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Palestinian Lies & Western Complicity

A continuing story.

(A short history of Palestine)

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By Daniel Doron

Recent Palestinian allegations about a massacre in the Jenin "refugee camp" (in reality, a fortified terrorist base) were spread like bushfire by the Western media, despite no corroborating evidence. So was Yasser Arafat's poisonous charge, upon emerging from isolation in his compound, that Israel was setting fire to the Church of the Nativity — a transparent effort to incite Christian rage against the Jews (maybe Arafat knew about Hitler's success in setting fire to the Reichstag).

The ease with which Western media gave currency to such dubious "news" illustrated once again how Western complicity helps the Arabs to spread disinformation damaging to Israel's — and the West's — war against terrorism.

The Arabs have successfully pilloried Israel in the court of public opinion through the deft propagation of two big lies. Relying on the sketchy historical knowledge of most people, and on the propensity of oft-repeated lies to become accepted wisdom, Arab officials have fabricated a historical narrative that has gained wide acceptance. It justifies Arab aggression, even terror, as an understandable response to cruel Israeli "occupation" and to the "stealing of Palestinian lands." The charges often stick, even though they are based on falsehoods.

JUST THE FACTS

What are the facts, then?

Since the second stage of Oslo was implemented in 1995, and most Palestinian towns and villages were ceded to the control of Arafat's Palestinian Authority, over 95 percent of the Palestinian Arab population of the West Bank and Gaza have not been under physical Israeli occupation. Yet amazingly, Arab spokesmen keep talking about their need to fight Israeli occupation, and officials and the media seldom challenge them. It seems like everyone forgot that in signing the 1992 Oslo accords, Israel recognized Arafat's PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people. Arafat was brought back, with his henchmen, from exile in Tunisia and given control of territories that Israel occupied in the defensive 1967 war — areas that never belonged to any Palestinian entity.

In return for self-government, the Palestinians undertook to revoke parts of their national covenant that called for Israel's destruction, and never again to resort to violence. These

pledges were constantly violated the moment the Israeli occupation was removed.

Still, Israel, exhausted by incessant Arab attacks, and eager for peace, continued implementing the Oslo agreements — including the ceding of territory and relinquishing control over their population. Since Oslo 2, the Palestinians have enjoyed self-rule of sorts. We say "of sorts," not because of the repeated incursions Israel had to make to thwart suicide bombing attacks, but because rule by Arafat's Palestinian Authority was not really "self-determination." The election by which Arafat was elected with an over 90 percent majority, Bolshevik style, was rather questionable and was never repeated again.

In fact, the "Authority" Arafat has established is even more repressive than many of the 21 dictatorships governing all other Arab states. His Tunisian henchmen did what they knew best. They immediately established a rule of terror, brooking no opposition, and wrested control from the local leadership. They systematically violated the Palestinians' most rudimentary human rights, engaging in extortion, kidnap, torture, and summary execution. They robbed the inhabitants of their livelihood, creating such mayhem that the Palestinian standard of living was cut by half and unemployment rose to over 60 percent. Every resource was exploited to wage a war against Israel, including considerable funds earmarked by the EU and U.S. as aid for the refugees.

Arafat's war disrupted trade with Israel and the employment there of most Palestinian labor — both sources of increasing Palestinian wealth. A nascent Palestinian civil society was destroyed, enabling the PLO to radicalize an increasingly impoverished population, and to transform their misery into pathological hatred for Israel.

Yes, the Palestinians are right in feeling under occupation and oppressed. But they are mistaken to think it is by Israel.

The audacious lie about the occupation is based, of course, on a bigger, more basic falsehood: namely, that Israel stole "Palestinian Arab lands" and that the PLO is fighting for the restitution of these illegally "occupied lands," especially those ostensibly usurped for Israeli "settlements" (which occupy, in fact, less than three percent of the West Bank's area, and were built on empty government-owned land).

Palestinian propagandists insist that contemporary Jews are not descended from Biblical Jews, and have usurped "Palestinian Arab lands" in three stages. They first allegedly penetrated Palestine in the late 19th century, settling it by stealth under imperial colonialist protection. Then in 1948, after the U.N. partition, they took more land by force, displacing an indigenous Palestinian Arab population fighting for self-determination; and finally, in the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel aggressively expanded, occupying the "West Bank" and the Gaza Strip and holding its Palestinian inhabitants in bondage, as they have ever since.

NOTHING NEW

Historical fact, however, belies this enticingly simplistic narrative.

The disputed territories, together with the territories that are now Israel and Jordan, were originally (in Biblical and post-Biblical times) Jewish kingdoms, and for most of the last seven centuries part of the Ottoman Empire. After the defeat and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the First World War, the League of Nations divided most of its former possessions in the 1922 peace conference. The Arabs were granted rights to most of the formerly Turkish-controlled lands, to an area that was 500 times larger in size than the small area reserved for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The British received an international mandate over Palestine because they undertook to establish a Jewish national home there, which the League considered as an act of "restoration" of ancient Jewish rights to the land — rights that outweighed any Arab claims based on later conquest and residence.

At first, the Arab representatives to the Versailles conference gladly accepted this division. It gave them control over vast areas lost centuries ago, without requiring them to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of soldiers, as the Allies had, to liberate these lands from Turkish dominion. They did not then consider the tiny sliver of South Syrian wasteland, known to Jews as Judea and Samaria and to the Europeans as the Holy Land, of any significance, politically or religiously, and were happy to give it up in exchange for what they so surprisingly gained. The Emir Faisal, who represented the Arabs, signed a draft agreement with the Zionist movement, welcoming the Jews back to their homeland and pledging cooperation.

So the disputed territories of the West Bank and the Gaza strip were never "Palestinian lands" — neither as national patrimony nor as private property. In fact, until the institution of the British mandate, the Holy Land never had a separate political identity or a distinct people inhabiting it. It was a neglected province of South Syria, whose few and destitute Arab inhabitants considered themselves South Syrians. As Bernard Lewis notes, "From the end of the Jewish state in antiquity to the beginning of British rule, the area now designated by the name Palestine was not a country and had no frontiers, only administrative boundaries... within a larger entity" of Syria.

Indeed, to date, 93 percent of the land in what was the British Mandate — including the lands of the West Bank — are still government-owned. They were so despoiled, malaria-infected, and sparsely populated that no private owners evinced any interest in owning them, so they were kept by the sultan and then inherited by the British mandate in safekeeping for the Jews.

On a visit to the Ottoman-controlled Holy Land in 1860, Mark Twain described it as "the prince of desolation." "The hills are barren... the valleys unsightly deserts... peopled by swarms of beggars struck with ghastly sores and malformations... Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes... only the music of angels could charm its shrubs and flowers again into life."

Other writers and artists visiting the Holy Land (chiefly from Britain and Germany) — as well as geographers, archeologists, and cartographers — were equally stunned by its utter desolation.

It was only toward the end of the 19th century, when a growing stream of Jewish immigrants rehabilitated the land — draining swamps, reclaiming deserts, and controlling the diseases (chiefly malaria) — that a decimated Arab population began increasing. The resuscitation of the land by the Jews and the economic opportunity they created brought an influx of Arab immigrants from dirt-poor neighboring Arab states to swell the number of Arabs in Palestine, so that by the turn of the century there were about 250,000 Arab Muslims and 150,000 Jews living there. 100,000 Christians and others

It was in fact British colonial machinations that turned initial Arab acceptance of a Jewish homeland in British-protected Palestine into unmitigated and disastrous hostility. British behavior in the Middle East in general, and in Palestine in particular, was common colonial practice: divide and rule. In India, it enabled the British to subdue the subcontinent with few troops by pitting hostile segments of the indigenous population against each other. They employed this strategy in Palestine too.

From the very first days of the mandate, a group of very influential British officials in the Colonial and the War Offices, who wanted to maintain control over the land and to prevent the establishment of an independent Jewish national home, started undermining their government's efforts to fulfill its obligation toward the Jews. These British officials, many of them avowed anti-Semites, fanned Arab resentment over broken British promises to make the Arabian chieftain, Faisal, king of Damascus and Syria, and redirected it against Jewish aspirations in Palestine.

Indeed, their naming the mandate over the Holy Land "Palestine," rather than the land of Israel, was a deliberate effort to obliterate the Jewish connection to the land by calling it by its Roman name. They also, in 1923, unilaterally removed from the original mandatory area all the land east of the Jordan River—75 percent of the territory promised to the Jews — and gave it to the Emir Abdullah of Arabia, Faisal's brother, in compensation to the Hashemite family for other broken promises. They did so despite objections from the League of Nations. The small area that had been designated as a home for the Jews was thus reduced to a mere sliver.

A distinct Palestinian Arab nationalism evolved only after the dream of an Arab Syrian kingdom — the brainchild of T. E. Lawrence — was shattered when the French evicted his protégé, the Emir Faisal, from Damascus in 1920. Only then did the South Syrian Arabs living under Britain's Palestine mandate separate themselves from Syria and start defining themselves as Palestinians. The process was accelerated by their growing negative reaction to the League of Nations' designation of Palestine as a Jewish national home.

The British helped make hostility to Zionism the defining issue of local Arab politics, and assisted in its exploitation as a lethal weapon in bloody Arab inter-clan struggles for dominance. Muslim clerics and Arab effendis exploited hostility against the Jews, always convenient scapegoats, to deflect the rage of their destitute, exploited people.

The British appointed an extremely radical upstart politician, Hajj Amin al-Hussieni, with a record of violence and incitement, as chief mufti of Jerusalem. They gave him the authority of a spiritual leader to the Arabs, and control of the considerable funds and properties managed by Muslim religious trusts. The mufti promptly proceeded to exploit these resources for his nefarious campaign against the Jews and against his Arab opponents — much as Arafat does today.

The mufti was, in fact, the originator of the murderous religious incitement used so effectively today by Arafat. Since the beginning of the British mandate in 1920, he used mosques, schools, and charitable associations to mount a racist campaign against the Jews, accusing them of betraying the Prophet Mohammed and of trying to defile and destroy Islamic holy places. The incitement resulted in periodic outbreaks of violence which culminated in several massacres and the eviction of Jews from Arab-dominated areas — notably in Hebron, where the Jews, who had lived there for centuries, were butchered by their Arab neighbors after the mufti spread a rumor through the preachers in the mosques that the Jews were conquering and defiling the El-Aksa Mosque.

The British not only failed to stop the carnage, but also arrested any Jew who bore arms in defense. British colonial officials then exploited Arab rage as an excuse to put more and more restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine and land purchase. They reneged, in fact, on their obligation to establish a Jewish national home. They even illegally blocked the entrance of Jews who were desperately trying to escape Europe. They did so even when the danger to Jewish life became obvious, helping Hitler to trap and kill many Jews.

The mufti accompanied his 1936-39 war against the Jews with a campaign of terror against his Arab opponents (again, just like Arafat). His henchmen assassinated not only every political rival that contemplated some sort of accommodation, but also practically anyone who could even potentially become a political rival. Hundreds of Arabs were liquidated, a large part of the Palestinian elites. Many more were forced to flee.

It was a tragedy from which the Palestinians, who were developing by then a hateful, xenophobic nationalism, never recovered. It explains why to date, the Palestinian, many of whom are talented, hard-working people, have been unable to build a civil society with legitimate political institutions. It was the loss and demoralization of their leadership that prevented the Palestinian Arabs from establishing a state in 1948. That in turn facilitated the takeover of their political life by the radical and criminal elements that have brought on them repeated catastrophes.

The British officials who have encouraged and exploited radical Arab elements are to a large extent responsible for the continued tragedy of Arab politics and for the repeated disasters the Arabs suffered. Most of the Arab states established by the colonialists remain artificial entities barely able to contain the hostile ethnic groups that were arbitrarily incorporated into them. Lacking a unifying principle and legitimacy, they remain politically, socially, and economically extremely unstable, held together by the military dictatorships the colonial powers left behind.

In 1948, the British gave up the mandate and the U.N. partitioned Palestine, offering the Jews only a sliver of the area originally designated as a Jewish national home. Partition arbitrarily deprived the Jews of their internationally sanctioned legal rights to all of Palestine, including what is now the kingdom of Jordan. Nevertheless, Israel accepted it.

The Palestinians, and the Arab states supporting them, refused to accept partition and launched a war of annihilation against Israel. The British left on May 15, 1948, doing everything they could to render the Jews defenseless before the onslaught of six Arab armies — including an Arab legion led by British officers which put siege to Jerusalem and almost starved its population. Against all odds, and at great cost (every ninth Israeli was a casualty of the war), Israel repulsed the Arab attacks and established itself within the 1949 armistice lines. Jordan unilaterally annexed the remaining heartland territories designated for a Palestinian state, and Egypt took control of the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians never protested — perhaps because they considered Jordan their own, since the majority of its inhabitants were Palestinians.

Before Israel ejected Jordan from the "West Bank" and Egypt from the Gaza Strip, in 1967, Palestinians lived for almost two decades under a very repressive Jordanian occupation and under brutal Egyptian military rule in the Gaza Strip — in utter destitution and with no rights at all. Gaza was, in effect, a large Egyptian prison camp. Yet they did not protest. Their anger was skillfully directed against Israel, so that they wished it destroyed even though it did not then occupy "their land" or hold them captive. Nor did any of their friends who today pretend to defend their right for self-determination raise then even a squeak.

The true intentions of the Authority's leadership under Arafat were made apparent when Israel's prime minister, Ehud Barak, offered to cede 96 percent of the disputed territories to the Palestinian Authority and even compensate it for the remaining 4 percent. As is well known, Arafat rejected the offer and launched his war of terror against Israel, hoping to force it to accept the "return" of Arab refugees, and to undermine Israel from within by swamping it with "returning" refugees.

Barak made these far-reaching concessions despite the fact that there were conflicting legal claims to the disputed territories, and that the settlements, built on empty government land, have not displaced any Palestinians or taken any of their

private property (except in rare cases for security or public works purposes).

GETTING NOWHERE

Still, the two big lies about continued Israeli "occupation" and "stolen Arab lands" continue to be used by the Arabs and have scored great successes, especially in Europe.

Since the Second World War, their alleged friends in the European Union — especially the French — systematically supported and sustained Arab dictatorships. The oppression generated by these dictators, and the poverty they perpetuated, helped create the backlash of radical Islamist fundamentalism. America's unqualified support for the repressive and corrupt regimes of Saudi Arabia and Egypt has also contributed its share to a continued Middle East catastrophe. Defense of the arch-terrorist Arafat, whose PLO the Saudis and the Egyptians created, fund, and support, is the logical conclusion of this dangerous policy.

The Europeans have at least good, if cynical, realpolitik reasons for supporting dictatorships in the Arab world. They sell them billions in armaments, helping to offset some of the cost of Middle East oil. They profit from "special" trade terms acquired from these corrupt regimes through the extensive use of bribery (a great competitive advantage over U.S. firms, which are forbidden by law from engaging in such practices). Israel's security is only another sop they willingly throw to these dictators in the furtherance of their interests.

They cannot, of course, openly admit such cynical behavior, since it might not sit well with their "liberal" constituencies and leftist supporters. So they cover up their cynicism with the pretence of seeking justice for the Palestinians — a pretence that plays well among their pro-third world, anti-American supporters.

The European elites are thus willing accomplices in the propagation of Arab lies that demonize Israel. Demonizing Israel makes it possible for them to support, with a clear conscience, the most horribly repressive Arab dictatorships and even the destruction of the only democracy in the Middle East. Barely 60 years after the Holocaust, Arab calumnies help the European salve their conscience so successfully that they are even ready to help Muslim rogue states acquire weapons of mass destruction, and to protect these rogue states against preventative action by the U.S.

It takes democracies a long time to absorb even the most recent and most costly lessons of history. A Europe that fell easy prey to the Big Lies Goebbels spread to keep it disarmed was to pay heavily for its complacency towards Nazi aggression. Last September 11, Americans paid heavily for their own failure to identify in time a danger from a radical and deadly challenge to their basic values and institutions — a challenge that before long may be mounted with weapons of mass destruction.

The West will continue to be exposed to grave danger until it finally wakes up and realizes how Arab lies have managed to

lull it to the danger from implacable Muslim fundamentalism, a danger Israel has already been facing for so many years.

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