizens' – the standard euphemism for its transformation into an Arab state in which Jews would be reduced to a permanent minority – predicted the demise of 'apartheid Israel'; while Sheikh Raed Salah, leader of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, prophesied Israel's disappearance within two decades should it not change its attitude to the Arab minority. For its part, 'the supreme follow-up committee of the heads of Arab municipalities in Israel' – the effective extra-parliamentary leadership of the Israeli Arabs – issued a lengthy document outlining its 'Future Vision for the Palestinian Arabs in Israel'. The document derided Israel as 'a product of colonialist action initiated by the Jewish-Zionist elites in Europe and the West', which, it charged, had pursued 'domestic colonialist policy against its Palestinian Arab citizens'. The document then rejected Israel's continued existence as a Jewish state and demanded its replacement by a system that would ensure Arab 'national, historic and civil rights at both the individual and collective levels'.³¹ Two years later, as Israel celebrated its sixtieth year of existence, the committee initiated what was to become a common practice by dedicating the 'Nakba Day' events – observed alongside Israel's Independence Day to bemoan the 'catastrophe' allegedly wrought on the Palestinians by the establishment of the Jewish state – to the 'right of return', the Arab catchphrase for Israel's destruction through demographic subversion. Even in Haifa, an epitome of Arab-Jewish coexistence since the early 1920s, local politicians attempted to replace the name of Zionism Avenue with its pre-Israel precursor.

This incendiary language had its predictable effect. When in February 1994 a Jewish fanatic murdered 29 Muslims at prayer in Hebron, large-scale riots erupted in numerous Arab settlements throughout Israel with mobs battling police for four full days. The scenario repeated itself in April 1996 when dozens of Lebanese Shiites were mistakenly killed in an Israeli shelling of terrorist targets in south Lebanon, and yet again in September 1996 during the 'tunnel war'. Things came to a head in October 2000, when the Israeli Arabs unleashed a tidal wave of violence in support of Arafat's two-days-old war of terror, which lasted for ten days and was only suppressed with great difficulty and the killing of thirteen rioters.

In the next two decades, mass Arab violence became a regular feature of Israel's domestic scene as the annual commemoration of the dead thirteen

rioters (eulogised by Arab society as ‘martyrs’) became a hotbed of riots, alongside occasional eruptions in response to Israel’s counterterrorist measures (the launching of Operation Defensive Shield, for instance, triggered violent demonstrations in Arab settlements throughout Israel). These skyrocketed to new heights in May 2021, when the fourth war in just over a decade between Israel and Hamas triggered a wave of violence by Israel’s Arabs in support of the Islamist terror organisation, which lasted for two weeks and dwarfed their October 2000 precursor.

Reluctant to acknowledge the latest riots for what they were and what they portended, the Israeli media, the academic and intellectual elite, and most of the political establishment attributed this volcanic eruption to the supposed discrimination and marginalisation of the Arab minority, just as an official commission of inquiry had done with regard to the October 2000 riots. Evoking the age-old Zionist hope that the vast economic gains attending the Jewish national revival would reconcile the Palestinian Arabs to the idea of Jewish statehood, this self-incriminatory diagnosis is not only totally misconceived but the inverse of the truth. If poverty and marginalisation were indeed the culprits, why had there never been anything remotely like the 2000 and 2021 riots among similarly situated segments of Jewish society in Israel (notably the ultra-Orthodox community and residents of the peripheral ‘development towns’), or, for that matter, among the Israeli Arabs during the much worse-off 1950s and 1960s? Why did Arab dissidence increase dramatically with the vast improvement in Arab education and standard of living in the 1970s and 1980s? Why did it escalate into an open uprising in October 2000 – after a decade that saw government allocations to Arab municipalities grow by 550% and the number of Arab civil servants nearly treble? And why did it spiral into a far more violent insurrection in May 2021 – after yet another decade of massive government investment in the Arab sector, including an NIS15 billion (US\$3.84 billion) socioeconomic aid programme in 2015?

The truth is that the 2021 riots, just like their 2000 precursor, were not an act of social protest but a nationalist/Islamist insurrection in support of an external attack by an enemy committed to Israel’s destruction. (So, for that matter, was the alleged support by Balad’s founding leader Azmi Bishara to Hezbollah during its 2006 war with Israel, which drove him to flee the country to avoid arrest and prosecution for treason.) In the words of Muhammad Baraka, head of ‘the supreme follow-up committee of the heads of Arab municipalities in Israel’:

Jerusalem has some dear sisters: Jaffa, Haifa, Acre, Lod, and Ramla. Just a few months ago, last May, at the time of the last Intifada – look at the center of the confrontation with the Zionist oppression forces. It was particularly in these cities – the cities that they tried to write off, to distort their image, and erase them from the map of Palestine—these cities rose up and said: ‘Palestine is here, it was called Palestine in the past, and it is called Palestine once again.’³²

Undermining democracy, deepening sociopolitical cleavages

However dramatic, radicalisation of the Israeli Arabs has not been Oslo's worst domestic calamity. Far more detrimental has been the destabilisation of the country's political system and the deepening of its sociopolitical cleavages to the point of endangering Israel's thriving democracy, if not its very existence. In the 30 years since the signing of the DOP, only two of the ruling 13 governments completed their four-year tenure with one term ended by the unprecedented assassination of the incumbent prime minister. Meanwhile, parliament's average lifespan dropped from 3.6 years to three years with Israel going through five electoral campaigns in the span of three-and-a-half years (April 2019–November 2022) that have left the latest government vying with orchestrated civil disobedience of unprecedented proportions that threatens to tear Israeli Jewish society apart.

Just as Labour's failure to anticipate the October 1973 war had led to its loss of power for the first time since Israel's establishment, so the Oslo disaster set the party on an intractable process of decline that brought it to the verge of political extinction. If in 1992 Labour enjoyed a comfortable majority of 44 of the Knesset's 120 seats to Likud's 32, by November 2022 it had plunged to just four seats (to Likud's 32) – the threshold for entering the Knesset – with repeated post-election polls predicting its failure to cross this threshold in future elections.

To make matters worse, as the 'peace process' lost public traction and parliamentary support the Rabin and Barak governments reverted to non-democratic means in a desperate bid to keep it afloat. If Oslo I was approved on 21 September 1993 by a Knesset majority of 61–50 with eight abstentions, Oslo II was approved on 5 October 1995 by a 61–59 majority, with the two deciding votes siphoned from another party by an unabashed act of political bribery – hardly a democratic move given the centrality of the issue to Israel's national security. Similarly, Barak's far-reaching concessions in Camp David, and all the more so in Taba – where according to Palestinian sources he accepted the 'right of return' (albeit not the actual return of **all refugees** to Israel itself)³³ – were made with no parliamentary majority or public support.

No less detrimental to Israel's democracy has been the unprecedented proliferation of 'atmosphere parties' triggered by the Oslo process, as the cognitive dissonance between realisation of Palestinian perfidy and the lingering yearning for peace drove many Israelis to cling to the latest celebrity hope-peddler to emerge on the political scene. Thus we have the nascent Third Way party winning four seats in 1996, only to evaporate into thin air three years later. It was then followed by the similarly disposed Center Party, which won six seats in 1999 before disappearing from the political scene in the 2003 elections, when another one-term party – One People – came into brief and unremarkable existence. *Shinui* (Change) party,

an offshoot of the one-term Democratic Movement for Change (DASH) that played a key role in Likud's 1977 ascendance, managed to win six and 15 seats in the 1999 and 2003 elections, respectively, before vanishing altogether in 2006. Ariel Sharon's *Kadima* (Forward) did much better by winning the premiership in 2006, but it, too, was gone by the 2013 elections. So was *Hatnua* (The Movement), formed by Likud-defector-turned-Kadima-refugee Tzipi Livni, which was amalgamated into Labour in the 2015 elections, and *Kulanu* (All of US), founded by Likud defector Moshe Kahlon, which entered the political fray in 2015 (10 seats), only to disappear in the September 2019 elections.

Yesh Atid (There is a Future), formed and led by TV personality Yair Lapid, proved more resilient. Having made an impressive debut in the 2013 elections (19 seats), it dropped to 11 seats in 2015 before merging for three successive elections (2019–20) with the newly-established 'Strength for Israel' headed by former IDF chief-of-Staff Benny Gantz, in an effort to unseat Likud. This failed, and in the 2021 elections the merger broke down with *Yesh Atid* winning 17 seats (second only to Likud's 30) and Gantz, who retained the stillborn merger's Blue & White name for his splinter party, contenting himself with eight seats. Fortunately for the two, Naphtalie Bennett, founding leader of the nascent *Yemina* (Rightwards), which failed to enter Knesset in April 2019 and won seven seats in each the September 2019 and 2021 elections, reneged on his longstanding public pledges and agreed to form a government with a string of leftwing parties (and the Islamist Ra'am party) in return for becoming prime minister, to be replaced mid-term by Lapid. And while this power usurpation was legally possible as no legislator had ever envisaged such an improbable scenario, Bennet's appointment set a dangerous anti-democratic precedent whereby leaders with no public support – his party held a fifth of Likud's seats and a third of *Yesh Atid*'s seats – could blackmail their way to the prime minister's office. Small wonder that two of Bennet's coalition partners, Labour leader Meirav Michaeli and *Israel Beitenu* (Israel is our home) leader Avigdor Lieberman, quickly pronounced themselves prime ministerial material despite their parties winning a mere seven seats each.

Even Barak, whose brief disastrous premiership ended in the worst electoral defeat in Israel's history, had no qualms about pronouncing himself two decades later the most qualified person for the job – shortly after failing to re-enter Knesset yet again. 'If, Heaven forbid, Bibi [Netanyahu] were to disappear one noon next week', he told a group of militant activists seeking Netanyahu's overthrow by extra-parliamentary means, 'and there is the possibility of deterioration with Hezbollah or the Iranians, or [there is another] crisis, and the social and economic crisis continues, and there is a need for decisions regarding Iran, annexation, etc., then objectively I am more suitable and better prepared than anyone in Israel to seize the helm'.³⁴

These megalomaniac pretences are emblematic of an attendant Oslo-induced anti-democratic debacle: the complete personalisation of Israeli politics and the substitution of self-serving opportunism for ideological and moral principles. For while Israel's diverse political system has seen from the outset the rise and fall of sectorial parties (e.g. WIZO, Yemenite Association, Sephardim and Edot Mizrah, Arab, religious, ultraorthodox), the Oslo-era 'atmosphere parties' are little more than tools for servicing their founders' personal interests and ambitions under the false pretence of serving the general good. Not surprisingly, these parties have been run in a dictatorial fashion with their leaders calling all the shots and making all decisions, great and small – from selection of Knesset candidates (and banishment of 'disobedient' MKs) to political platforms and manoeuvres – hardly a shining example of a democratic practice.

No less detrimental to Israeli democracy has been the total loss of connection between ideological precepts and their actual implementation attending the Oslo process. Of course, failure to fulfill elections promises is a universal phenomenon that is hardly exclusive to Israeli politics. Yet such has been the regularisation of this malpractice in the Oslo era, especially with regard to the most crucial national issues, that it has emptied the notion of democratic elections of any substance as voters have no clue what policies they are going to see. Thus we have Rabin agreeing to surrender the Golan Heights to Assad in flagrant violation of his longstanding position and electoral pledges to the contrary and eschewing his party's perennial refusal to negotiate with the PLO, despite the latter's continued commitment to Israel's destruction. Similarly, no sooner had Sharon publicly vowed that the Gaza Jewish communities were an integral part of Israel than he changed tack and decided to uproot them all. Confronted with widespread opposition in Likud to the move, Sharon had no qualms of breaking the ruling party and forming his own Kadima party. So did Barak, who in January 2011 split from Labour together with four other MKs and formed his own *Atzmaut* (Independence) party so he could retain the defence portfolio in Netanyahu's government, from which Labour decided to secede.

But then, having served for full four years as the most powerful member of the Netanyahu cabinet (after the PM), Barak waged a relentless defamation campaign against his former superior, including the cofounding of another short-lived 'atmosphere party' (in September 2019 elections) dubbed The Democratic Camp. Having failed to re-enter Knesset, he escalated his anti-Netanyahu rhetoric calling for nationwide civil obedience to prevent the prime minister's supposed attempt to set up a fully-fledged dictatorship by underhand means, be they anti-Corona emergency measures or reformation of Israel's legal system. He was joined in this campaign by Yaalon, who left Likud to establish his own stillborn party after being asked by Netanyahu to

vacate the defence portfolio (which he had held for three years) so as to allow Lieberman's Israel Beitenu to join the ruling coalition.

Nowhere was the substitution of naked opportunism for ideological precepts and moral values more starkly illustrated than by the composition of the Bennett-Lapid ruling coalition. Not only did this odd ensemble of bedfellows have nothing in common beyond the burning desire to unseat the long-reigning Netanyahu after repeatedly failing to do so at the ballot box, but it was riven by longstanding animosities and loathing. For Bennett was not the only one to have sold his lifetime professed principles and ideals for a coveted post. Lieberman, for one, who for decades had been portrayed by the Left and the mainstream media as the archetypical 'fascist', and who had closely collaborated with the ultra-Orthodox parties in numerous national and local elections campaigns, was warmly embraced by his past detractors once he crossed the Rubicon and refused to join Netanyahu's government in April 2019 – an act that set in train five electoral rounds in which he reverted to vile anti-religious and anti-Netanyahu attacks. The same applied, to a lesser extent, to Gideon Saar, who left Likud to form his own *Tikva Hadasha* (New Hope) party after his failed bid for Likud leadership had made his relations with Netanyahu untenable.

And let's not forget Sharon, who was instantaneously transformed from a murderous ogre into an affable grandfatherly figure (with a criminal investigation against him on serious bribery charges swiftly closed) after announcing his decision to uproot the Gaza communities, or the long string of Likud 'princes' (notably Olmert, Livni, Benny Begin, Dan Meridor, Limor Livnat, Roni Milo, and Rubi Rivlin) who had reached top national spots on their parents' shoulders only to become Likud's sharpest detractors with the waning of their personal fortunes – to the warm embrace of the mainstream media.³⁵

Yet these opportunistic acts pale in comparison with Bennett's abrupt U-turn that transformed him overnight in the eyes of the mainstream media (and would-be coalition partners) from a fascistic extremist into democracy's latest saviour. In a series of TV and radio appearances on 21 March 2021 – two days before the elections – he repeatedly vowed that 'under no circumstances shall I ever lend my hand to the formation of a government under Lapid, with or without rotation, because of the simple fact that he is a man of the Left and I don't act against my principles'. Reassuring voters that 'a vote for Yemina is an insurance policy for a right-wing government since I will never sell my principles for any job', he went as far as to sign in front of the camera a self-drafted document reiterating the above pledge about Lapid and challenging Netanyahu to promise to not establish a government with Raám.³⁶

Conclusion

As it celebrates its 75th anniversary, Israel faces a tidal wave of civil disobedience among Israeli Jews – two years after seeing mass anti-Jewish riots by its Arab citizens – that threatens to tear the country's sociopolitical fabric apart and leave it open to outside aggression. And while the roots of this turmoil can arguably be traced to the Left's decades-long refusal to accept its intractable loss of dominance to 'Second Israel' – a motley coalition of long-marginalised segments of Israeli society, from Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Revisionist movement and its current Likud incarnation, to Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews, to religious and ultra-Orthodox communities³⁷ – the Oslo era's fragmentation of the country's political system into an amalgam of dictatorially-run 'atmosphere parties' subordinating the national interest to their leaders' personal ambitions has catapulted this process to unprecedented, extremely dangerous, heights.

Sadly, as shown by this article, the adverse implications of the purported 'peace process' go way beyond this disastrous development. By replacing Israel's control of the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians with corrupt and repressive terrorist entities that indoctrinated their subjects with burning hatred of Jews and Israelis, as well as murdered some 2,000 Israelis and rained thousands of rockets/missiles on their population centres, the Oslo process has made the prospects for peace and reconciliation ever more remote. By deflating the IDF's fighting spirit and combative ethos, it has weakened Israel's national security and made the outbreak of a multi-front Arab-Israeli war – a scenario that had effectively vanished after the 1973 war – a distinct possibility: this time with the likely participation of Iran, the foremost regional superpower, and Israel's Arab citizens. And by transforming the PLO (and, to a lesser extent, Hamas) into internationally accepted political actors without forcing them to shed their genocidal commitment to the Jewish state's destruction, it weakened Israel's international standing and subjected it to sustained de-legitimisation campaigns.

Indeed, the fact that President George W. Bush's historic conditioning of Palestinian statehood on the replacement of the violent and corrupt PLO regime by 'new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror'³⁸ has been ignored by successive US administrations (including that of Donald Trump), let alone the Europeans, with this same terror-tainted repressive leadership universally viewed as the prospective government of a future Palestinian state, is an assured recipe for disaster. For so long as not a single Palestinian leader evinces genuine acceptance of the two-state solution or acts in a way signifying an unqualified embrace of the idea, there can be no true or lasting reconciliation with Israel. And so long as the territories continue to be governed by the PLO's and Hamas's rule of the jungle, no Palestinian civil society, let alone a viable state, can develop.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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