

Don't Legitimate Arafatistan

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

Jun 19, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Articles & Testimony

Lying in bed Monday night, I switched the channel from a gloomy CNN documentary on Chechnya -- Christiane Amanpour describing death and destruction in another God-forsaken place -- to watch the even gloomier Palestine Television, the official satellite station of the Palestinian Authority. On an English-language talk show, the hosts were queried by a caller on the Koranic rationale for dispatching a 15-year-old girl to blow herself up to kill Israeli boys and girls. In response, a Palestinian version of Larry King said he was no theologian but in his view, "martyrdom operations" were just a way to perform an act of "an eye for an eye" justice, something that the Jews should understand.

Tuesday morning, I awoke, turned on CNN, and saw the footage of the carnage left by a suicide attack on a bus in Jerusalem. At least 19 were killed, including boys and girls. It was all so predictable.

As President Bush prepares to announce plans for the creation of a "provisional" Palestinian state, this vignette underscores the cognitive dissonance between diplomacy and reality.

Logically, the case for a Palestinian state is compelling. More than half a century ago, the United Nations first offered statehood to Palestinians. Though they rejected it, because it came at the price of accepting the existence of Israel, the idea of "Palestine" did not disappear. A smart, industrious people, Palestinians have acquired a national identity over the last century, even if it has developed largely in response to the success of Zionism. There may have been a time when solutions to the Palestinian question could have been found in the deserts of Iraq, in union with Jordan, or in annexation by Israel, but those options disappeared long ago, leaving some form of independence as the only option left standing. While not every people who deserve a state actually get one -- the tragic case of Iraqi Kurds tops the list -- Palestinians were lucky enough to have Israel as their enemy, not Saddam Hussein. For that reason alone, the world is talking about Palestinian statehood, not Palestinian genocide.

Sadly, though, statehood is not on the minds of those Palestinians who strap to their waist a belt filled with 10 kilos of explosive, packed with nails and soaked with rat poison, don a skullcap or Israeli army uniform, board a bus, press a button and ascend to some perverse heaven. In fact, no one really knows what is on their minds -- after all, a failed or reluctant suicide bomber may not have the same motivation as one who completes the task -- but chances are it's not the promise of a new flag, anthem or passport. All we know for sure is that the bomber has killed Jews. The rest is psychology.

Statehood is also not what's on the minds of the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat. Even if one accepts the wildly revisionist Palestinian history of the Camp David talks, there can be no arguing with the fact that Palestinians would have received more land faster if they had pursued the path of negotiations than by recourse to mass uprising or terrorist attacks. Indeed, if Arafat had pursued diplomacy rather than violence two years ago, Palestine would cover 97% of the West Bank, including part of Jerusalem, not the 40% President Bush is likely to propose.

Statehood may very well be on the minds of the majority of Palestinians themselves. What has been overlooked in the past two years is how few Palestinians actually participated in either the intifada -- the early phase of violent popular protest, when Palestinian youth were seen daily throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at Israeli checkpoints -- or the more recent stage of drive-by shootings, terrorist bombings or infiltrations into Jewish settlements. All told, just a tiny percentage of Palestinians have been mobilized for confrontation against Israel. While many tell pollsters they support fighting until all Palestine is liberated -- i.e., the destruction of Israel -- perhaps the fact so many are sitting out the fight is a sign of war weariness and realism, tinged with fatalism. Alas, in Arafatistan, none of this matters much. The war goes on.

This is the real dissonance in the U.S. initiative to create a "provisional" Palestinian state. It may be a noble, just attempt to address the aspirations of ordinary Palestinians but, in raw political terms, they lack the means to take advantage of what is on the table. They are powerless and irrelevant. The two groups that matter today are the bombers and the leaders, the tag-team operation that sets the agenda of television newscasts and the itineraries of traveling diplomats. And when they see President Bush taking even the most incremental steps toward Palestinian demands, they know they are on the right track.

I have much sympathy for President Bush, who neither sought the war on terrorism nor aspired to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians. Whereas his predecessor, Bill Clinton, was caught up in the romance of being simultaneously the most pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian president in history, President Bush has instead sought a more realpolitik balance of being simultaneously the most pro-Israel and pro-Saudi president in history. Hence, the effort to try in vain to fit the round Arafat peg into the square "peace process" hole, all the while supporting Israel's right to self-defense.

But it cannot work. America's interests and those of the Arafat-jihadist alliance that runs Palestine today are incompatible. Led as it is, independence will give "Palestine" new means to wage its war against Israel; shorn of its current leadership and its ideology of perpetual conflict, Palestine stands a good chance of living with Israel, as President Bush likes to say, "side by side, in peace and secure borders."

The president's expected declaration on Palestine, therefore, will not mark a bold, new chapter in U.S. policy. On the contrary, it is an example of avoiding a decision, not taking one. If President Bush is serious about Arab-Israeli peacemaking, he must choose between support for the Palestinian people and sufferance of the current Palestinian leadership. A speech on that theme may break some diplomatic china -- at home and abroad -- but anything less will fail the test of making real progress toward peace. ❖

Wall Street Journal

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)