

Bringing Historical Literacy to the Debate on Israel

By Don Sutherland

Yesterday witnessed the 51st Israel Day Parade in New York City. The atmosphere was festive and jubilation was in the air. But if one steps back from this joyous occasion, one finds serious and growing challenges facing those who support the world's only Jewish state.

Jewish students have confronted [suspicion](#) on some college campuses. The Doctoral Students Council even sought to adopt a [resolution](#) demanding that the City University of New York (CUNY) boycott Israeli academic institutions and divest from Israeli companies last fall. That such a proposal was inconsistent with academic freedom in seeking to stifle academic participation, was premised in astonishing historical illiteracy, and was timed for a vote when Jewish students were unable to attend, did not matter. It almost passed. There remains danger that it will resurface yet again.

To defeat such illegitimate resolutions, one must be literate in the facts that concern a complex historical dispute. Two points are central: (1) The Jewish people were willing to accept the existence of an Arab state from the moment the approved the partition plan and, (2) The Palestinian leadership shot down far-reaching recent peace proposals.

Following the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of Resolution 181 on November 29, 1947, Dr. Abba Hillel Silver representing the Jewish side declared:

We pray for the peace of Palestine. We extend a hand of genuine friendship to the new Arab state which is to be established in Palestine. The Jewish nation in Palestine will be eager to cooperate fully with its Arab neighbor and to contribute within the framework of the economic union to the progress and prosperity of the whole of Palestine. In this historic hour we call upon the Arab people of Palestine and all neighboring Arab countries to join with us in an era of peaceful and fruitful collaboration.

In stark contrast, Abdul Rahman Azzam Pasha, Secretary-General of the Arab League, threatened, "The partition line shall be nothing but a line of fire and blood." On January 18, 1947, *The New York Times* reported that Haj Amin el Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem declared that "all Arab peoples and governments refuse to accept the partition of Palestine in any shape or form."

Israel's modern-day founders were not the ones who rejected a two-state solution. On May 14, 1948, Israel was re-established as the British Mandate over the region expired. Israel's declaration of independence stated, in part:

We offer peace and amity to all neighboring states and their peoples, and invite them to cooperate with the independent Jewish nation for the common good of all. The State of Israel is ready to contribute its full share to the peaceful progress and reconstitution of the Middle East.

Barely twelve hours later, Arab armies launched an invasion aimed at conquering the new nation, even after Israel had pledged "peace and amity" to its neighbors. The May 15, 1948 edition of *The New York Times* reported:

Cairo reported that Egyptian armed forces had been ordered to enter Palestine. Arab armies moved from Trans-Jordan at 12:01 A.M. Saturday [May 15] to "liberate the Holy Land from Zionism," said a Trans-Jordan communique reported by the United Press from Amman...

The planes [from an Arab air attack] swooped over Tel Aviv little more than twelve hours after Jewish leaders proclaimed the existence of a new Hebrew state of Israel.

That was then. In 1979 Egypt concluded a peace agreement with Israel and Jordan did so in 1994. Both agreements have held even as the Mideast has undergone significant turbulence. The Palestinians had a historic opportunity to conclude a peace agreement with Israel that would have granted them 97% of the West Bank, all of the Gaza Strip, and much of East Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods in 2001. They rejected this agreement that had been brokered by President Clinton.

In *My Life*, President Clinton recounted:

When he left, I still had no idea what Arafat was going to do. His body language said no, but the deal was so good I couldn't believe anyone would be foolish enough to let it go...

Arafat's rejection of my proposal after Barak accepted it was an error of historic proportions.

Clinton's Mideast Envoy, Dennis Ross explained in his *The Missing Peace*:

Yassir Arafat had definitively demonstrated that he could not end the conflict. We had made every conceivable effort to do what we now had to accept was impossible with Yassir Arafat...

Did we come close? Yes. Were the Palestinian negotiators ready to do the deal that was available? Yes. Did we ultimately fail because of the mistakes that Barak made and the mistakes that Clinton made? No, each, regardless of his tactical mistakes, was ready to confront history and mythology. Only one leader was unable or unwilling to confront history and mythology: Yassir Arafat.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright recounted in *Madam Secretary: A Memoir*:

If Arafat had chosen differently, Palestine would now be a member of the United Nations, its capital in East Jerusalem. Its people would be able to travel freely between the West Bank and Gaza. Its airport and seaport would be operating. Palestinian refugees would be receiving compensation and help in resettling. Instead the Palestinians have their legalisms, their misery, and their terror.

In 2008, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had his own historic opportunity to conclude peace with Israel. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had offered a [proposal](#) that was perhaps even more generous than what had been available to Arafat. Abbas passed.

The Washington Post's Deputy Editorial Page Editor, Jackson Diehl, later [wrote](#) a meeting he had with Abbas:

In our meeting Wednesday [May 27, 2009], Abbas acknowledged that Olmert had shown him a map proposing a Palestinian state on 97 percent of the West Bank -- though he complained that the Israeli leader refused to give him a copy of the plan. He confirmed that Olmert "accepted the principle" of the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees -- something no previous Israeli prime minister had done -- and offered to resettle thousands in Israel. In all, Olmert's peace offer was more generous to the Palestinians than either that of Bush or Bill Clinton; it's almost impossible to imagine Obama, or any Israeli government, going further.

Abbas turned it down. "The gaps were wide," he said.

All said, even before Israel's re-establishment, Israel's founding leaders strove mightily for peace. Despite the numerous conflicts and terrorist attacks against its people, Israel has not abandoned efforts to reach an agreed peace. The narratives of those who seek boycotts or worse ignore these facts. Instead, those narratives are based on a distorted illusion that survives only because historical literacy concerning the long-running Arab-Israeli dispute is inadequate.