

Rethinking the Palestinian Question

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Five years ago (*Worldview*, "The Middle East Conflict: A Christian Perspective," July-August, 1969) I laid out what seemed to be the absolutely essential components for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. These included the continued existence of Israel as a free and independent state within relatively secure and defensible boundaries, the expression of Palestinian nationalism within some form of national entity, and the development of a scheme for joint Arab-Israeli sovereignty over the city of Jerusalem. In the light of conversations with Israelis and Arabs over the last two years, some modifications are in order.

First, it has become evident to me that Israel's need for relatively safe and defensible borders cannot stand in isolation from other realities that have emerged since the Yom Kippur War of October, 1973. The most fundamental reality is that Israel's long-term existence depends primarily on its ability to establish a peaceful accommodation with her Arab neighbors. After talking to Israelis in all walks of life I am convinced that Israel's economy and, even more important, its national psyche cannot sustain an ongoing series of wars separated by periods of seige mentality under terrorist attacks. There is simply no possible decisive military victory open to Israel that would once and for all put an end to the Palestinian struggle.

It is with a heavy heart that I have become convinced that each Israeli attempt to "wipe out" the Palestinian guerrilla groups by incursions into Lebanon, Jordan, or Syria simply adds another nail to Israel's coffin. Israel's only hope of long-term survival is to find some way of working for the establishment

of a Palestinian entity. I do not suggest that Israel commit suicide. Any meaningful existence for Jews in the Middle East for the foreseeable future requires an independent Jewish state rather than the so-called secular Jewish-Arab state some Palestinian spokesmen advocate (usually only to Western audiences). But if Israel hopes to preserve her existence as a nation it must recognize that an early resolution of the Palestinian issue is essential.

I was somewhat encouraged this summer, in contrast to the summer of 1973, to see how widespread the discussion of the Palestinian issue has become in Israeli life at all levels. This despite the repeated claims of Mr. Rabin that it is not the crucial question. Israeli press and television, as well as daily conversations, leave no doubt that the Israeli public has begun to recognize its centrality, and this will soon have its effect on government policy. Even the Rabin government's still inadequate public perception of the Palestinian question is a significant advance over its virtual closet status during the Meir era.

Obviously Israel cannot solve the Palestinian issue by herself. That is in the main the task of the Palestinian people. But Israel's policy decisions must begin to reflect the fact that its long-term existence depends on a solution of the Palestinian problem. This will dictate certain decisions which in the short-run perspective may seem unattractive. It will mean doing everything possible to prevent further escalation of hatred among the Palestinians against Israel, and it will mean dropping all talk about wiping out the Palestinian liberation movements. More specifically, it means ending reprisal raids against Palestinian locations in other Arab countries.

Admittedly, there are serious short-term risks in such a policy, and a few terrorists may find their way across Israeli borders. Israel's only hope here is to beef up its border defenses, both human and electronic. Every death of a Palestinian noncomb-

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tant in Lebanon or elsewhere (something that is almost inevitable in the reprisal approach) only widens and intensifies support for the "totally destroy Israel" faction among the Palestinian masses. In pursuing reprisal policy, the Israeli leadership is making some of the same mistakes the United States made in Vietnam. They have simply not understood adequately the nature of a liberation movement.

This critique of Israeli policy may sound harsh coming from one who has generally been identified with the pro-Israel camp. In no way do I underestimate the difficulty the present Israeli government would have in adopting the policy I advance. It is easy for an outsider to criticize. I do not have to face the people of Maalot or Kyrat Shmonah. Neither do I ignore the presence of powerful forces within Palestinian nationalism that, out of political principles or religious convictions (e.g., the Muslim brotherhood), will settle for nothing less than the total destruction of Israel as a state. The Palestine Liberation Organization in its 1974 meeting again reaffirmed its absolute unwillingness to recognize the State of Israel or to conclude peace with it. Such position statements must be taken seriously and not dismissed as propaganda for the home folks, as some Western supporters of the Palestinian cause tend to do. If I were living in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem I would regard these PLO public statements with utmost seriousness and not lightly lay them aside as negotiable issues.

I also strongly reject the type of criticism leveled against Israel by a Daniel Berrigan. It is one-sided, sometimes uninformed, and theologically arrogant. My own critique of Israeli policy stems from a passionate desire to see Israel's future existence guaranteed. Israel's situation is a very serious one, and it is with reluctance that I interject yet another critical voice. I am fully aware there is no guarantee that the moderate factions among the Palestinians will win the day—no matter what Israel does. Sometimes this realization leads me (as it does some of my Christian friends in Israel) to the brink of despair. But the retaliatory, search-and-destroy operations against the PLO will never bring peace. The only hope for Israel is to adopt policies that will strengthen rather than weaken the moderates within the Palestinian world.

At the same time, I would squarely challenge the Palestinians and their Western supporters. If they really want peace and justice in the Middle East they must stop calling for the destruction of Israel and put an end to the terrorist activities against the civilian population in Israel and abroad. Such actions make it almost impossible for any Israeli government to take the necessary risks for peace and still retain the support of its population. Also, from the moral point of view, are those who engage in or sanction Maalot and Munich really capable of producing any

kind of just and humane society if they gain power? I think it particularly incumbent upon the Palestinians' Western supporters (especially in religious circles) to renounce such policies and to do everything possible to strengthen the more moderate factions within the Palestinian camp.

Let's be honest. There has been far more open disagreement regarding specific Israeli policies by pro-Israeli Westerners and by Israelis themselves than there has been criticism of Palestinian policies by pro-Palestinian Westerners and Palestinians themselves. Such criticism is desperately needed if the final shape of the Palestinian entity is to represent the feelings and desires of all the Palestinian people (and not just of the PLO) and if Palestinian nationalism is not to lose its soul in the mire of hatred and violence. Likewise there must be a willingness on the part of the Palestinians and other Arab states to establish normal diplomatic ties with Israel involving trade, travel, and the like. I agree with Prime Minister Rabin that this would be an important sign that the Arabs are sincere about a peaceful settlement. Formal diplomatic contact does not mean that distrust and disagreement automatically disappear. But, as has been the case in the U.S.-Chinese rapprochement, it is one significant indicator of a willingness to accept each other's legitimacy as a state, and it is a commitment to work for deeper and more lasting ties.

Another specific policy decision incumbent upon Israel is to move away from support for King Hussein. The thought of King Hussein's continued presence in Amman is understandably appealing to the Israelis on pragmatic grounds. He is the least likely Arab leader to launch military action against Israel, and his feverishly loyal Bedouin troops have kept the Palestinians in line. In addition, he is readily susceptible to pressure from the United States. But my contact with Palestinians reveals a hatred of Hussein that runs as deep as the dislike of Israel. For them, especially the West Bankers, he has become a symbol of repression and second-class citizenship, an internal colonialist who murdered twenty thousand Palestinians during the Jordanian civil war.

In the long run he will have to disappear from the scene, if there is to be lasting peace in the area. Every time Israel publicly expresses its support for Hussein either directly or indirectly it further alienates the Palestinians and makes any future hope of reconciliation more difficult. My impression is that for the most part Israelis are not sufficiently aware of the deep resentment the King evokes among the bulk of the Palestinian population. One way in which Israel might demonstrate its disfavor of Hussein is by publicly announcing its unwillingness to return any of the West Bank to his control until he reaches some accommodation with the Palestinians.

These are the relevant policy considerations if "secure and defensible boundaries" is to take on any genuine meaning for Israel. The Yom Kippur War showed that the border question can no longer dominate Israeli thinking as it has for the last several years. In a meaningful peace settlement the Israelis ought to be willing to withdraw from most of the territory captured in 1967. The only exceptions I would make would be some minor adjustments around Jerusalem, the front ridge area of the Golan Heights, and perhaps Sharm-el-Sheik. For the moment let me bypass the complicated issue of the city of Jerusalem. Some form of demilitarization, perhaps with U.N. observation, would also be necessary for part of the Sinai, Golan Heights, and West Bank.

A special word about the Golan, which for Israel is undoubtedly the most emotional and strategic part of the occupied territories. The Golan has been the scene of Israel's greatest loss of life in military battle. It is difficult to know how one makes precise moral judgments about such a political situation. But after two decades of continual Syrian shelling of Israeli villages from the Heights I believe Syria has forfeited its rights to the outer edges of the Golan. Israeli farmers in the *kibbutzim* at the base of the Golan have a right to live in relative peace. Syria's claims to the Golan have been further eroded, in my mind, as a result of her treatment of the Druze people on the Golan (one of the principal groups of the Heights), including needless bombardment of Druze villages during the Yom Kippur War.

The second absolutely essential requirement without which there can be no lasting Middle East settlement is the establishment of a Palestinian entity. This requirement has already been touched upon in discussing the Israeli need for secure and defensible borders, but some further elaboration is necessary. First, the term "entity" rather than "state" is used quite deliberately. It is not up to outsiders to tell the Palestinians whether they ought to opt for a totally independent state on the West Bank-Gaza or establish some form of political union with Jordan. Reflecting upon the total situation, however, it would seem that ultimately the Palestinian state should include both banks of the Jordan River. This in view of the fact that a large number of Palestinians already live on the East Bank. The proposal is in line with the eventual disappearance from the scene of King Hussein and the dismantling of the present state of Jordan. This may not take place immediately. In fact, there may be an advantage in retaining a separate East Bank government in Amman under Hussein for the time being, lest a power vacuum be created too quickly.

Too often the idea of a Palestinian state is put forward as a panacea by pro-Arab spokesmen. The truth is that, unless certain safeguards are built in, there is no guarantee that such a state will truly

improve the lot of the majority of Palestinians. One such necessary safeguard is assurance that all groups of Palestinians, and not only the PLO, will have a voice in setting up the state. Securing such broad representation will not be an easy task, since the people of the area have not been used to publicly expressing their views. Few organizations exist that could channel such opinions. In addition, while in one sense the people of the West Bank share a common identity as Palestinians, in many ways they are less a nation than a collection of cities and villages. Being from Nablus, Bethlehem, Gaza, or Jericho is a far more important identification than being Palestinian. The relations between the towns have not always been cordial; one locality frequently looks at others with disdain or even scorn. Merging these diverse and competing identities into a single nation is no little challenge. Then too, a significant part of the present Jordanian population (in fact, some of King Hussein's staunchest supporters, and the core of his army) are Bedouins. While falling generally within the category of Arab, the Bedouins view themselves as different from the Palestinians, who, in turn, frequently resent them.

An even more crucial issue in any Palestinian state (and in the Arab world generally, especially in Lebanon) is the tension between Christian Arabs and Muslim Arabs. While they willingly accept a common Palestinian identity with their Muslim brothers and sisters, the Christian Arabs display a deep distrust of the Muslim and a fear of what will happen to them under a more militant Arab regime. This fear, incidentally, is especially strong in Lebanon, where Lebanese and foreign clergymen have told me privately that they fear a bloodbath against Christians if the Muslims take control of the government. This has led some Lebanese to secretly support Israel in the current conflict.

Much has been written in the last few years about the disappearance of Christians from the Middle East, from the Jerusalem and West Bank areas in particular. Christians have often blamed oppressive Israeli policies for this exodus. One cannot deny that Israeli occupation has contributed to the frustration felt by many West Bankers, resulting in a desire to emigrate to the Americas or Western Europe. But when Christians claim this is the dominant factor, they are covering up the central blame the Christian churches share. In point of fact, Christian missionaries have until very, very recently done little or nothing to develop an authentic Arab Christianity, one firmly implanted in the soil and culture of the Middle East. Arab Christians have generally been Westernized to such an extent that they are psychologically better prepared to live in Western societies than their own. Because of the better education they have received, they are also more fit to emigrate than their Muslim counterparts. This Westernization of the Christian Arabs has led many Muslims, not

without some justification, to view the Christian Arab as a somewhat alien force, a residue of Western colonialism that must be eradicated in any future Palestinian state.

As one speaks with young Christian Arabs in the West Bank, their desire to leave the area is of frightening proportions. If the various churches represented in the Middle East really want to help their Christian brothers and sisters, as I believe they must, they have to end their anti-Israeli sloganeering and get to the real issues.

The first step would be to use any influence the churches may have, internationally and locally, to insure that the rights of Christian Arabs will be guaranteed in any new Palestinian state. Second, the churches must do everything possible to create an indigenous Arab Christianity. The Anglican Church and the Vatican have taken a few concrete steps in this direction recently, the latter with the creation of the new University of Bethlehem, the first university on the West Bank. The cold, even hostile, reception accorded this university experiment by much of the Arab world only reveals the depth of the problem. Arab Christians desperately need institutions of all kinds (including communications media) through which they can articulate their feelings and culture. In a recent issue of *Worldview* ("The New Face of Israel," July) Michael Selzer writes of the need for Israel to create a more Middle Eastern image by incorporating into its national psyche the culture of the Middle Eastern Jews. The same point is relevant to the situation of the Christian Arabs. The more the Christian communities of the Middle East take on an Arab face, the greater the possibility for a genuine reconciliation with their Muslim brothers and sisters.

As to the status of Jerusalem, the general outline of a resolution appears very much as it did in 1969. The city cannot be redivided in its pre-1967 fashion; international control by the U.N. or another body is not a viable alternative; and the eastern part of the city cannot remain solely under Israeli jurisdiction. Some form of joint Arab-Israeli sovereignty must be developed.

While there should be no new barriers erected be-

tween the eastern and western parts of Jerusalem, there is no reason why East and West Jerusalem should be under the same political administration. West Jerusalem, as Israel's capital, is Israeli, and I see little reason for any Arab voice in its management. For East Jerusalem I would propose that there be a separate municipal government, perhaps a council with both Jewish and Arab representation. The representatives would be chosen by the local residents of East Jerusalem. Since the Eastern part of the city is also of special import to Jews and Arabs everywhere, nonresidents might also serve on such a Council. The Mayor of West Jerusalem, for example, might very well be an ex-officio member of such a council. Both the Israeli and the Palestinian and/or Jordanian flags could fly over East Jerusalem, and the residents could hold either Israeli or Palestinian citizenship.

All sorts of other arrangements would have to be worked out regarding the police, municipal services, taxes, and the like. But in the context of peace I am convinced these details could be resolved amicably. It might also be possible to evolve a scheme whereby some Jews could live in such historic places as Hebron while retaining Israeli citizenship, and Israeli Arabs who remain in their Galilee villages could opt for Palestinian citizenship.

It is not news that there is no easy road to peace in the Middle East. It is very possible that Arab extremists, coupled with Russian intervention, or, less likely, the domination of Israeli politics by hard-liners, could produce further war and suffering. If this should occur, I believe both Arabs and Israelis would be the losers. In such an event, I fear for the survival of Israel. That is why it is imperative that religious and political leaders, whether pro-Arab or pro-Israeli, shed one-sided clichés and inflammatory rhetoric and get on with the task of creating a viable and just society in the Middle East. The principal architects of such a society must be, of course, the Palestinians and the Israelis. But there is a constructive role also for outsiders. If some of the steps suggested above begin to be implemented, I remain hopeful that there is a possibility of a solution to the Middle East problem that has plagued us for so many decades.