

Mutual Recognition between Palestinians and Israelis Is Necessary for Peace

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Brief Analysis

Recently, the mayor of Jerusalem commended the U.S. plan to cut UNRWA funding and claimed that the agency is teaching children terrorism in its schools. To illustrate his statement, he referred to the fact that Dalal al-Mughrabi—a PLO operative who conducted a terrorist attack in 1978 during which 35 Israeli civilians were killed—is portrayed as a national hero in UNRWA textbooks.

It is true that Mughrabi committed a terrorist act by killing civilians. However, in the eyes of Palestinians, she is not a terrorist but a hero who fought for the freedom of her people. Palestinians view Mughrabi the same way Israelis view Menachem Begin, who committed terrorist acts on Palestinian people while he was involved in the Irgun terrorist group, and was wanted by British authorities for bombing the King David hotel. In these cases, the problem is that each party is viewing history from its own perspective, while national pride prevents either party from admitting any faults. Each party, through its own national consciousness, enforces its own narrative while vilifying the other party. This attitude will lead nowhere.

Mutual recognition between Palestinians and Israelis is needed for reconciliation, and reconciliation is needed to achieve lasting peace. From the Israeli perspective, the resistance to admitting Palestinians' grievances is understandable. Recognizing the Palestinians' grievances and the fact that they were forcibly displaced from their homes will entail recognition of their rights, namely the right to go back home. The right of return is a nightmare for Israelis as it will tip the demographic balance in favor of Palestinians. However, this fear is exaggerated. Palestinians who are properly settled elsewhere will not come back. And as for the Palestinians lingering in the refugee camps of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and other countries, a settlement can be reached with these host countries. Nevertheless, so far Israel has not found itself in a position where it is compelled to make a concession towards recognition.

Thus, recognition is a high price for the Israelis to pay, but it is the price for peace. This is why the international community should recognize Palestinian grievances the same way it recognized the grievances of the Jewish people—it should recognize the Nakba of 1948 in which the Palestinian people were forcefully displaced from their homes. The Nakba should be an indisputable, undeniable fact in the same way the Holocaust is an indisputable, undeniable

fact. Currently, the Western world views May 15 as a joyful day marking the birth of a state for the Jewish people who endured centuries of persecution in Europe. The Western world should also take a closer look at the other side of the coin: Israel must recognize the Nakba. The 15th of May also marks the Nakba for the Palestinian people, and without recognition of the Nakba, peace will remain a contract on paper that can be breached anytime conditions permit. 25 years after Oslo, we still lack a solution, and the Palestinian state is stuck in endless, futile negotiations.

On the other hand, peace between the Palestinians and Israelis will contribute to the stability of the entire region. In his 2014 address to the UN, president Obama said: “The situation in Iraq, Syria, and Libya should cure anyone from the illusion that this [Arab-Israeli] conflict is the main source of problems in the region.” This statement was in line with the Israeli narrative, which argues the main problem in the region is that Sunni and Shia Arabs are killing each other, a conflict that Israel has nothing to do with.

While this may be true, every leader, every dictator, and every terrorist that the region has known has used the Palestinian cause in order to garner legitimacy. Khomeini, though not even Arab, adopted the liberation of Jerusalem as his prime foreign policy goal; the name of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ main division is the Quds (Jerusalem) brigade. Similarly, Saddam Hussein began firing scud missiles into Israel following his 1991 invasion of Kuwait in order to garner legitimacy with the Arab masses, and he presented the entire invasion as one episode in a grand plan for the liberation of Palestine.

Hezbollah’s secretary general Hasan Nasrallah has also justified his intervention in Syria by saying that the road to Jerusalem starts from Aleppo. Even Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi vowed to turn to Palestine once he finishes off his immediate enemies. All of these figures adopted the issue of Palestine because it is an issue that is very dear to the hearts of Muslims and Arabs everywhere.

There will be no peace unless the Palestinian people get a viable, decent, and fair settlement. A fair solution for the Palestinians will strip radical movements of their legitimacy. On the other hand, forcing a dictum on the Palestinians that does not take their national aspirations into consideration and only serves the interests of Israel is doomed to fail. Not only it will fail, terrorists will use it to gain legitimacy and to mobilize a new wave of Jihadis. Even as ISIS fades away, a new movement will undoubtedly emerge, and you can bet that like its predecessors, it will adopt the issue of Palestine. ❖

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