



Palestine and Palestine Studies: One Century after World War I and the Balfour Declaration

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In this overarching March 2014 inaugural lecture at the newly established Center for Palestine Studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi, while reminiscing about the genesis and evolution of the new narrative on the 1948 war, provides fresh analyses of both the Balfour Declaration and UN Security Council Resolution 242. He also addresses such pressing Palestinian issues as the one-state/two-state debate, Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), and the Hamas/Fatah relationship. He concludes by highlighting the potentially catastrophic nature of the disputes centering on Jerusalem's Muslim holy places and the threat to the Middle East posed by the policies of Benjamin Netanyahu, "the most dangerous political leader in the world today."

I

WE MEET TODAY to celebrate the second anniversary of the establishment of the SOAS Center for Palestine Studies. I am honored to have been asked to deliver this first annual lecture. It is deeply gratifying to be addressing you on this occasion in the name of a sister institution—Institute for Palestine Studies (IPS)—which has just celebrated its fiftieth anniversary as an independent, private, nonpartisan, nonprofit, public service research institute.

We at IPS look forward to long years of innovative cooperation between our two institutions. Like other centers of Palestine studies, we are both researching the same phenomenon: the ever-growing accumulation of debris generated on that fateful day of 2 November 1917 by the so-called Balfour Declaration, the single most destructive political document of the twentieth century on the Middle East.

How far this university has traveled—and how alien the idea of a Center for Palestine Studies would have been to Lord Balfour—can be gauged from the oft-quoted words, dripping with Olympian disdain, he uttered in 1919: "The Great Powers are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the seven hundred thousand Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land."¹

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The expression “Palestine Problem” is shorthand for the genesis, evolution, and fallout of the Zionist colonization of Palestine, which began in the early 1880s and is ongoing at this very hour. One century ago this year, the floodgates of World War I opened to usher the chain of events that led to the Balfour Declaration. By the time it was issued in 1917, almost forty years had passed since the beginning of Zionist colonization, and twenty since the first Zionist Congress at Basel. Despite the fervor of the early colonists, the movement of the Jewish masses fleeing Tsarist rule was not southwards towards the Levant, but westwards across Europe towards the magnetic shores of North America. A trickle arrived in Palestine; a flood rolled across the Atlantic. Most rabbinical authorities throughout the Diaspora were hostile to Zionism for preempting the Jewish Messiah, while the American and European Jewish bourgeoisie were embarrassed by Zionism and fearful of gentile charges of dual loyalty.

All this changed when Britannia gave its blessing to the Zionist venture in the Balfour Declaration. Not only did it give its blessing, it also agreed to transform this unilateral declaration into a self-imposed obligation guaranteed under international law in the newly established League of Nations Mandate system. Uniquely in its governance as an imperial power, it agreed to carry out this obligation in partnership with a foreign private body—the World Zionist Organization—now elevated, in the guise of an international Jewish agency, to an independent actor recognized by the League for the specific purpose of creating the Jewish national home in Palestine.

An immediate question leaps to mind. How could London, teeming with pro-consular expertise ripened during centuries of dealings with multitudinous races and faiths across the globe, have fallen for the Zionist plan? The short answer has two syllables: hubris. At the end of World War I, with the United States withdrawn behind a wall of isolationism and with the Ottoman, Romanov, Habsburg, and Hohenzollern empires in ruins, British power was paramount. King Clovis’s realm across the channel alone could challenge it. But this was no big deal, because Sir Mark Sykes had found a handy formula to win French acquiescence: Divide the loot!

There is of course a longer answer, which is where our research centers come in. Setting aside the trees and thick foliage of the Mandate period’s white papers, blue books, and commissions of inquiry, our scholars would do well to look more deeply into how and why imperial London between the two world wars nurtured a rival *imperium in imperio* under its governance. The puzzle deepens when one considers that this imperium was not only local. It had an *external* dimension, an *imperium ex imperio*, in the Jewish Agency, whose major central financial institutions and other sources of power were largely American, putting it beyond London’s control.

Thus, when in 1939 Ben-Gurion, the preeminent leader of the Yishuv, decided to change horses, discarding the British mount (favored by his political rival, Chaim Weizmann) for an American steed, he did so in deliberate calculation of America’s potential as a counterweight and successor to Britain. The story is as old as history: the revolt of a client against a metropolitan patron. But the erosion of Anglo-Zionist concord by the late 1930s also illustrates an iron law of politics. No two political entities remain eternally wedded to one another. There may be a moral here for the current relationship between Obama’s Washington and Netanyahu’s Tel Aviv.

II

The events of 1948 have stirred up more controversy than any other phase of the Palestine problem, giving rise eventually to a new post-Zionist school of historiography in Israel. Its authors have been designated as the New Historians, as opposed to the Old Historians who articulated a mythical Zionist foundational narrative. The old narrative featured a Yishuv *David* facing an Arab *Goliath*, with Perfidious Albion bent on strangling the infant state. It also involved hundreds of thousands of Palestinians leaving their homes, farms, and businesses in response to orders from their leaders to make way for the invading Arab armies on 15 May 1948.

Given the role of the Institute for Palestine Studies and this speaker in the articulation of the Palestinian counter-narrative to that of the Old Historians, it could be useful, for the record, to share some elements of how it developed. One of the first authoritative accounts of an early version of the Israeli orders myth is given by the Palestinian historian 'Arif al-'Arif.² 'Arif had been based in Ramallah as assistant district commissioner during the last years of the Mandate, and the Jordanians kept him on as de facto civilian governor.

In mid-July 1948, Israeli forces had attacked the Palestinian towns Lydda and Ramla while the Arab armies a stone's throw away stood by. The entire population of the two towns, some sixty thousand people, was forced on a long trek towards Ramallah. They arrived there in a pitiable condition, after hundreds had dropped along the way. Count Bernadotte, the UN mediator, arrived in Ramallah the third week of July. 'Arif, who was delegated to accompany him, was astonished when Bernadotte told him that the senior Israeli officials he had just met had "assured" him that the inhabitants of Lydda and Ramla had left because of orders given them by the town leaders. 'Arif immediately arranged for Bernadotte to meet these leaders, still living in caves and under bridges after their expulsion: Muslim and Christian ecclesiasts, municipal councilors, judges, professionals of all kinds. There is little doubt that this experience contributed to Bernadotte's recommendation to the UN on the return of the refugees, which the General Assembly adopted after his assassination by Yitzhak Shamir's Stern Gang.

In the 1950s, the orders myth was all over the British media. By this time, the predominant Israeli version was that the orders had been broadcast by the top Palestinian leadership, not local leaders. The most aggressive exponent of this version was the British journalist Jon Kimche, then editor of the weekly *Jewish Observer*, the organ of the British Zionist Federation. The top Palestinian leader, Haj Amin al-Husayni, was then living in exile in Lebanon. I had known him from childhood and he had always treated me kindly. When I described to him the impact of the orders' myth in the West, he immediately allowed me unrestricted access to his archives (since destroyed by Phalangist militiamen during the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s). I had earlier gone through reams of the BBC monitoring records of the 1948 Arab radio broadcasts kept at the British Museum in London. I added the data from Haj Amin's archives to the findings from the BBC records to produce my article "Why Did the Palestinians Leave?" which was published in 1959 by the *Middle East Forum*, the alumni journal of the American University of Beirut (AUB).³

Enter Erskine B. Childers. Soon after the article's publication, I received in Beirut a visit from this young Irish journalist who showed great interest in the BBC records and said he intended to examine them himself upon his return to London. Enter (early 1960) Ian Gilmour, owner of the *Spectator*, the

prestigious British weekly. He had just been to Israel and had heard all about the orders from senior Israeli officials. Having read the article in *Middle East Forum*, he asked many questions and left. On 12 May 1961, the *Spectator* published Childers' article entitled "The Other Exodus," whose conclusion was: no orders.

There ensued a crackling correspondence of readers' letters that lasted almost three months in which, thanks to Gilmour, the counter-Israeli narrative was given unprecedented exposure.⁴ An early responder was Jon Kimche, who loftily opined: "New myths . . . have taken place of old ones. The Israelis . . . have contributed their share, but more lately it has been the Arab propagandists (Walid Khalidi and Childers)."⁵

At the time, I was on sabbatical from the AUB at Princeton, checking the CIA monitoring records of the 1948 Arab broadcasts at the Firestone Library. From there, I wrote to the *Spectator* disclaiming acquaintance with Childers (which was untrue), but expressing great delight that he had independently arrived at the same conclusion as myself (which was true). I also noted that my latest findings in the CIA records corroborated my earlier findings in the BBC records.⁶ As it happened, while at Princeton I had also been looking at the Hebrew sources with the help of a sympathetic elderly Sephardic lady scholar.

The result of my research was "Plan Dalet: The Zionist Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine," soon to be published, again in the *Middle East Forum*.⁷ As the *Spectator* correspondence increasingly involved the Palestinian exodus more generally—I weighed in with a summary of my findings. My letter stated, inter alia:

A Zionist master-plan called Plan Dalet for the forceful occupation of Arab areas both within and outside the Jewish State "given" by the UN to the Zionists was put into operation. This plan aimed at the de-Arabization of all areas under Zionist control.

Plan Dalet aimed at both breaking the back of Palestine Arab resistance and facing the UN, the U.S., and the Arab countries with a political and military fait accompli in the shortest time possible—hence the massive and ruthless blows against the centers of Arab population.

As Plan Dalet unfolded and tens of thousands of Arab civilians streamed in terror into the neighboring Arab countries, Arab public opinion forced their shilly-shallying governments to send their regular armies into Palestine.

It is the considered opinion of this writer that it was only the entry of the Arab armies that frustrated the more ambitious objective of Plan Dalet, which was no less than the military control of the whole of Palestine west of the Jordan.⁸

To the best of my knowledge, this was, and remains, the first public mention of Plan Dalet in the West.

III

Just as World War I gave birth to the Balfour Declaration, the 1967 war gave birth to another momentous document: UN Security Council Resolution 242 (UNSCR 242).⁹ And just as the Balfour Declaration is, in a sense, the fountainhead of all developments in the Palestine problem/ Arab–Israeli conflict in the twentieth century up to and including the 1967 war, so is UNSCR 242,

in a sense, the ultimate fountainhead of all developments in the conflict throughout the balance of the twentieth century and to this day. Oddly, many observers look with favor on UNSCR 242, largely because its preamble talks about the “inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war.” But in its operative paragraphs, UNSCR 242 does the precise opposite. True, it talks about “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied” (in the French version, *des territoires occupés*), but it does not specify the *time* when the withdrawal should begin, the *line* to which Israel should withdraw, or how long the withdrawal should take. Nor does it mention by name the territories to be withdrawn from. The resolution calls for peace and “secure and recognized borders” between all the protagonists, but it does not indicate who decides the security or location of these borders. There is no mention of the armistice lines. The resolution affirms the need for a “just settlement of the refugee problem,” but does not indicate who decides the justice of the settlement or who these refugees are. The word “Palestinian” is totally absent, and there is no reference to the applicability of the Geneva Conventions to the occupied territories.

This remarkable text should be seen against the background of decisions taken by the Israeli cabinet on 18–19 June, soon after the hostilities ended. Briefly, the Israeli cabinet consensus centered on:

1. Withdrawal *only* on condition of peace agreements;
2. Peace treaties with Egypt and Syria on the basis of the international frontiers *and* Israel’s security needs;
3. Annexation of the Gaza Strip; and
4. The Jordan River as Israel’s security border, implying permanent control over the West Bank.¹⁰

You don’t have to be a cryptographer to see the concordance of UNSCR 242 with these specifications—or rather *instructions*—of the Israeli cabinet. The focus on peace treaties with Egypt and Syria to the exclusion of Jordan was, of course, designed to decouple these countries from the Palestine problem and to isolate both the Palestinians and Jordan. On 28 June 1967, ten days after this cabinet meeting, Israel revealed its true intentions by annexing the 2.5 square miles of Jordanian municipal East Jerusalem together with an additional 22.5 square miles of adjacent West Bank territory in an obscene territorial configuration sticking northwards at Ramallah.

UNSCR 242 was an Israeli diplomatic and political victory no less momentous than its victory on the battlefield. But it was only possible because of President Lyndon B. Johnson. What really motivated President Johnson remains a field of study for all centers of Palestine studies. As a senator in 1956, Johnson had adamantly opposed Eisenhower’s decision to force Israel to restore the status quo ante and give back its acquisition of territory by war. In the aftermath of the 1967 war, Israel’s foreign minister Abba Eban worked closely with Johnson’s inner circle, including U.S. ambassador to the UN Arthur Goldberg.¹¹ (As a member of a pre-Saddam Iraqi delegation to the UN General Assembly right after the war, I had to listen to Eban weave his spider web of falsehoods, but I also got the chance to rebut him).¹²

Eban reveals in his memoirs that he urged his American counterparts to “eradicate” from their minds the very concept of “armistice,” and to link Israeli withdrawal from the current cease-fire lines “to peace negotiations in which boundaries would be fixed by agreement.”¹³ This meant that the starting point for the negotiations would be the farthest foxholes reached by Israeli armor deep

in Arab territory. It also meant that Israel could—as indeed it did—use the full weight of its conquests and its military superiority to dictate the time, tempo, scope, sequence, and extent of its withdrawal.

The “regime” established by UNSCR 242 has been acquiesced in, if not abetted, by successive American administrations since Johnson’s presidency. The resolution’s opaqueness and permissiveness made possible the settlement policy ongoing to this very hour. It is this regime that sent Sadat to Jerusalem and Arafat to Oslo.

The 1967 war dealt the coup de grâce to secular pan-Arabism, already in its death throes. But it catapulted the Palestinian guerrilla movement to the front ranks because it symbolized *resistance* for the entire Arab world after the humiliating rout of the Arab armies. The war’s most profound and potentially catastrophic impact, however, lies in the inspiration it gave to neo-Zionist religious fundamentalist messianism, and to its creation of conditions conducive to a clash over Jerusalem’s holy places between Jewish and Christian evangelical jihadists, on the one hand, and Muslim jihadists on the other.

IV

When one looks at the Palestinian scene today, one sees a people hanging by their fingernails to the rump of their ancestral land. In such dire straits, the topmost Palestinian priority should surely be to close ranks. This is why the Fatah-Hamas rift is so scandalous. You need your two fists to survive. Both sides are equally to blame and both sides should be tirelessly, relentlessly urged to reconcile. Of course the very act of reconciliation between them would be pounced on by Netanyahu as an act of war. But surely Israel knows that intra-Palestinian reconciliation is a *must* for any Palestinian-Israeli peace.

The gap between Fatah and Hamas on the mode of struggle is wide. Abbas is committed to nonviolence. This commitment is not philosophical: as a practitioner of violence in his guerrilla days, Abbas was quietly absorbing its cost and consequences. It is no coincidence that he was the first within the Fatah leadership to propose a dialogue with sympathetic Israeli interlocutors. Abbas’s commitment to nonviolence is strategy, not tactics. I know this for certain, having listened to him and to his three predecessors: Arafat, al-Shuqairi, and Haj Amin. In many ways, Abbas is a tragic figure. He is a guerrilla leader wittingly turned “collaborationist.” Every night his security forces keep to their barracks, while Israeli commando squads prowl the by-lanes of casbahs, refugee camps, and West Bank villages hunting down young militants. This is a terrible price to pay for moral high ground. How long can Abbas maintain this policy without real progress towards peace? How long can the Palestinians put up with his leadership? Nevertheless it should not be forgotten that the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement could not have progressed so far without Abbas.

Wide though it is, the gap between Abbas and Hamas on the issue of armed struggle is not unbridgeable. There is evidence of pragmatism within the Hamas leadership. And if it thinks theologically, it can also conceive of a theological exit strategy from its declared commitment to the armed struggle. Besides, Abbas’s commitment to nonviolence does not preclude civil disobedience. This could be the meeting ground once the will to reconcile takes over, and the time for civil disobedience comes.

If the Fatah-Hamas rift is dangerously detrimental to the Palestinian cause, so is disagreement about its political goal. It is no secret that the one-state/two-state issue is a major topic of debate, not only within the Palestinian camp, but also within a much wider circle of allies and supporters. As you may have surmised, I am not a congenital advocate of the partition of Palestine—that is, the two-state formula. In fact, I came to it pretty late. It was only in 1978 that I espoused it in an article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled “Thinking the Unthinkable.”¹⁴ I am still a two-stater, and this is why: there is global support for a two-state solution—with the possible exception of the Federated States of Micronesia. It would be irresponsible to forgo this invaluable asset. We have already tried the one-state framework during the 30 years of the British Mandate, and we know what happened even though the balance of power was at first massively in favor of the Palestinians.

The balance of power today is crushingly in favor of the other side. Israel is the superpower of the Arab *Mashriq*, thanks to the rottenness of the Arab states system and its incumbent political elites. In a one-state framework, Israel would have the ideal alibi to remove whatever constraints remain on settlement. Within a twinkling the Palestinians would be lucky if they had enough land to plant onions in their back gardens and to bury their dead alongside.

Israel’s 1948 Declaration of Independence pledged to ensure “complete equality of social and political rights to all inhabitants, irrespective of religion, race, or sex.”¹⁵ Now Netanyahu is insisting on prior recognition of the *Jewish* character of Israel as an absolute condition of a peace agreement. Of the thirty-seven signatories to the 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence, only *one* was born in Palestine. The others came mostly from Poland and the Russian Empire: from Plonsk, Poltava, and Pinsk, from Lodz and Kaunas.¹⁶ These men were mostly left of center, but they had not come all the way to Palestine to share their new home with its inhabitants. When Netanyahu speaks of a Jewish state he is speaking in the name of a vast and growing religious fundamentalist right-wing nationalist constituency, which splits Israeli Jewish society right down the middle. The division in the Jewish population of Israel today is no longer between Left and Right, but between the secularists and the religious. Many of the secularists are liberal and post-Zionist, but they are not in the ascendant.

In the ascendant is a neo-Zionist messianic triumphalist religious right settler movement allied to U.S. Christian apocalyptic evangelism fired by the 1967 conquest of the whole of Eretz Israel and the “return” of the “Temple Mount” to Jewish military possession. This coalition considers Palestinians to be Canaanites whose doom is biblically predestined. It does not look much more favorably on the secular Jewish Israelis. There is no consensus in Israel on who is a Jew. Indeed, we should ask Bibi [Prime Minister Netanyahu] for a definition of “Jewish.”

Many proponents of BDS are one-staters looking to the success of sanctions against South Africa. But between the start of the sanctions against South Africa in the early 1960s and Mandela’s election in 1994 there were thirty years. Time is not an asset for Palestinians in a one-state framework despite the demographic factor. I am not against BDS. I want it to succeed. To succeed it needs the Jewish post-Zionists and the liberal Zionists. Delegitimize the occupation and your chances are bright. Delegitimizing Israel itself will cost you the bulk of your Jewish allies and most of the friendly world capitals. Let us have two BDS campaigns: BDS one, to end the occupation, and BDS two, to implement the pledge to its Arab citizens in Israel’s Declaration of Independence—in that sequence.

To hug one's identity in an age of globalization is a global phenomenon witnessed in the breakup of states and devolution movements worldwide. The one-staters run counter to this trend. A Palestinian state is a Palestinian imperative. Palestinians need to maintain their own link to what is left of their own ancestral soil. They need an umbilical cord to the collective memories of their parents and grandparents. They need a tribune that will stand up for those of them who will remain in their diaspora. They need to pass an inheritance to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They need a spot under God's sun where they are not aliens, stateless ghosts, or second-class citizens.

V

Just how sorry the state of the "Arab Nation" is can be gauged from the fact that the future of Palestine hinges more on "the desires and prejudices" of Benjamin Benzion Nathan Netanyahu than on those of any incumbent in the proud Arab capitals of Umayyad Damascus, Abbasid Baghdad, Ayyubid Cairo, or Wahhabid Riyadh. Still, the current tripartite discourse between Netanyahu, Kerry, and Abbas is in reality a facade for the arm-wrestling marathon that has been going on between Bibi and Obama for five years.

I listed Bibi's parentage advisedly. His ideological template was forged by and embodied in the teachings of his grandfather Rabbi Nathan and his father Professor Benzion.¹⁷ Rabbi Nathan, a contemporary of Herzl's, was a National Religious Zionist (a rare species at the time). He was an ardent follower of Vladimir Jabotinsky, the founder of the Zionist Revisionist movement, so named because from the early 1920s it sought to "revise" the gradualist, dissembling strategy of Chaim Weizmann and Ben-Gurion. Jabotinsky insisted on an unabashed assertion of the *end point* of the Jewish National Home—a Jewish state *through* which the River Jordan flowed, not one in which the River was the *border*.¹⁸ This goal was to be achieved, in the shortest possible time by massive immigration, by means of an "Iron Wall"—that is, overwhelming military might.¹⁹ Ben-Gurion routinely referred to Jabotinsky as "Vladimir Hitler."²⁰

Benzion's ardor for Jabotinsky was no less intense than Nathan's. He joined the Revisionist party at eighteen and later edited a Revisionist daily, entitled *Jordan*, which relentlessly criticized Weizmann and Ben-Gurion.²¹ Benzion followed Jabotinsky to the United States where he became his secretary. He stayed there for ten years spreading the Revisionist ideology, but returned to Israel to blast Begin for his peace treaty with Egypt.²² Recently, not long before his death, Benzion told an Israeli daily that by "withholding food from Arab cities, preventing education, terminating electrical power and more, the Arabs won't be able to exist and will run away from here."²³

Bibi's Israeli biographers report that Benzion tutored his sons in history and Judaism and that they held their father in "holy reverence."²⁴ As a boy, Bibi often wanted to discuss "the two banks of Jordan principle."²⁵ If Bibi's grandfather and father were his formative ideological influences, his role model in life was his older brother Jonathan, the hero of Entebbe where he was killed in action. This is where Bibi's swagger comes from.

Jonathan's death traumatized father and son. To honor him they established the Jonathan Institute in Jerusalem for the study of "international terrorism."²⁶ Appropriately, one of its conferences was addressed by Prime Minister Menachem Begin, though he apparently refrained from sharing his reminiscences about Dayr Yasin, or about how his organization, the Irgun, had

introduced the letter bomb, the parcel bomb, the barrel bomb, the market bomb, and the car bomb to the Middle East.²⁷

For Bibi, the United States is as much home ground as Israel. He knew the country from age seven: elementary school, high school, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), a Boston consulting firm. During this period, he honed a Philadelphia accent and mastered baseball vocabulary. At least three of his uncles had immigrated to the United States, where they became steel and tin tycoons.²⁸

After Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Yitzhak Shamir, then foreign minister, sent Bibi as an attaché to the Washington embassy to help repair Israel's image. Bibi was an instant success: ubiquitously glib in the media, lionized by the major Jewish organizations. As ambassador to the UN from 1984 to 1988, he consolidated his stardom with the pro-Israeli public in the United States. In 1991, Shamir, now prime minister, made Bibi deputy minister [without portfolio], further feeding his Himalayan political appetite. By 1993, Bibi was the Likud leader, by 1996, prime minister.

A major source of insights into the relationship between Washington and Tel Aviv is the memoirs and autobiographies of successive presidents and secretaries of state. The space devoted to the Arab-Israeli conflict in these writings has grown enormously in the last few decades. Curiously, to date there has been no serious attempt to collate this information with the other sources—another field of investigation for Palestine studies centers.

Since his Washington embassy days, Bibi has dealt in various capacities with five U.S. administrations. He considers the American political arena as legitimately open to him. He believes that his writings on terrorism convinced President Reagan to change American policy on how to deal with it.²⁹ He brags that he successfully lobbied Congress to end Secretary Baker's attempts to open a dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), explaining that "All I did was force him [Baker] into a change of policy by applying a little diplomatic pressure. That's the name of the game. . . ."³⁰

On his first visit to the United States as prime minister in 1996, Bibi addressed Congress, receiving tumultuous jack-in-the-box, bipartisan ovations. A tycoon uncle whom he had invited to the session told a U.S. newspaper that he believed his nephew could beat Bob Dole and Bill Clinton in a presidential race.³¹ President Clinton complained that when Bibi came to the White House for a visit, "evangelist Jerry Falwell" was outside, "rallying crowds . . . praising the Israeli government's resistance to phased withdrawal from the West Bank."³² Clinton also complained that "Likud agents in the US joined Republicans to stir up suspicion against [his] Middle East diplomacy."³³ Clinton believed that Bibi "recoiled at heart from the peace process."³⁴ His favorite tactic was to "stall" and "filibuster" and when challenged he would cry "national insult."³⁵

Enter Barack Obama. Bibi, born in 1949, is twelve years older. By the time Obama ran for the U.S. Senate in 2003, Bibi had already been UN ambassador, leader of the Likud, prime minister, foreign minister, and was then the incumbent finance minister. It was probably only after his 2004 speech at the National Democratic Convention that Obama began to loom on Bibi's political radar screen. Where on earth did this guy come from, and with that middle name? It is tempting to speculate that Bibi felt Obama impinge on Bibi's own turf. There is no time to go into the various rounds of the Obama-Bibi arm-wrestling match—the settlement freeze, Iranian nuclear

ambitions, the 1967 lines, UN recognition of Palestine,³⁶ the Hamas-Fatah agreement. Some observers believe Bibi has “humbled” Obama.³⁷ I think they are at deuce.

VI

In the last hundred years since 1914, Zionism rode piggyback first on Pax Britannica, then on Pax Americana to establish a Pax Israelitica at the expense of the Palestinian people. How long can it persist in its refusal to seriously address what it has done to the Palestinians?

My hunch is that Bibi will acquiesce to Kerry’s framework proposals, but only with the intention to stall. He thinks he can get away with it. He sees himself as more than the prime minister of Israel. In 2010 and 2012, the *Jerusalem Post* ranked him *first* on a list of the World’s Most Influential Jews. To Bibi, the Atlantic flows *through* Eretz Israel. Bibi knows he will outlive Obama politically. In Israel, once a prime minister, always a prime minister. Obama has less than three years to go. Meanwhile, Bibi knows he can outflank Obama in the Congress. He certainly has more bipartisan support there than the incumbent of the Oval Office.

All the other protagonists are committed to a peaceful resolution. Kerry is his master’s voice, and Obama’s understanding of the Palestine problem far surpasses that of all his predecessors. Abbas’s commitment to peace is genuine. At his age, peace would be the crowning achievement of a lifetime. The Gulf dynasts are panting for a resolution. They want to focus on the *real* enemy: pan-Islamic, antimonarchical Tehran. Bibi will never share Jerusalem. Continued occupation and settlement, while tightening the noose around East Jerusalem, is a sure recipe for an apocalyptic catastrophe sooner or later over the Muslim holy places in the Old City. With the continued surge in religious fundamentalist zealotry on both sides, the road to Armageddon will lead from Jerusalem.

That is why Benjamin Benzion Ben-Nathan Netanyahu is the most dangerous political leader in the world today.

About the Author

Walid Khalidi, a founder of the Institute for Palestine Studies and its general secretary, has taught at Oxford University, the American University of Beirut, and Harvard University. He is an American Academy of Arts and Sciences Fellow.

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- 16 The only Palestine-born signatory was Behor Shalom Shitrit, born in Tiberias, Galilee, in 1905.
- 17 Ben Caspit and Ilan Kfir, *Netanyahu: The Road to Power* (London: Vision, 1998), p. 9.
- 18 Joseph B. Schechtman, *Fighter & Prophet*, vol. 2 (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), p. 112.
- 19 Schechtman, *Fighter & Prophet*, vol. I (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1956), p. 434. For Jabotinsky’s fascination with “iron,” see Schechtman, vol. 2, p. 412.
- 20 Lennie Brenner, *The Iron Wall* (London: Zed Books, 1984), p. 108.
- 21 Caspit and Kfir, *Netanyahu*, p. 13.
- 22 Caspit and Kfir, *Netanyahu*, p. 13.
- 23 Interview in *Maariv* (3 April 2009) with Benzion Netanyahu, conducted by Sari Makover Belikov, translated the same day by Noam Sheizaf, “Netanyahu’s Father Discusses the Peace Process: Excerpts from the Exclusive *Maariv* Interview,” *Promised Land* (blog), 3 April 2009, <http://www.promisedlandblog.com/?p=803/>.
- 24 Caspit and Kfir, *Netanyahu*, p. 20 and p. 16 respectively.
- 25 Caspit and Kfir, *Netanyahu*, p. 10.
- 26 See Benjamin Netanyahu, ed., *International Terrorism: Challenge and Response* (Jerusalem: The Jonathan Institute, 1989).
- 27 See Menachem Begin, “Freedom Fighters and Terrorists,” in Netanyahu, *International Terrorism*, pp. 39–47.
- 28 Caspit and Kfir, *Netanyahu*, p. 17.
- 29 Caspit and Kfir, *Netanyahu*, pp. 79–80.
- 30 Caspit and Kfir, *Netanyahu*, p. 116.
- 31 Caspit and Kfir, *Netanyahu*, p. 18.
- 32 Branch Taylor, *The Clinton Tapes: Wrestling History with the President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), p. 494.
- 33 Taylor, *The Clinton Tapes*, p. 345.
- 34 Taylor, *The Clinton Tapes*, p. 523.
- 35 Taylor, *The Clinton Tapes*, p. 488.
- 36 On 29 November 2012, the UN General Assembly accorded Palestine the status of a nonmember observer state at the United Nations. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/ga11317.doc.html/>.
- 37 See Peter Beinart, chapter entitled “The Humbling,” *The Crisis of Zionism* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2012), pp. 145–60.