

April 6 2009 -- pre-publication text:

FREEDOM FIRST

For four thousand years, the Passover celebration of freedom has been a central theme, both for the Jewish people, who retell the story of slavery in Egypt and the Exodus every year, and for other oppressed people who have found hope in these events. In America, the oppressed Blacks identified themselves with the enslaved Hebrews, and leaders like Martin Luther King referred to their struggle in biblical terms. Similarly, the victims of South African apartheid often adopted the symbols of the Exodus, and Nelson Mandela became their Moses.

But in the hate-filled ideological climate in which the Jewish state is portrayed as the world's worst human rights offender, Israel is often cast in the role of the Egyptian taskmasters, and the Palestinians have become the enslaved people.

This version of history is both patronizing and wrongheaded. Unlike the Jewish emphasis on freedom, which is reflected in the Zionist movement, most Palestinian officials and leaders give priority to preventing Jewish sovereignty and rolling back the recognition of Israel as the Jewish homeland.

Israel is not the reason for the lack of a Palestinian state – this is the responsibility of the Palestinians, and an accurate reflection of their agenda. For over six decades, Arab leaders rejected every opportunity to create an independent state that would have also left Israel intact. In November 1947 – twenty years before “the occupation” following the 1967 war – Arab officials spurned the United Nations partition plan, which embodied the “two state solution”. In sharp contrast, the Zionist leadership grasped this opportunity, despite the minimal territory allocated to the nascent Jewish state.

After the terror campaign and Arab invasion in 1948 failed to dislodge the Jews or to destroy Israel, the Arab leaders continued to refuse compromise that would have meant accepting Israel's existence and legitimacy. For them, freedom was and remains a secondary goal, at best.

More recently, PLO leader Yassir Arafat's behavior during the Oslo process in the 1990s showed that nothing had changed in the intervening decades. Optimistic Israel officials expected the Palestinians to follow the Zionist approach of the 1940s, and to use this process, beginning with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, to develop the

institutions that would lead to statehood. Arafat could easily have negotiated the terms of a two-state solution during this period, had he been interested in this outcome.

However, the Palestinian leadership continues to demonstrate that it was not interested in political independence, if this meant accepting Israel as a Jewish state. Arafat walked away from every attempt to negotiate a compromise, including the Camp David summit in 2000, and in the talks that followed. Instead, he and the PLO prepared for another round of warfare aimed, again, at destroying Israel, this time using suicide bombers as the main weapon.

After Arafat's death, Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 provided yet another opportunity for the Palestinians to declare independence, but the results were the same as before. Rather than seeking to develop the institutions of a sovereign state, the Palestinians used the freedom of action in Gaza to smuggle massive amounts of weapons from Iran, and to extend the rocket attacks against Israel. Shortly afterwards, Hamas took control from Fatah in a violent coup, and increased the range of the attacks. As a branch of the Moslem Brotherhood, Hamas openly declares that its primary objective is destroying Israel. An independent Palestinian state is secondary, at best, in this religious war.

In referring to Gaza, the critics and apologists, who blame all the failures on Israel, argue that this "partial withdrawal" left Israel in control of the West Bank, making Palestinian independence impossible. But this is simply an excuse – if the Palestinians had chosen sovereignty as the primary goal, they would have grasped the opportunity, just as Ben Gurion and the Jewish leadership did in May 1948, with the departure of the British colonial regime. If independence was at the top of the list, a success in Gaza would have been followed by gradual extension, but the main objective continued to be war against Israel. Similarly, Palestinian literature, movies, and songs highlight negative messages and the actions of martyrs in the struggle against the Jews and the Jewish state. For Palestinians, the concept of freedom is subsumed in the desire to defeat and destroy Israel.

In contrast, for the Jewish people in exile for two thousand years, the goal of freedom was rekindled every year during the Passover seder, which ended with a positive message -- the hope for "next year in Jerusalem". For those who are serious about promoting peace based on the "two state solution", placing the blame on Israel is counterproductive. Until the Palestinians adopt the positive rhetoric of freedom based on construction, to replace the negative language of destruction, there will be no change.

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