

# Rashid Khalidi and the Palestinians' Failure to Achieve Statehood

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A few days before the recent presidential election in the United States, would-be voters were warned of a potential threat to the future of their great republic. It would appear that Barack Hussein Obama, candidate of the Democratic party, had broken bread some years earlier with a “known Palestinian terrorist,” a former neighbor and one-time fellow faculty member at the University of Chicago. The unproved accusation that Obama was indeed an intimate friend of Rashid Khalidi, scion of a distinguished Palestinian family, would seem to have had little, if any, impact on the habits of American voters, who do not as a rule demonstrate any interest in, or give any credence to, what university professors say. It is the conceit of French intellectuals to affirm that they are at the heart of politics, and of British intellectuals that the world would be a better place if only they were.

There are, however, ways to influence public discourse without offering direct counsel to the powers that be. A frequent guest of the media, Khalidi is perhaps the most visible spokesman for the Palestinian cause in the United States, a position he inherited from Edward Said, whose name graces the professorship in Arab politics that Khalidi holds at present. Like Said, Khalidi has been influential in the universities at which he has taught and in the scholarly circles he frequents. His outlook resonates deeply, not only among Palestinian intellectuals, but among many Westerners sympathetic to the plight of his people, who remain, as before, subjected to humiliation and without a truly independent and cohesive polity of their own. It is, therefore, informative to take a close look at his scholarship and views on the evolution of Palestinian national consciousness and, linked to that, the policies he advocates for establishing a Palestinian state to take its place among the Arab nation states of the Middle East.

Khalidi's works, most notably his recent book *The Iron Cage*<sup>1</sup> and his earlier tome *Palestinian Identity*,<sup>2</sup> should be taken very seriously and read very closely, if for no

other reason than that they arguably reflect the opinions of many individuals and groups both in and outside of academic life, particularly among more reflective Palestinians and those who have long sympathized with the plight of the Palestinian people.

It is perhaps not surprising that Khalidi has achieved the status bestowed upon him. The Khalidis, who are counted among the noble Palestinian families, have long enjoyed a reputation as men of letters and public service. The American-born and American-educated son of a diplomat and the nephew of university professors, Rashid Khalidi served in the nerve center of the PLO in Beirut (hence the baseless accusation of his being a terrorist). The experience exposed him to the highhandedness and corruption of its political leadership, which he openly criticized, much to his credit. At a later stage, when he was already a well-established scholar, he interrupted his academic projects to serve as an adviser to Palestinian peace delegations. In sum, he has carried on in the family tradition. Not surprisingly, Khalidi suggests that if the fate of the Palestinians were left to the sophisticated and worldly urban elites as represented by his own and other distinguished families, and not the narrow-minded and corrupt, the road to Palestinian nationhood might have been more level, despite Zionist opposition and what he considers overwhelming British, and then American, support for the Zionist project.

Said, a quintessential cosmopolitan, who made his scholarly mark in literary studies based on texts written in Western languages, had at best a rudimentary knowledge of formal Arabic and was essentially unlearned in the vast and complex realm of Islamic studies. In contrast, Khalidi, who was trained to be a historian of the modern Middle East, has a full command of modern Arabic and access to a vast range of relevant Arabic sources, including those found in his own family's magnificent Jerusalem library. Readers fully aware of Khalidi's passionate support of his people's aspirations and hopes would be wrong to dismiss Khalidi's work as mere apologia for the Palestinians. His extended essay, *The Iron Cage*, is written for a wider reading public but is also addressed to serious scholars, including Middle East experts. But as in all his writings, and indeed interviews to the media, one senses an underlying testiness to what may seem at first a rather muted and balanced attitude. What is more, there is a tendency to bend history to suit a narrative of aborted Palestinian nationalism; this tendentiousness needs to be scrutinized rather than taken at face value. In effect, Khalidi often uses highly charged and misleading language, for example, his description of the Islamic activists of Hamas as "protégés" of the Israelis. He refers in that instance to circumstances wherein these Palestinian militants accepted external funding the Israelis allowed from more conservative Arab states, in a misguided expectation that a turn to religion among the Palestinians would weaken the more secular PLO.

The problem with Khalidi's scholarship extends well beyond the use of language. Time and again the author goes to great lengths to fit square pegs into round holes and, like many notable Arab scholars, when he turns to Zionism and Israel he is forced to rely on English translations of the Israeli press—his paper of choice is *Haaretz*, the daily most critical of Israel's policies; his columnists of choice are the most vociferous in their criticism. When turning to secondary sources, more often than not he chooses selectively from certain revisionist Israeli historians writing in English, rather than confronting a much larger Zionist historiography, mostly written in Hebrew, a language of which Khalidi has no command. In any case, he gives little credence to the many critics of the revisionists, whom he cites with great approval. Unlike their learned critics, and the Israeli public at large, he considers the revisionist or "new" Israeli historians brave enough to unpack heavily entrenched Zionist myths, particularly those surrounding the birth of the Jewish state. Indeed, he wishes there were more Arab historians brave enough to confront their own past. In the end, his expressed views of mainstream Zionist historians do disservice to the lively academic and public debates that have always characterized Israel's engagement with its past and present, debates which take place not only among intellectuals, but the public at large.

In *The Iron Cage*, Khalidi informs us that he did not intend to write still another narrative history that strictly adheres to events told in chronological order. Rather, he wished to explore the inability of the Palestinians to establish an independent state before the momentous and tragic events of 1947–49, what he terms "the dissolution of Arab Palestine," and the impact of their failed efforts on the years thereafter. Why, then, were the Palestinians unable to achieve their cherished aims? From Khalidi's perspective, the aborted quest for Palestinian statehood before 1948 stems from a variety of factors, including the public commitment of the British government to establishing a Jewish polity in a land that had been inhabited by an overwhelming Arab majority for centuries. By numbers alone, it was the Arabs who should have been given the exclusive right to self-determination when Great Britain contemplated carving up the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Before the Balfour declaration, which committed Great Britain to establishing a national homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine, the Jewish inhabitants represented at best 12 percent of the total population. The author emphasizes that it was the British who denied the Palestinians a formal representative body, a parliament of sorts that might have given them practice at democratic rule and set them on the path to future independence. Given the demographics of 1930, when such a request was formally presented to the British authorities, any parliament of that sort would have resulted in an overwhelming Arab majority that would have blunted the efforts of the Zionists to promote their own agenda, to which the British were officially committed. No wonder British officials made the creation of that elective body conditional upon Arab recognition

of Jewish claims in Palestine, however one defined “national home.” In the same fashion, they recognized the Jewish Agency as representative of the *Yishuv* [the Jewish community], so long as it recognized Arab sensitivities. (Khalidi neglects to mention the Palestinians boycotted joint governing bodies of a lesser nature to which were invited to participate.)

Nor is it clear why a parliament in British-controlled Palestine should have led to a democratic polity or indeed any polity of the future. The Palestinian parliament set up in Gaza under the Egyptian occupation (1948-67) hardly proved an instrument to prepare the Palestinians for independence, let alone effective government. The same might be said of the various rubber stamp parliaments that dot the Arab political landscape today. In any case, under British rule, there were various Arab bodies to coordinate the interests of the Palestinian community. Why didn't these bodies evolve into entities that might have paved the way for a Palestinian state, or at least provided the necessary leadership to guide the Palestinians in moments of crisis? Surely the Arabs of Palestine did not need a stamp of approval from the Mandatory authorities to wield these institutions for their own purposes. Moreover, the Palestine civil service, judiciary, and even elements of the police force were staffed by Arabs who could have formed the basis of a civil administration within an Arab state. These Arabs were, after all, the employees of the Mandatory authorities, as were Jews who served in similar positions.

Khalidi rightly sees British support for a Jewish polity in Palestine as stemming in part from a common biblical past shared by Christians and Jews. He adds that the baton of that commitment, rooted in familiar biblical tales and landscape, has now been passed on to the United States, which Khalidi sees as being influenced by evangelical Christian views. No wonder the Arabs are given short shrift. Their history and culture are foreign and do not mesh with Western Christian sensibilities. He also stresses America's current misguided policies in the Middle East based on overarching global ambitions.

For Khalidi, there is a certain irony in the success of the Zionists in carving a Jewish state out of the Arab heartland. He contends that the Jews, as a rule, were not enthusiastic about the Zionist project, but a minority of East European settlers in the Holy Land pursued their objectives and won the sympathy of the Christian world, particularly after the persecution of the Jews in Europe and especially after the Holocaust, a barbaric event on European soil for which the innocent Palestinians were made to pay. Unlike some Palestinians, Khalidi does not deny or make light of Jewish suffering, or evade the psychic effects of the Holocaust on world Jewry. But for him the question remains: Why indeed were Jews fleeing Europe before the war allowed entry to Palestine, thus creating a critical mass with which to promote a viable Jewish polity in the future? And why, following

the Holocaust, were the flotsam and jetsam of surviving European Jewry imposed on the Arabs of Palestine? By the time Israel was declared a state, Jews made up some 40 percent of the total population. If the Europeans felt guilt about their Jews, they should have assumed the burden of accepting Jewish refugees, rather than imposing them on the indigenous Arabs and calling for the establishment of a Jewish state, if even in only part of Mandated Palestine. Unfortunately for Palestinian Arabs, that argument has been made moot by the course of historical events. Again to Khalidi's credit, the strength of Israel is not something he believes can be wished away by religious phantasmagoria, and that depresses him as he looks to the future. There is a state of Israel, and its Jewish citizens, however divided over political and social issues, are not inclined to commit self-inflicted politicide because the Arabs regard the creation of that state as an injustice, or as Khalidi has put it, "conceived in guilt."

Were the British all that complicit in denying the Palestinians what should have been rightfully theirs and so supportive of Zionist efforts to reconstitute the Jewish people in their ancestral homeland? In truth, the British authorities in Whitehall and Jerusalem, whom Khalidi paints as supporters of Zionism, did not alleviate the plight of the Jews seeking refuge in Palestine at their greatest moment of peril. Having castigated the British for favoring the Zionists and having thwarted establishing the foundations for Palestinian statehood, Khalidi might have noted more emphatically that His Majesty's Government prohibited extensive Jewish immigration in 1939, when tens of thousands of Jews could have been spared the fate that awaited them. The White Paper of 1939, which severely curtailed legal Jewish immigration, is mentioned en passant. He might also have alerted readers to the harsh, if not brutal, manner in which the British armed forces intercepted Jewish refugees en route to Palestine after the war and either returned them to Europe or interned them in Cyprus. He might have chosen to emphasize how Britain abstained during the UN vote for partitioning Palestine rather than support the creation of Arab and Jewish states—hardly a mark of sympathy for Zionism. In truth, the British had their own political objectives in Palestine, objectives that were rooted in a broad game of global politics rather than any latent desire to satisfy the Zionist agenda or deny the maximalist claims of the Arab leadership.

On the whole, British policy was self-serving, and often shifted depending on which officials were given responsibility at a particular moment in time. With the rise of Nazi Germany, they were caught between a rock and a hard place. While many leading and influential British statesmen and soldiers sympathized with the Zionists and Zionism, there were others who were vehemently opposed to them and their agenda, as they considered the broad need for support throughout the Arab world in the impending, and then actual, conflict with the Axis powers. Following the war, there were the Russians to contend with and Americans

to compete with for political influence in the region. Nor should one discount completely traditional antisemitism when evaluating the sum of British policy from World War I until May 1948. In any case, why lay such heavy blame on Great Britain for the Palestinians' inability to pursue their avowed goals. Were the Palestinians bereft of choices in which to pursue their aims? Did the decisions of their leadership and the nature of their society not play a role in the catastrophic events that were to overtake them?

What Khalidi describes in detail are at best the seedlings that slowly grew into the energizing force of today's Palestinian nationalism, which still remains diffuse more than a century later. His reference to the boundaries of Palestine does not at all account for the shifting map of Arabic Filastin or Falastin throughout the course of history. Indeed, for much of the nineteenth century, Filastin, regardless of boundaries, did not even exist as a minor administrative unit of the Ottoman Empire. That is to say, for official purposes, there was no Palestine at the time. Nor could one speak in any real sense of Palestinians before the British Mandate established a country called Palestine. Even into the early 1930s, there were still a few important notables who promoted Syrian nationalism, in accordance with time-tested political realities. The lands encompassed by the British Mandate had most often been directly governed by an authority situated in Damascus. Such was the case in Greco-Roman times and for most of the approximately 1,300 years of Islamic rule. Even when the Ottomans sought to lessen the influence of Damascus by reducing the territory its governor controlled, they did not create a political entity called Filastin or Falastin.

Still, one has to ask why the seedlings did not bear full fruit. Khalidi refers to the disparity in numbers between the educated urban elites centered in Jaffa and Haifa, the cosmopolitan port cities along the Mediterranean, that is, the leaders who in his opinion could have successfully directed a national movement (presumably along with his native Jerusalemites), and the vast majority of the Palestinians, the poor peasants and artisans of the rural villages and small towns. More telling yet are the differences between the Palestinian Arabs and the *Yishuv*, the highly organized Jewish community. He speaks of the diverse nature of Jewish society (as if diversity was a positive rather than negative indicator of successfully building the framework for nationhood) and stresses its economic vitality and high educational standards based on European models.

He also points out that as the Arabs could not get their act together, the Jews of Palestine were laying the groundwork for a future state by creating state-like institutions. In effect, the Zionists created what he labels a "para-state" with British approval, with the Jewish Agency being the central institution that coordinated Zionist efforts. He is quite right that the Zionists began creating a state within

a state. However, his linking of those pre-state institutions to British approval caricatures the vast and complex structure of the *Yishuv*, which began to forge its own institutions, without first seeking British approval. The most notable of these were: the utilization of a national fund to facilitate land purchases (begun in 1901 under Ottoman rule); the creation of a labor federation that at the same time created the infrastructure of heavy industry and a workers union that offered vast benefits to both its Jewish and Arab members (founded in 1920 before the Mandate); agricultural collectives of different sorts and the modern all-Jewish city of Tel Aviv (also going back to Ottoman times). They also included the establishment of a world-class university and technical institute and the numerous private initiatives that transformed the Jewish community of the Holy Land from a basket case in need of charity to a vibrant society seeking to promote European values in a distinctively Jewish polity. What need is there to make the British complicit in these achievements or to suggest it was the British who prevented the Arabs from doing the same?

There is, to be sure, much truth to Khalidi's lament about the Palestinians' inability to match the Jews and to secure the firm, if not unbridled, political support of the Mandatory authorities, and yet, given their numbers, and according to Khalidi himself, it was their evolving sense of national identity that was to prevent the Palestinians from overcoming the obstacles allegedly placed before them by the British and marshalling their energies to pave the way for a state of their own. He maintains that the key event was the Arab uprising of 1936–39, triggered after a general strike called in 1935 gave rise to open rebellion against British rule and Zionist interests. The rebellion was carried out largely by rural bands and Bedouins who had turned against the traditional leadership—the urban elites—thereby emasculating the very individuals and bodies that could have steered the Palestinian Arabs toward statehood. (It is not at all clear of what use a Palestinian parliament would have been in those turbulent times.) The rebellion, which was brutally suppressed, left the Arab community psychically exhausted and incapable of organizing itself to meet the crises of 1947–48, when the fate of a Palestinian state hung in the balance—or so Khalidi maintains.

There is no doubt that the revolt had a devastating effect on Palestinian Arab society, but that was true only because that society had never formed a sense of common identity and purpose other than to chafe at British rule and seethe at Jewish ambitions, which were seen not simply in light of the Zionist project but against the background of traditional anti-Jewish attitudes stemming from the birth hour of Islam in the seventh century. The rebels were originally drawn from the lumpenproletariat, individuals given to religious fervor who had come from their rural villages to work in the towns and cities. With work stopped as a result of the general strike, and with economic conditions deteriorating in the rural

areas, they had time on their hands; access to weapons; knowledge of the terrain of rural Palestine, which favored hit-and-run tactics; hatred of the unbelievers; and above all, grievances against Khalidi's cosmopolitan elites, many of whom were absentee landlords who gouged them in bad times, acting through village headmen in their employ. Many cash-starved landlords even sold land to Jews, resulting in the displacement of a few thousand Arab farmers and raising fears of widespread dislocation from lands Arabs had worked without deeds, in some cases for generations.

What started as a campaign against the British and Jews soon became a wholesale attack against the urban elites and their associates. It also led to massacring the Druze (an offshoot sect of Islam) in their Mount Carmel villages and turning against individual Christian Arabs before the Muslim religious authorities intervened to prevent further sectarian carnage in the Christian areas of settlement. The same disorder characterized relations all through Arab society. Clans turned against clans; extended families turned against one another; the leading notables, whose conflicts had been commercial and political, were given, on occasion, to more violent means. In all the turmoil, many notables showed little, if any, sign of leadership; a number left the country for safer environments in neighboring Arab countries. Why, then, is Khalidi so intent on directly linking the Arab revolt to the failure to establish a Palestinian state in 1947-48?

One can, indeed, point to other reasons for their failure. World War II altered the economy of Palestine, which became the great rear base of Britain in the Middle East. Jewish industry produced material for the war effort, and the Arabs benefited enormously from the economic opportunities that reversed the difficult conditions of the previous decade. The war also opened other opportunities for the Arabs of Palestine, opportunities that could have played to their advantage in the coming military struggle with the Zionists. With the exception of some fringe characters and groups, the Jews of Palestine, conscious of what the Nazis had done to their brethren, threw their full weight behind the Allies. Thousands of Jews volunteered to assist the war effort in a wide variety of ways, including the formation of a Jewish Brigade, which earned distinction fighting with the British Eighth Army in Italy, and played an active role in the illegal immigration that brought Jewish Holocaust survivors to Palestine after the war. Most important, the combat experience of the brigade veterans and others who fought with the British against the Vichy authorities in the Levant provided the fledgling Jewish Defense Forces of 1947-49 with officers able to plan and mount complex operations, once sufficient war matériel reached them from arms dealers in Europe.

The Arabs of Palestine, with no such fear of the Germans and certainly no enmity, hedged their bets on the winner. They wisely did not seek to undermine British

rule, even though the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the leading Islamic authority in the country and the most implacable enemy of Britain and the Jews, threw his lot in with the Germans and spent most of the war in Berlin.

On the whole, Palestinian militias were woefully inadequate in protecting their people's interests once they were embroiled in Israel's War of Independence. Even before the Zionist forces acquired sufficient arms to take the offensive in a decisive manner, they had beaten back the challenge of the Palestinian Arabs, who, overconfident, disorganized, and lacking military and political leadership, could not mount sustained and effective resistance, let alone seize the initiative. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs fled the path of battle, either to escape the fighting or because they were evicted by the advancing Jewish armies anxious to consolidate their gains and link the disparate areas of Jewish settlement that were isolated from major Jewish population concentrations. However Zionist strategy unfolded in the chaotic developments in the first year of the fighting, in the end, hundreds of Palestinian villages were abandoned or cleared, and hundreds of thousands of Arabs were either forced into exile or had to take refuge in areas of Palestine with which they did not personally identify. The great port cities of Jaffa and Haifa were left with a small Arab minority. In the western areas of Jerusalem, the Arab neighborhoods were almost entirely depleted of their inhabitants. The mixed large towns of Galilee and the Jordan Rift became Jewish cities. How did all this happen so quickly? What precipitated the complete collapse of leadership in this moment of crisis, a crisis from which the Palestinians have never recovered—witness their inability to create an effective polity some sixty years later?

Khalidi is right to look to the deep roots of this catastrophe, but unfortunately he does not dig all that deeply. To do so would make the Palestinians less the victim of others—be it the British, the Zionists, the Americans and, not least, the Arab states, which have continuously paid lip service to the Palestinian cause but have produced precious little to change the fate of this unfortunate people. Certainly, one has to look into a more distant past than that which titillates the interest of most historians of the modern Middle East and the vast army of media types and their rented experts. The problems of today's region, and particularly the Arab–Israeli conflict, did not begin with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the subsequent encroachment of the European powers, starting points for the conventional education of most historians of the modern Middle East. Nor is it the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent creation of artificial nation-states by the Western world as they carved up an Islamic polity to suit their own political interests.

No one in his or her right mind would argue that all these events of modern times are not critical to the shaping and understanding of the current state of

the Palestinians, but as Khalidi speaks specifically of the Palestinians' failure to establish an independent state, I would suggest we look beyond his truncated vision and that of so many other observers. We might want to consider factors of a more cosmic nature. To begin with, we should stress that nationhood, citizenry and the modern nation state are conceptions of European origins that appealed to the Arabic-speaking Muslims insofar as they sought a greater role in their own affairs as subjects of the Ottoman Turks. The Christians of the Arabic-speaking provinces, who strongly advocated these notions, focused on the concept of citizenship, as they envisioned it putting them on equal footing with the dominant Muslim majority instead of being subject to the demeaning status of *dhimmi*, or protected minority. In the end, the current Arab states of the region, whose boundaries were drawn to suit European interests and had no previous reality in history, lacked a true sense of legitimacy even after they achieved independence.

Moreover, the very concept of citizens united in polity by virtue of living within defined national borders is alien to traditional Islamic theories of government and the practice of traditional Islamic politics. For the Muslim faithful there is only the *ummah*, the all-embracing religious community first established by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Then, as now, in theory, the *ummah* includes all Muslims and draws no distinctions as to geographical situation or origins, differences of ethnicity, spoken language and the like. For some 1,300 years, the rulers of this idealized society, whether the Prophet himself or the Arab caliphs who replaced him, or the Ottoman sultans who assumed the title of caliph, demanded a loyalty that trumped narrowly defined allegiances.

The tension between political and social realities occasioned by loyalties and allegiances of distinct ethnic groups at the local and regional level, and a transcendent but unrealizable ideal that was intended to create a sense of collective unity among all Muslims have been constant features of Islamic politics from the outset and is very much in evidence in modern times, indeed until this very day. The modern Arab nation-state with a separate communal identity legally enshrined in constitutions, also borrowed from Europe, is the very antithesis of the long-held and cherished Muslim ideal. It is no small wonder, then, that the modern Arab nation-state is currently attacked by the more militant Islamists, who wish to replace it with some form of universal caliphate, or at least see the reinstatement of traditional Islamic law. The modern nation-state has survived in the region only because it controls internal dissension and the divisiveness of its different ethnic, religious, and local societies by authoritarian, and at times brutal, ruling elites. Even the concept of "Arabism" (*urubah*) could not serve to create a sense of collective identity that might have mobilized the Arabs of Palestine to a common purpose, especially in the face of adversity. Our understanding of what it means to be an Arab is also of European origin, an import concurrent with the

nation-state that was meant to draw distinctions between the inhabitants of the Arabic-speaking provinces and their Ottoman Turkish sovereigns. The peoples of the Middle East never conceived of an Arab nation, in the European sense of the word “nation,” before the encroachment of Western ideas. Before the penetration of European notions of nationhood, to be an Arab implied no common sense of national consciousness, let alone polity.

In contrast, the Jews of Palestine, despite their diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, shared a common sense of history that linked them to the land of their ancestors and a general sense of responsibility that linked them to one another. What linked the Arabs of Palestine (referring mostly to those Arabs who were Muslims, that is, the overwhelming majority of the Arabs) was their hatred of the unbelievers whose powerful presence demeaned their religion and put an end to centuries of Muslim dominance. Given that the Palestinians had to create a nation-state against the will of a well-organized Zionist adversary that grew more powerful with each passing year of the Mandate, they would have had to shelve their local and ethnic identities and allegiances and the internal feuds these allegiances engendered for the sake of a common national goal. That goal may have resonated in intellectual circles but not deeply enough among the rural peasantry who made up the majority of the Arab population, at least not deeply enough to overcome their antipathy to other Arabs in whose midst they lived. When push came to shove, they could not be fully mobilized in a jointly coordinated effort to achieve either the political or military objectives of their would-be leaders.

What if there had been no Zionist project to contest the Arabs of Palestine? No doubt, a Palestinian state would have emerged—though under pressure from its more powerful Arab neighbors. It would have been in a similar situation as the Jordanian monarchy, forced to steer a cautious course through treacherous waters. But there was a Zionist project, and that had to be taken into consideration by the Arab leadership, particularly in the years of the British Mandate, when the surge of Jewish immigration meant that the creation of a Palestinian state that had an Arab character could only be achieved by force of arms. That was, of course, impossible when the British controlled the country, and it has proved impossible ever since. Farsighted Palestinian Arabs might have sought a different course at critical moments—they might seek such a course even today. Despite the many obstacles that confront the Palestinians, one is not encouraged by the current drift created by Islamic revival and the attitudes that revival engenders toward Jews and Judaism. Nor is one encouraged by the attitudes toward the Arabs engendered by certain elements of Israel’s population, especially among those settlers imbued with messianic fervor. Still, the door to a two-state solution remains open, if ever so slightly, because, in effect, there can be no other accommodation between the two peoples who claim the same land.

Khalidi is quick to mock the former Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban's famous quip: "The Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." What if the Arabs, not merely the Palestinians, but all the Arab states, had accepted the Partition Plan passed by the United Nations in 1947? To be sure, the Palestinians would have been left with only half a loaf of bread. But the Jewish half would have contained an Arab population nearly equal to that of the *Yishuv*, and the geographical boundaries of the two respective states would have represented "kissing points," a combination of factors that would have placed the Jewish state solidly within the orbit of a much larger Arab world rather than forcefully isolated from it. The Arab acceptance of Jewish sovereignty over a truncated area of the Mandated territory might have created the basis of mutual acceptance and spared the region and the world so much tragedy. As it were, the circumstances did not allow such a concession by the Palestinians and the other Arab states (save the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan).

Neither Arab/Muslim culture nor the Palestinians' demand for what they considered absolute justice could have allowed any such compromise. If the Palestinians have learned anything since, they have shown little, if any, ability to offer a reasoned plan that would force Israel to accept a meaningful compromise. Khalidi's Palestinians are in that sense imprisoned in a cage to which they still have the key. It is not, however, the key some Arab families still retain to the homes that they abandoned, homes now either destroyed or occupied by others and to which they seek to return, at least as a matter of principle.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> *The Iron Cage* (Boston, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Palestinian Identity* (New York, 1997).