The Geopolitics of the Palestinians

Analysis

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Editor's Note: This is the sixth in a series of monographs on the geopolitics of countries influential in world affairs.

Dealing with the geopolitics of a nation without a clearly defined geography is difficult. The geography within which Palestinians currently live is not the area they claim as their own, nor are their current boundaries recognized as legitimate by others. The Palestinians do not have a state that fully controls the territory in which they live, nor can their existing governing entity, the Palestinian National Authority, be regarded as speaking for all Palestinians. A range of things that a state must have in order to be a state, from an economy to a military force, either do not exist or exist in forms that are not fully mature. It is therefore impossible to speak of the geopolitics of "Palestine" as if it were a nation-state. We will begin instead by speaking of the geopolitics of the Palestinians — and in a departure from other installments in this series, we do not begin with geography, but end there.

In raising the notion of a Palestinian geopolitics, we already enter an area of controversy, because there are those — and this includes not only Israelis but Arabs as well — who would argue that there is no such thing as a Palestinian nation, that there is no distinct national identity that can be called Palestinian. But while that might have been true 100 years ago or even 50, it is certainly no longer true. If there was no Palestinian nation in the past, there certainly is one now, and — like many nations — it was born in battle. A nation has more than an identity. It has a place, a location. And that location determines its behavior. To understand Hamas' actions in Gaza, or Israel's for that matter, it is necessary to consider first the origins and then the geopolitics of the Palestinians. This is a story that we have told before, but it is key to understanding the geopolitics of the region.
The Origins of Palestinian Geopolitics

The story begins with the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the Middle East from 1517 to 1918, when World War I ended. The Ottomans divided the Middle East into provinces, one of which was Syria. Under the Ottomans, the Syria province encompassed what is today Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. Constantinople (Istanbul), the Ottoman seat, sided with the Germans in World War I. As a result, after the war the victorious British and French dismantled the Ottoman Empire, and the province of Syria came under British and French rule. Under a secret wartime French-British deal, known as the Sykes-Picot agreement, the province was divided on a line running from Mount Hermon due west to the sea. The area to the north was placed under French control; the area to the south was placed under British control.

The French region was further subdivided. The French had been allied with the Maronite Christians during a civil war that raged in the region in the 1860s. Paris owed them a debt, so it turned the predominantly Maronite region of Syria into a separate state, naming it Lebanon after the dominant topographical characteristic of the region, Mount Lebanon. As a state, Lebanon had no prior reality, nor even a unified ethno-sectarian identity; its main unifying feature was that demographically, it was dominated by French allies.

The British region also was divided. The Hashemites, who ruled the western Hejaz region of the Arabian Peninsula, had supported the British, rising up against the Ottomans. In return, the British had promised to make them rulers of Arabia after the war. But in addition to the Hashemites, London was also allied with the French and with other tribes against the Ottomans, and thus could not make the Hashemites the unquestioned rulers of all of Arabia (the Peninsula as well as the Levant). Furthermore, the Sauds in 1900 had launched the reconquest of Arabia from Kuwait, and had gained control over the eastern and central parts of the peninsula. By the mid-1920s, the Hashemites lost control over the peninsula to the Sauds, paving the way for the eventual creation of Saudi Arabia.

But by then the British had moved the Hashemites to an area in the northern part of the peninsula, on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. Centered on the town of Amman, they named this protectorate carved from Syria "Trans-Jordan," as in "the other side of the Jordan River," since it lacked any other obvious identity. After the British withdrew in 1948,
Trans-Jordan became contemporary Jordan. The Hashemites also had been given another kingdom, Iraq, in 1921, which they lost to a coup by Nasserist military officers in 1958.

West of the Jordan River and south of Mount Hermon was a region that had been an administrative district of Syria under the Ottomans. It had been called "Philistia" for the most part, undoubtedly after the Philistines whose Goliath had fought David thousands of years before. Names here have history. The term Filistine eventually came to be known as Palestine, a name derived from ancient Greek — and that is what the British named the region, whose capital was Jerusalem.

Significantly, while the people of this area were referred to as Palestinians, a demand for a Palestinian state was virtually nonexistent in 1918. The European concept of national identity at this time was still very new to the Arab region of the Ottoman Empire. There were clear distinctions in the region, however. Arabs were not Turks. Muslims were not Christians, nor were they Jews. Within the Arab world there were religious, tribal and regional conflicts. For example, there were tensions between the Hashemites from the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabs settled in Trans-Jordan, but these were not defined as tensions between the country of Jordan and the country of Palestine. They were very old and very real, but were not thought of in national terms.

European Jews had been moving into this region under Ottoman rule since the 1880s, joining relatively small Jewish communities that had existed there (and in most other Arab regions) for centuries. The movement was part of the Zionist movement, which — motivated by European definitions of nationalism — sought to create a Jewish state in the region. The Jews came in small numbers, settling on land purchased for them by funds raised by Jews in Europe. Usually, this land was bought from absentee landlords in Cairo and elsewhere who had gained ownership of the land under the Ottomans. The landlords sold the land out from under the feet of Arab tenants, dispossessing them. From the Jewish point of view, this was a legitimate acquisition of land. From the tenants' point of view, this was a direct assault on their livelihood and eviction from land their families had farmed for generations. And so it began first as real estate transactions, winding up as partition, dispossession and conflict after World War II and the massive influx of Jews after the Holocaust.
As other Arab regions became nation-states in the European sense of the word, their views of the region developed. Those who adopted the Syrian identity, for example, saw Palestine as an integral part of Syria, much as they saw Lebanon and Jordan. They saw the Sykes-Picot agreement as a violation of Syrian territorial integrity, and opposed the existence of an independent Jewish state for the same reason they opposed Lebanese or Jordanian independence. Elements of Pan-Arab nationalism and Islamic identity informed this Syrian view, but they were not the key factors behind it. Rather, the key factor was the view that Palestine was a province of the sovereign entity known as Syria, and those we call Palestinians today were simply Syrians. The Syrians have always been uncomfortable with the concept of Palestinian statehood — though not with the destruction of Israel — and actually invaded Lebanon in the 1970s to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Fatah.

The Jordanian view of the Palestinians was even more uncomfortable. The Hashemites were very different from the region's original inhabitants. After the partition of the British-administered Palestine in 1948, Jordan took control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. But there were deep tensions with the Palestinians, and the Hashemites saw Israel as a guarantor of Jordanian security against the Palestinians. They never intended an independent Palestinian state (they could have granted it independence between 1948 and 1967), and in September 1970, they fought a bloody war against the Palestinians, forcing the PLO out of Jordan and into Lebanon. The Jordanians remain very fearful that the last vestige of the Hashemite monarchy could collapse under the weight of Palestinians in the kingdom and in the West Bank, paving the way for a Palestinian takeover of Jordan.

The Egyptians also have been uncomfortable with the Palestinians. Under the monarchy prior to the rise of Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1952, Egypt was
hostile to Israel's creation. But when the Egyptian army drove into what is now called Gaza in 1948, Cairo saw Gaza as an extension of the Sinai Peninsula — as it saw the Negev Desert. It viewed the region as an extension of Egypt, not as a distinct state.

Nasser's position was even more radical. He had a vision of a single, united Arab republic, both secular and socialist, and thought of Palestine not as an independent state but as part of this United Arab Republic (which actually was founded as a federation of Egypt and Syria from 1958 to 1961). Yasser Arafat was in part a creation of Nasser's secular socialist championing of Arab nationalism.

The liberation of Palestine from Israel was central to Arab nationalism, though this did not necessarily imply an independent Palestinian republic.

Arafat's role in defining the Palestinians in the mind of Arab countries also must be understood. Nasser was hostile to the conservative monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. He intended to overthrow them, knowing that incorporating them was essential to a united Arab regime. These regimes in return saw Arafat, the PLO and the Palestinian movement generally as a direct threat.

It is critical to understand that Palestinian nationalism did not simply emerge over and against Israel. That is only one dimension. Palestinian nationalism represented a challenge to the Arab world as well: to Syrian nationalism, to Jordanian nationalism, to Nasser's vision of a United Arab Republic, to Saudi Arabia's sense of security. If Arafat was the father of Palestinian nationalism, then his enemies were not only the Israelis, but also the Syrians, the Jordanians, the Saudis and — in the end — the Egyptians as well.

The Palestinian Challenge Beyond Israel

Palestinian nationalism's first enemy is Israel, but if Israel ceased to exist, the question of an independent Palestinian state would not be settled. All of the countries bordering such a state would have serious claims on its lands, not to mention a profound distrust of Palestinian intentions. The end
of Israel thus would not guarantee a Palestinian state. One of the remarkable things about Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza was that no Arab state moved quickly to take aggressive steps on the Gazans' behalf. Apart from ritual condemnation, weeks into the offensive no Arab state had done anything significant. This was not accidental: The Arab states do not view the creation of a Palestinian state as being in their interests. They do view the destruction of Israel as being in their interests, but since they do not expect that to come about anytime soon, it is in their interest to reach some sort of understanding with the Israelis while keeping the Palestinians contained.

The emergence of a Palestinian state in the context of an Israeli state also is not something the Arab regimes see as in their interest — and this is not a new phenomenon. They have never simply acknowledged Palestinian rights beyond the destruction of Israel. In theory, they have backed the Palestinian cause, but in practice they have ranged from indifferent to hostile toward it. Indeed, the major power that is now attempting to act on behalf of the Palestinians is Iran — a non-Arab state whose involvement is regarded by the Arab regimes as one more reason to distrust the Palestinians.

Therefore, when we say that Palestinian nationalism was born in battle, we do not mean simply that it was born in the conflict with Israel: Palestinian nationalism also was formed in conflict with the Arab world, which has both sustained the Palestinians and abandoned them. Even when the Arab states have gone to war with Israel, as in 1973, they have fought for their own national interests — and for the destruction of Israel — but not for the creation of a Palestinian state. And when the Palestinians were in battle against the Israelis, the Arab regimes' responses ranged from indifferent to hostile.

**Geography**

The Palestinians are trapped in regional geopolitics. They also are trapped in their own particular geography. First, and most obviously, their territory is divided into two widely separated states: the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Second, these two places are very different from each other. Gaza is a nightmare into which Palestinians fleeing Israel were forced by the Egyptians. It is a social and economic trap. The West Bank is less unbearable, but regardless of what happens to Jewish settlements, it is trapped between two enemies, Israel and Jordan. Economically, it can exist only in dependency on its more dynamic neighboring economy, which means Israel.

Gaza has the military advantage of being dense and urbanized. It can be defended. But it is an economic catastrophe, and given its demographics, the only way out of its condition is to export workers to Israel. To a lesser extent, the same is true for the West Bank. And the Palestinians have been exporting workers for generations. They have immigrated to countries in the region and around the world. Any peace agreement with Israel would increase the exportation of labor locally, with Palestinian labor moving into the Israeli market. Therefore, the
The only solution for the Palestinians to this conundrum is the destruction of Israel. But they lack the ability to destroy Israel. The destruction of Israel represents a far-fetched scenario, but were it to happen, it would necessitate that other nations hostile to Israel — both bordering the Jewish state and elsewhere in the region — play a major role. And if they did play this role, there is nothing in their history, ideology or position that indicates they would find the creation of a Palestinian state in their interests. Each would have very different ideas of what to do in the event of Israel's destruction.

Therefore, the Palestinians are trapped four ways. First, they are trapped by the Israelis. Second, they are trapped by the Arab regimes. Third, they are trapped by geography, which makes any settlement a preface to dependency. Finally, they are trapped in the reality in which they exist, which rotates from the minimally bearable to the unbearable. Their choices are to give up autonomy and nationalism in favor of economic dependency, or retain autonomy and nationalism expressed through the only means they have — wars that they can at best survive, but can never win.

The present division between Gaza and the West Bank had its origins in the British mandate. Palestine was partitioned between Jews and Arabs. In the wake of the 1948 War, Arabs lost control of what was Israel; the borders that emerged from this war and lasted until 1967 are still recognized as Israel's international boundary. The area called the West Bank was part of Jordan. The area called Gaza was effectively under Egyptian control. Numbers of Arabs remained in Israel as Israeli citizens, and played only a marginal role in Palestinian affairs thereafter.

During the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Israel occupied both Gaza and the West Bank, taking direct military and administrative control of both regions. The political apparatus of the Palestinians, organized around the PLO — an umbrella organization of diverse Palestinian groups — operated outside these areas, first in Jordan, then in Lebanon after 1970, and then in Tunisia after the 1982 invasion of Lebanon by Israel. The PLO and its constituent parts maintained control of groups resisting Israeli occupation in these two areas.

The idea of an independent Palestinian state, since 1967, has been geographically focused on these two areas. The concept has been that, following mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestinians, Palestine would be established as a nation-state based in Gaza and the West Bank. The question of the status of Jerusalem was always a vital symbolic issue for both sides, but it did not fundamentally affect the geopolitical reality.

Gaza and the West Bank are physically separated. Any axis would require that Israel permit land or air transit between them. This is obviously an inherently unstable situation, although not an impossible one. A negative example would be Pakistan during the 1947-1971 period, with its eastern and western wings separated by India. This situation ultimately led to the 1971 separation of these two territories.
into two states, Pakistan and Bangladesh. On the other hand, Alaska is separate from the rest of the United States, which has not been a hindrance. The difference is obvious. Pakistan and Bangladesh were separated by India, a powerful and hostile state. Alaska and the rest of the United States were separated by Canada, a much weaker and less hostile state. Following this analogy, the situation between Israel and the hypothetical Palestine resembles the Indo-Pakistani equation far more than it does the U.S.-Canadian equation.

The separation between the two Palestinian regions imposes an inevitable regionalism on the Palestinian state. Gaza and the West Bank are very different places. Gaza is about 25 miles long and no more than 7.5 miles at its greatest width, with a total area of about 146 square miles. According to 2008 figures, more than 1.5 million Palestinians live there, giving it a population density of about 11,060 per square mile, roughly that of a city. Gaza is, in fact, better thought of as a city than a region. And like a city, its primary economic activity should be commerce or manufacturing, but neither is possible given the active hostility of Israel and Egypt. The West Bank, on the other hand, has a population density of a little over 600 people per square mile, many living in discrete urban areas distributed through rural areas.

In other words, the West Bank and Gaza are entirely different universes with completely different dynamics. Gaza is a compact city incapable of supporting itself in its current circumstances and overwhelmingly dependent on outside aid; the West Bank has a much higher degree of self-sufficiency, even in its current situation. Under the best of circumstances, Gaza will be entirely dependent on external economic relations. In the worst of circumstances, it will be entirely dependent on outside aid. The West Bank would be neither. Were Gaza physically part of the West Bank, it would be the latter's largest city, making Palestine a more complex nation-state. As it is, the dynamic of the two regions is entirely different.

Gaza's situation is one of pure dependency amid hostility. It has much less to lose than the West Bank and far less room for maneuver. It also must tend toward a more uniform response to events. Where the West Bank did not uniformly participate in the intifada — towns like Hebron were hotbeds of conflict while Jericho remained relatively peaceful — the sheer compactness of Gaza forces everyone into the same cauldron. And just as Gaza has no room for maneuver, neither do individuals. That leaves little nuance in Gaza compared to the West Bank, and compels a more radical approach than is generated in the West Bank.

If a Palestinian state were created, it is not clear that the dynamics of Gaza, the city-state, and the West Bank, more of a nation-state, would be compatible. Under the best of circumstances, Gaza could not survive at its current size without a rapid economic evolution that would generate revenue from trade, banking and other activities common in successful Mediterranean cities. But these cities have either much smaller populations or much larger areas supported by surrounding territory. It is not clear how Gaza could get from where it is to where it would need to be to attain viability.

Therefore, one of the immediate consequences of independence would be a massive outflow of Gazans to the West Bank. The economic conditions of the West Bank are better, but a massive inflow of hundreds of thousands of Gazans, for whom anything is better than what they had in Gaza, would
buckle the West Bank economy. Tensions currently visible between the West Bank under Fatah and Gaza under Hamas would intensify. The West Bank could not absorb the population flow from Gaza, but the Gazans could not remain in Gaza except in virtually total dependence on foreign aid.

The only conceivable solution to the economic issue would be for Palestinians to seek work en masse in more dynamic economies. This would mean either emigration or entering the work force in Egypt, Jordan, Syria or Israel. Egypt has its own serious economic troubles, and Syria and Jordan are both too small to solve this problem — and that is completely apart from the political issues that would arise after such immigration. Therefore, the only economy that could employ surplus Palestinian labor is Israel's.

Security concerns apart, while the Israeli economy might be able to metabolize this labor, it would turn an independent Palestinian state into an Israeli economic dependency. The ability of the Israelis to control labor flows has always been one means for controlling Palestinian behavior. To move even more deeply into this relationship would mean an effective annullment of Palestinian independence. The degree to which Palestine would depend on Israeli labor markets would turn Palestine into an extension of the Israeli economy. And the driver of this will not be the West Bank, which might be able to create a viable economy over time, but Gaza, which cannot.

From this economic analysis flows the logic of Gaza's Hamas. Accepting a Palestinian state along lines even approximating the 1948 partition, regardless of the status of Jerusalem, would not result in an independent Palestinian state in anything but name. Particularly for Gaza, it would solve nothing. Thus, the Palestinian desire to destroy Israel flows not only from ideology and/or religion, but from a rational analysis of what independence within the current geographical architecture would mean: a divided nation with profoundly different interests, one part utterly incapable of self-sufficiency, the other part potentially capable of it — but only if it jettisons responsibility for Gaza.

It follows that support for a two-state solution will be found most strongly in the West Bank and not at all in Gaza. But in truth, the two-state solution is not a solution to Palestinian desires for a state, since that state would be independent in name only. At the same time, the destruction of Israel is an impossibility so long as Israel is strong and other Arab states are hostile to Palestinians.

Palestine cannot survive in a two-state solution. It therefore must seek a more radical outcome — the elimination of Israel — that it cannot possibly achieve by itself. The Palestinian state is thus an entity that has not fulfilled any of its geopolitical imperatives and which does not have a direct line to achieve them. What an independent Palestinian state would need in order to survive is:

- The recreation of the state of hostilities that existed prior to Camp David between Egypt and Israel. Until Egypt is strong and hostile to Israel, there is no hope for the Palestinians.
- The overthrow of the Hashemite government of Jordan, and the movement of troops hostile to Israel to the Jordan River line.
- A major global power prepared to underwrite the military capabilities of Egypt and those of whatever eastern power moves into Jordan (Iraq, Iran, Turkey or a coalition of the foregoing).
- A shift in the correlation of forces between Israel and its immediate neighbors, which ultimately
would result in the collapse of the Israeli state.

Note that what the Palestinians require is in direct opposition to the interests of Egypt and Jordan — and to those of much of the rest of the Arab world, which would not welcome Iran or Turkey deploying forces in their heartland. It would also require a global shift that would create a global power able to challenge the United States and motivated to arm the new regimes. In any scenario, however, the success of Palestinian statehood remains utterly dependent upon outside events somehow working to the Palestinians' advantage.

The Palestinians have always been a threat to other Arab states because the means for achieving their national aspiration require significant risk-taking by other states. Without that appetite for risk, the Palestinians are stranded. Therefore, Palestinian policy always has been to try to manipulate the policies of other Arab states, or failing that, to undermine and replace those states. This divergence of interest between the Palestinians and existing Arab states always has been the Achilles' heel of Palestinian nationalism. The Palestinians must defeat Israel to have a state, and to achieve that they must have other Arab states willing to undertake the primary burden of defeating Israel. This has not been in the interests of other Arab states, and therefore the Palestinians have persistently worked against them, as we see again in the case of Egypt.

Paradoxically, while the ultimate enemy of Palestine is Israel, the immediate enemy is always other Arab countries. For there to be a Palestine, there must be a sea change not only in the region, but in the global power configuration and in Israel's strategic strength. The Palestinians can neither live with a two-state solution, nor achieve the destruction of Israel. Nor do they have room to retreat. They can't go forward and they can't go back. They are trapped, as Palestinians seemingly destined not to have a Palestine.