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EMPIRES OF FEELING & FANTASY

In an August 2017 edition of *The New Yorker*, Hussein Agha and Ahmad Samih Khalidi offer a grim eulogy for the Palestinian national movement. “Palestinians are sliding toward the unknown,” they write. “The contemporary Palestinian national movement—founded and led by Yasser Arafat and embodied by the P.A., Fatah, and the P.L.O. over the past half century—is reaching its end.”

This is hard reading for someone who still hopes for a healthy Palestinian state as a means to end the conflict. But I speak with Palestinians often, so I know that Agha and Khalidi are right.

The basic *telos* of Palestinian identity is the liberation of Greater Palestine (not the just the West Bank and Gaza but all the land that comprises modern-day Israel) and the return of its refugees. But what happens when Palestinians realize that neither goal is achievable? They will either deny the fact, stagnate, and fall deeper into desperation; or they will accept it, move on, and rebuild their movement from the ground up. Fearing the first, Agha and Khalidi call for the second. So do I.

The Lebanese philosopher Charles Malik believed that Arab states would never be as prosperous as Western states until they embraced a more scientific and objective approach to reality. He admitted that the encounter with empiricism would cause “whole empires of feeling and fantasy and prejudice and poetry...to crash down,” but believed it was necessary for the long-term well-being of the Arabs.

The Palestinian national movement is one such illusory empire. Constructed on poetry and prejudice and generations of fantasy, it too must come crashing down so that it can be rebuilt, this time on a more solid basis.

THE THREE YOUNG MEN who slipped into the Old City of Jerusalem before dawn on July 14, 2017, were all members of the same Arab clan

and citizens of the State of Israel. Their name was Mohammed Jabareen—all three of them—and they brought two rifles and a pistol in a bag from their homes in the northern Israeli city of Umm al-Fahm. Their plan was to kill Jews and kick off a regional conflagration that would advance the liberation of Palestine.

Just before 8 am, they gunned down two Israeli police officers near the entrance to the Temple Mount complex. The officers were Druze, not Jews, but wore the uniform of the Jewish state, and that was enough. Pursued by Israeli security forces, the Jabareens fled into the complex, where they died in a hail of bullets as *shahids*, martyrs for their people.

How could the Jabareens have possibly thought killing Israeli police officers would advance their cause? Didn't they realize these senseless murders would make Israelis even more vigilant? Didn't they understand that Palestinian violence has never worked since the time of the British Mandate?

Apparently not. But the Jabareens aren't alone. And it isn't just self-defeating violence that hinders the Palestinian cause. Agha and Khalidi point out two more defects.

The first is the weakness of Palestinian identity. Currently there is no “unifying Palestinian bond” that can “forge a truly *national* enterprise out of highly localized components.” As the 1948 generation dies off, young Palestinians are wondering what the cause is all about. Is it about resistance? Negotiations? Religion? Real estate? There isn't a clear answer. “Without ‘armed struggle,’” Agha and Khalidi write, “the national movement had no clear ideology, no specific discourse, no distinctive experience or character.”

The PLO formally abandoned the armed struggle and the liberation of Greater Palestine in the 1990s for the establishment of a smaller state inside the West Bank and Gaza. But the spectacular failure to achieve even that more limited goal has pushed many young Palestinians back to the original vision. “The conflict may be dragged back to its historical origins as a struggle over and across the entire Holy Land,” suggest Agha and Khalidi, “reopening old wounds, inflicting new ones, and redefining how and if the conflict will be resolved.” The Jabareen attack, committed by Israel citizens who grew up speaking Hebrew, might be indicative of such a blurring of the 1948/1967 narratives.

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The second obstacle is the lack of political pragmatism. The Jews have always accepted something over nothing (Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann famously declared his willingness to accept a Jewish state “even if it’s the size of a tablecloth”); Palestinians have consistently preferred nothing over something. From Haj Amin al-Husseini and Izz ad-Din al-Qassam to Yasser Arafat and Ismail Haniyeh, the basic Palestinian position has been to sacrifice oneself and one’s people in a blaze of glory before conceding one point of the political program. Palestinian culture gives the word *shahid* mythical power, making gritty compromises like the 1947 Partition Plan and other peace deals impossible to contemplate. Far better to die in purity.

If martyrdom is the greatest Palestinian virtue, *tatbi’a*, or normalization, is the greatest Palestinian sin. A normalizer is a Palestinian who accepts Israel, cooperates with Israel, or suggests that Palestinians should get used to a Jewish state living next door. Professor Mohammad Dajani of Al-Quds University was accused of *tatbi’a* in 2014 when he brought his Palestinian students on a study trip to Auschwitz. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was accused of *tatbi’a* that same year when he dared to lament the Arabs’ rejection of the 1947 Partition Plan.

This basic inability to cope with the fact of Israel is a major obstacle that needs to be overcome. “[Y]esterday’s conventional nationalism and ‘national liberation’ are no longer the best currency for political mobilization and expression in today’s world,” explain Agha and Khalidi. Palestinians must “adapt their struggle and aspirations to new global realities.

“Nationalism itself has changed,” they continue. “Palestinians need to search for new means of expressing their political identity and hopes in ways that do not and cannot replicate the past.”

AND YET, I SAY, the liberation of Palestine is still possible.

President Abbas raises an eyebrow: “How so?”

Admit mistakes. The starkest difference between Israeli and Palestinian political culture is self-criticism. Israelis never stop criticizing each other and their policies; Palestinians almost never do, at least in public. As someone who leads study tours on both sides of the Green Line, I can vouch for the glaring contrast between the two.

Forget Greater Palestine. It’s over. Israel is not going anywhere and is getting stronger.

That doesn’t mean a new political entity called Palestine cannot emerge: that is, a smaller state of the Palestinian people in some part of historic Palestine, just as Israel is a state of the Jewish people in some part of historic Israel. Accept that, and get your people to accept it.

Forget the refugees. Or rather, forget the idea that the 800,000 refugees from 1948 and their millions-strong progeny will ever return to the State of Israel. You can throw those old keys away. The refugees belong in their country of residence or in the new State of Palestine. Accept that.

Be pragmatic. You’re not going to get what you want. So start asking yourself what is a “something” Palestine, a Palestine the size of a tablecloth. Create a state that you can be proud of for the sake of your children and grandchildren. The Jews have accepted less than they wanted. You should too.

Punish violence and incitement to violence. This is simple enough.

Embrace tatbi’a. You must deal with the Jews; you must befriend them. Terrorizing their civilians won’t scare them away; it will do the opposite. If independence and coexistence are your goal, they are not your enemy. Normalize. Concede. Compromise. Live.

Accept Jewish citizens. The current position of the Palestinian Authority is that the future State of Palestine will be free of Jews—*Judenrein*, as der Führer used to say. This is a position that Christians like me cannot endorse. Jews are an ancient people who belong there as much as you do. Just as 20 percent of Israelis are Arab, there is no reason that 20 percent of Palestinians shouldn’t be Jewish. Settlers should be able to stay if they want to become citizens. Embrace their love of the land.

The real Palestinian martyr will be the one who stands up and delivers this bold message to his people, even if he is killed immediately afterward. The death of this prophet, unlike the death of the Jabareens who threw their lives away for nothing, will ignite a new spirit of truth among right-thinking Palestinians that, God-willing, they will fan and use to raze the old empires of the mind and to build anew. P

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