

# Mahmoud Abbas and the 'Jewish State'

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



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## In refusing to recognize Israel as the "Jewish state," the Palestinian leader is denying a fact that even Arafat was willing to admit.

**O**n my desk sits a replica of a tourist guide printed in 1924 by the Supreme Muslim Council of Jerusalem, the highest Muslim communal body in Palestine. Thousands of travelers to the Holy Land in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s learned from this guide that Solomon's Temple, the holiest site in Judaism, was located on the site now occupied by the Haram al-Sharif, or "Noble Enclosure," which includes the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque.

The fact that the head of the Supreme Muslim Council was Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the Britain-appointed mufti of Jerusalem and father of Palestinian nationalism who later infamously collaborated with the Nazis, lent special credence to this statement of Muslim recognition of historic Jewish connection to Jerusalem.

Flash forward to July 2000, when President Bill Clinton hosted a fateful peace summit at Camp David. In one critical encounter, Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat -- who effectively inherited the mantle of leadership from him -- rejected what his mentor had affirmed decades earlier. As Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross later recalled, Arafat told Clinton that Solomon's Temple was never in Jerusalem. If any Jewish temple existed, Arafat suggested, it was in the West Bank town of Nablus. The summit collapsed in acrimony. Within weeks, Palestinians launched the Second Intifada, which cost thousands of lives and dealt prospects for peace a terrible blow.

As President Barack Obama prepares to host Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the White House on Monday, amid a violent flare-up of tensions between Israel and Islamic extremists in Gaza, history may be poised to repeat itself. Once again, a Palestinian leader is taking an even more rejectionist position than his predecessor.

Today's issue is the question of the "Jewish state." This is shorthand for Israel's demand that Palestinians specifically accept that the goal of current diplomacy is the mutual recognition of two independent, sovereign states -- Palestine, the nation-state of the Palestinian people, and Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people. Abbas

affirmed last week that he would flatly refuse such a formula: "No way," he said. The fact that he is, as Obama has said, the most moderate Palestinian leader Israel has ever dealt with only lends gravity to the fact that he has adopted such a hardline view.

On the surface, it is difficult to understand what all the ruckus is about. Israel, of course, was built by Jews as a haven for Jews. The 1947 U.N. resolution that gave international imprimatur to the partition of British-mandated Palestine mentioned the phrase "Jewish state" dozens of times. Surveys over the last decade by respected Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki show that 40 to 52 percent of Palestinians would accept recognition of Israel as the "Jewish state" -- levels of support, it is important to note, achieved without Abbas's public endorsement.

Even Arafat, the uber-nationalist, understood this. The same Arafat who rejected the idea of a historic Jewish connection to Jerusalem and orchestrated numerous terrorist attacks in his bitter fight against Israel accepted the contemporary reality that Israel -- whether he liked it or not -- was the "Jewish state." And he said so publicly, on at least three occasions.

On Nov. 18, 1988, in the early days of the first Palestinian uprising, Arafat convened the Palestine National Council, the proto-parliament of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), to issue a declaration of independence. That document, a Palestinian hybrid of the American and Israeli declarations of independence, proclaimed the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the United Nations resolution "which partitioned Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state."

This description was not simply a throwaway line, but rather the considered position of the Palestinian leadership at the time. On Dec. 8, 1988, the *New York Times* reported on a press conference Arafat held with several American peace activists. At the event, Arafat said: "We accept two states, the Palestine state and the Jewish state of Israel."

Sixteen years later, in an interview published on June 17, 2004, Arafat reaffirmed his position. Asked by Israel's liberal daily newspaper *Haaretz* if he understood that "Israel has to keep being a Jewish state," the PLO leader replied, "Definitely." He later said to the interviewer that it was "clear and obvious" that the Palestine refugee problem needs to be resolved in a way that does not change the Jewish character of Israel through an influx of millions of returning Palestinians.

Reasonably enough, Palestinians are asking today why Israel insists on them recognizing its status as the "Jewish state," when past Israeli leaders did not make this demand in peace talks with Egypt or Jordan. The reason is because conflicts with those countries were, by the time of peace talks, essentially territorial disputes, resolved through the equitable drawing of boundaries and the creation of mutually satisfactory security arrangements.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is deeper -- it is existential. While many Palestinians suspect that Israel will forever deny them independence, deep in the minds of many Israelis is the idea that Palestinians have a long-term plan to destroy Israel. Formal recognition of Israel as the rightful national home of the Jewish people, which would exist side by side with the rightful national home of the Palestinian people, would go far toward calming such fears. The fact that Abbas still refuses to offer this recognition only deepens those fears.

Perhaps Abbas's refusal is tactical -- an attempt to extract concessions from Israel in exchange for saying the same words Arafat uttered years ago. Or perhaps his refusal is as real and portentous as Arafat's refusal to accept a Jewish connection to Jerusalem.

To his credit, Obama has understood the centrality of the "Jewish state" issue. Despite the pressure he has exerted on Israel to stop building in Jerusalem, release jailed terrorists, or make painful concessions in peace talks, the president has never wavered from his characterization of "the Jewish state of Israel."

That position will be put to the test in Obama's meeting with Abbas on Monday. The president will face a choice: He

can recite how even the iconic Arafat recognized Israel as the Jewish state, remind Abbas of the years lost and lives wasted since the last time a Palestinian leader took a harder line than his predecessor, and -- taking a page from his recent public warnings to Israel -- threaten Abbas with a dire future of isolation and irrelevance if he doesn't grab this opportunity for peace. Or alternatively, he could punt -- letting Abbas keep both the accolades of a moderate and the positions of a rejectionist.

For a president confronted elsewhere by metaphors of the past -- Vladimir Putin as Adolf Hitler, the return of the Cold War -- how Obama deals with the "Jewish state" issue in his meeting with Abbas will determine whether, in the Israeli-Palestinian context, history is moving forward or once again moving backward.

*Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.* ❖

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