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Why Would Israel Want Peace?

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Brief Analysis

In an ideal world, Israel, as a Jewish majority state holding on and developing the age-old Jewish civil and spiritual traditions, and home to a thriving Arab community, would sit next to a Palestinian state, home to its Arab majority and to an integrated Jewish community of citizens and residents — both at the pursuit of an European Union like framework eventually including other states in the region. Disputes, individual and collective, would be resolved, with trust, through judicial and cultural means. Alas, the region is farther from this vision today than virtually ever before.

The reasons for the failure are multiple and are polemically transacted by political leadership and public intellectuals. Grievances on both parties have merit, and whether through commission or omission, local, regional and global stakeholders can be faulted for where the vexing problem of Israel/Palestine currently stands.

Still, from an Arab self-critical perspective, two recent developments deserve serious consideration: the on-going “Marches of Return” at the Gaza-Israel border, and the recent comments of Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority. In both cases, a reasonable question to ask as a corollary to the events themselves and to the reaction in Arab political culture to them is: Why would Israel seek peace with an opponent apparently set on negating and denigrating it?

Irrespective of legal and procedural considerations, from a moral and ethical perspective, the right of an individual to return to his or her home, to seek the restoration of his property, and to claim compensation for prior deprivation, can be asserted as valid. So is the right of an individual to live in security in his homeland, without having to tackle overt and covert attempts at his or her expulsion or elimination. An honest assessment of the “Marches of Return” ought to recognize them more as an affront to the latter right of Israelis — to be confident of the permanence of their society — than an assertion of the former right for Palestinians. The declared peaceful intent and character of the marches is contradicted by the rhetoric of eradication and obliteration directed at Israel, by Palestinians and by much of Arab political culture. While the moral case for a Palestinian right of return is strong, it is neither made nor served by an open attempt at rejecting the foundation of the two-state solution — that Israel will emerge from such a

solution with the confidence that its destruction is no longer sought. Many, in Israel and abroad, are critical of the heavy hand of Israeli authorities at the border. Indeed, the “Marches” do not constitute an existential threat to the existence of Israel, as a state and as a society. They do expose nonetheless an ill will towards Israel that invites even the most principled supporters of a Palestinian right of return for deep reconsideration. The “Marches” — in both their Palestinian and Arab framing — ultimately support what skeptical and pessimistic observers of the situation have consistently argued: that the Palestinian right of return is trumped by the Israeli right to security.

Far more troubling than “Marches” manipulated if not orchestrated by parties — from Hamas to Iran — seeking immediate gains, even to the detriment of Palestinian rights, were the words uttered by Mahmoud Abbas in an official capacity, at an official gathering. Condemned by many in Israel and the West as “antisemitic,” the statements by Abbas — attributing the persecution of the Jews in Europe, including the Holocaust, to their “social function” as bankers and lenders, and not their identity — were neither rebuked nor questioned in Arab political culture. In fact, the opinion expressed by Abbas is relatively “moderate” in the Arab cultural context, where the “Jews,” in the collective, are derided as “the killers of prophets” or the descendants of apes and pigs; where the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” is deemed a verified and respectable source; and where global evils, from communism to imperialism, are directly traced to the perfidy of the “Jews.” In fact, in much of Arab political culture, no derogatory term need be affixed to the word “Jews.” The word “Jews” is its own derogation.

Yet, Abbas crossed a red line. In 2001, as a neophyte dictator welcoming the Roman Pontiff, Bashar al-Assad embarrassed the aging and ailing Pope John Paul II with a litany of statements illustrating the multiple origins of modern Arab anti-Jewish discourse, displaying its Islamic, anti-Zionist, and European antisemitic pedigree. A decade later, in 2010, the Muslim Brotherhood leader and later elected Egyptian president Mohamad Morsi demonstrated his outrage at Israeli wartime actions in Gaza by engaging in a public rehash of anti-Jewish slurs. Neither Assad nor Morsi, however, were ever considered enlightened leaders who may usher their countries and region into a brighter future. Despite some previous confused statements, much was expected of Abbas as a Palestinian president able to transcend the noxious noise of a troubled political culture, leading his society to a reasonable resolution of its plight.

His recent statements, however, are not mere revisionism or denial. The particular nature of the crime of the Holocaust, with six million victims in a world conflict that killed upward of fifty million, is that individuals were targeted, tagged, and exterminated on the basis of who they were, not on the basis of a threat or function. In town after town, it was not merely the “bankers and the lenders” who were rounded up, treated as cattle, and shipped to elimination camps, but young circumcised boys, elderly musicians, artists, housewives, engineers, and any other human beings “tainted” by Jewish ancestry. The would-be killers of the Jews had the solemn intent, potent means, and almost succeeded in their quest, obliterating most of the ancestral European Jewish life, and leaving survivors in a state of perpetual trauma. That Mahmoud Abbas, after a lifetime of engaging Jewish partners, is unaware of this reality is beyond disappointing. To “explain” the genocide of the Jewish on the basis of their “social function” is to excuse it. It is also to justify a repeat, in an environment seemingly eager for one, even if incapable of it.

Mahmoud Abbas apologized to those who were offended, but did not address the substance of his statements. It can be assumed a fortiori that he misspoke, that his understanding of Jewish concerns, however surprising that is, is deficient. In that case, for the apology to be meaningful, may the moment be an opportunity for teaching Arab political culture about the deep wounds of Jewish history, and may the teacher, and the critic of the malevolent portrayal of the “Jews” across the region be Mahmoud Abbas. Otherwise, Mahmoud Abbas has irreversibly damaged his credibility as a partner for peace, and has given Israel further reasons not to seek the ever so elusive settlement. ❖



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