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## **DISENGAGEMENT IS NO SOLUTION**

When Menachem Begin, newly-elected prime minister of Israel, met president Jimmy Carter at the White House in 1977, he was almost immediately pressed by Carter to stop the settlement of Jews in Judea and Samaria. Begin replied that just as the president could not prevent American citizens from living where they pleased in the US, so he as prime minister of Israel had no right to prevent Jews from living where they pleased in the Land of Israel.

Begin's reply was in complete conformity with the Mandate for Palestine - the Jewish people's international charter for its state in Palestine. It was conferred on Britain in 1922 for the specific purpose of promoting and facilitating the 'reconstitution' of the Jewish National Home in Palestine. Notably it laid on the British government the duty of promoting the 'close settlement' of Jews on the land, as well as giving them state lands on which to settle.

Britain's giving up of the Mandate in 1947 did not affect the rights of the Jewish people. They remained valid under the United Nations organization established after World War II - and in spite of all that has happened since, they remain valid to this day. Palestine, however, was only a very small part of the territories of the defeated Turkish Empire shared out by the League of Nations after World War I; and it was the Arabs who were the great beneficiaries of the Turks' defeat. Mandates to oversee and promote Arab progress to independence were given to France as well as to Britain. France governed Syria and Lebanon; Britain, in addition to Palestine, was entrusted with a Mandate for the huge territory of Mesopotamia (Iraq). All these were to become Arab states.

Moreover, as a precursor to Britain's later betrayal of her trust to the Jewish people, the British government slipped in a clause excluding the whole of Eastern Palestine (beyond the Jordan River) from the Jewish state-to-be. Jewish protests were to no avail.

Thus, in time, was formed Transjordan - a virtually empty territory taking up almost 80 percent of Palestine's total area. It became a brand new Arab state, its inhabitants coming from western Palestine and some from Hedjaz (now Saudi Arabia). This eastern part of the Land of Israel was eventually named the Kingdom of Jordan. Thus the great Arab nation came into sovereign possession of the whole of the huge territory between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, except for the sliver of land that remained for the Jewish State of Israel.

THEN, IN 1947, the General Assembly of the United Nations, successor to the League of Nations, proposed the partition of Palestine, which would add still more territory (now in Western Palestine) to Transjordan. The Jews, decimated by the Holocaust, and hungry to see their own state at last, perforce accepted this further truncation of their territory.

But the League of Arab States (not the 'Palestinians' - no such entity or claimant existed in 1947) rejected the offer, and instead, emboldened by the manifest military weakness of the minuscule Jewish state, launched a three-front attack on it the day it was born in 1948 with the declared intention, and exuberant hope, of wiping it out.

Why? Why? What quarrel with Israel did Egypt have, or Iraq, or Syria, or Saudi Arabia, or indeed Transjordan itself? They had no quarrel with Israel - except its very existence.

Whence comes the Arabs' unchanging, inflexible attitude to the Jewish people? One part of the answer is that they have persuaded themselves that the complete territory between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean is Arab property.

The Arabs, though failing to destroy Israel in the war of 1948, managed to capture and occupy (and annexed) a slice of western Palestine - the 'West Bank.'

Still, they did not waver in their determination to destroy Israel. In 1967 they went to war again in order to take over the remainder of the land. Unabashedly, with their armies poised on Israel's borders, their leader, Egyptian president Gamal Nasser, boasted that they were about to annihilate Israel.

That second war the Arabs lost completely. By any civilized criterion - let alone international precedent - they certainly thereby forfeited the territory they had raped in the first place in 1948. Unbelievably, the Israeli government, longing for peace, offered to hand back the territory Israel had regained. The Arab states, at a conference in Khartoum, bluntly refused. They were not interested in just any piece of territory. They wanted it all.

Any objective observer would say: 'Here was a golden opportunity to give the Palestinians a state.' But that had been possible also before 1967. Indeed, why not in 1947 or 1948? And throughout the 19 years in between? This never occurred to the Arab states, including Jordan, nor did the Arabs living in western Palestine ever demand it from Jordan. True, a terrorist organization was formed in 1964 when Jordan still held the territory but the terrorists - the PLO - did not attack Jordan; they attacked Israel.

However, the Arabs changed their strategy after the 1967 defeat. They recalled the advice of the Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba who warned them in the 1950s that they would never destroy Israel in one blow and must aim at accomplishing it in phases. Thus Arab diplomacy switched from dissolution of the Jewish state to the creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank, but with Jerusalem as its capital.

That is the reality that successive leaders of Israel, Right and Left, have failed or refused to confront. Nor have they seriously considered a comprehensive strategy with which to combat its manifold manifestations, nor even a serious public education campaign to parallel the world-wide Arab propaganda.

NOW, PRIME Minister Ariel Sharon has catapulted Israel straight into the Arab plan of 'phases' - by which Yasser Arafat meant one Arab gain or victory as a jumping off ground for the next phase, until Israel is eliminated and 'a million Jews flee to America.' Here we have a sudden unexpected procession of circumstances. First, the acceptance of the Munich-styled road map diktat - which at least, as a first step, provided for Arab disarmament. Then, without any sign of disarmament (on the contrary, with every indication that no Arab leader was going to do anything about disarmament), Israel announces the surrender of territory.

To the Arabs the surrender of territory in Samaria is probably more important symbolically than in Gaza; and perhaps most meaningful to them is the 'evacuation' of Jews from the land they live on, by force if necessary Inshallah.

Now, more and more Israelis who were at first beguiled by a presumably far-sighted leader, who seemed to be saying that this is the road to peace, have begun to see

the Sharon plan as simple defeatism. Even from the editors of Haaretz, who have been asserting persistently that Sharon's plan was supported by a majority of the people, have come signals that they are afraid that a referendum now would show the contrary.

Can disengagement be stopped? It can be stopped if Sharon's majority in the Likud Party come to their senses, withdraw their support for his plan, and pass through the Knesset a decision for a referendum. Such a vote might well also ensure their own chances of being elected to the next Knesset.

Israel's enemies would not like it, but with Europe going through a rash of referenda, criticism there would largely be stilled. Nor could the United States reasonably object to such a democratic decision.

In any case, it is time that Israel stopped trying to appease its enemies. Moreover, a halt in the disengagement process would have a healing effect on internal Israeli relations. It would also create a margin of time for a rethinking of the whole Arab Israeli dispute, not only in Israel but also in the United States and, indeed, in the world at large.