

9. The Rise of the PLO

This is the ninth part of our acclaimed series, "A Short History of Israel". If you wish to read the preceding parts, see the **Table of Contents** for links to them. We welcome comments and criticisms. Do tell us what you think.

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Six months before Sadat's historic policy change, a Likud-based coalition had taken power for the first time in Israel. So it now fell to the Likud leader, Menachem Begin, a former Irgun commander, longstanding champion of the cause of unrestricted Jewish settlement, and implacable opponent of any hint of appeasement, or trust, of Israel's enemies, to decide how to respond to Sadat's overture.

On the same evening, Begin invited Sadat to Jerusalem to address the Knesset.

The broad elements of the peace treaty – peace and recognition for Israel, in return for the Sinai peninsula, which Israel had captured from Egypt during the Six Day War – were agreed immediately. This was the first time that any Arab nation had agreed to the principle of the partition of Palestine. But the details became the subject of gruelling negotiations which lasted until 1979. For the Israelis, one of the most difficult of the Egyptian demands was that the Jewish settlements that had been built in Sinai be evacuated, but they eventually agreed to this. In an operation overseen by Ariel Sharon (then a member of the Cabinet), 2,800 bitterly resisting inhabitants were forcibly evicted by IDF soldiers, and their homes and orchards razed to the ground to make it impossible for them to return.

Sadat and Begin shared the Nobel Peace Prize for this treaty. To this day, Egypt and Israel have adhered to it. They maintain fully accredited embassies in each other's countries, trade is officially permitted, as are tourism and all other normal exchanges between neighbours. No threats of war, implicit, explicit or indirect, are issued. Egypt does not tolerate the launching of terrorist attacks on Israel from its soil (though Israel has a longstanding complaint that Egypt does not prevent the smuggling of weapons to terrorists operating from Gaza). However, although the treaty required the parties to "seek to foster mutual understanding and tolerance and ... abstain from hostile propaganda against each other", there was

no specific provision for a cessation of anti-Semitic incitement in the Egyptian press and other government-controlled media, or in the mosques and schools. Such incitement continued to increase. Today, very few Israeli businesspeople or tourists actually visit Egypt, because of the risk to their lives.

The rage of the Arab world was turned against Egypt. All Arab countries broke off or scaled back diplomatic and trading relations with it. Saudi aid was cut off. But the US made good the financial losses, and Egypt came to be regarded as a US ally in the region. Gradually, relations with the Arab world have been restored, so that by now, the only significant hostility that remains towards Egypt is from Islamic fundamentalists. However, Egypt has still not regained its former position as the generally accepted leader of the Arab world. Iraq under Saddam Hussein tried hard to take over that position.

With the assistance of France and Germany, Iraq began to build a nuclear reactor at Osirak, for the purpose of manufacturing nuclear weapons. When Iran (which was fighting a bitter war with Iraq at the time in which some one million people were to die) had attacked this reactor but failed to do much damage, Saddam Hussein had said that the attack had been futile anyway, because the target was Israel alone. In June 1981, Israeli aircraft attacked and destroyed the reactor, just before it was to have become operational. This action was ferociously criticised by every other nation and by almost every shade of opinion everywhere in the world, including the US government and including the Israeli Labour Party. The US determined that Israel had violated the terms of its purchase of US aircraft by using them for such a purpose, which they said "cannot but seriously add to the already tense situation in the area". As punishment, the US suspended deliveries of aircraft to Israel.

In an impassioned defence of his decision before the Knesset, Begin said:

Two European governments, in return for oil, have assisted the Iraqi tyrant in the construction of atomic weapons. We again call upon them to desist from this horrifying, inhuman deed. Under no circumstances will we allow an enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction against our people.

We shall defend the citizens of Israel in time, and with all the means at our disposal.

The Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) a decade later changed the minds of many Americans about the morality of the Osirak raid, and about whether its effect was to increase or decrease tension in the area, and about whether the US should have opposed or supported it. Subsequently, US and world opinion has moved even further. In January 2000, when David Ivry, who had led the Israeli Air Force at the time of the Osirak raid, became Israeli Ambassador in Washington, he received a gift from Richard Cheney (now US Vice President). It was a satellite photograph of the Osirak site, with the

inscription: "For General David Ivry – With thanks and appreciation for the outstanding job he did on the Iraqi nuclear program in 1981, which made our job much easier in Desert Storm."

In October 1981, Sadat was murdered by Islamic fundamentalists for making peace with Israel. The Vice-President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, became President, which he remains to this day.

Terrorism, and the PLO in particular, had been playing an ever-increasing role in the region and in the world, and had become an accepted feature of the political scene. In May 1974, PLO terrorists took control of a school at Ma'alot in northern Israel, and murdered 22 children. In October 1974 an Arab summit conference at Rabat declared the PLO the 'sole representative' of the Palestinian people. In November 1974 the UN endorsed that decision by granting the PLO observer status – in effect, UN membership in all but name.

In many respects the PLO had (and continues to have) access to more privileges of membership of the UN than Israel. Arafat declared "The goal of our struggle is the end of Israel, and there can be no compromise or mediations. We don't want peace, we want victory. Peace for us means Israel's destruction, and nothing else." Eleven days later, armed with a pistol, he addressed the General Assembly of the UN, and received a standing ovation. The following year, the General Assembly, with 75 countries in favour and 35 dissenting, passed a resolution declaring Zionism to be a form of racism. This was not received with uniform enthusiasm everywhere – for instance, the centre-left *Observer* newspaper in Britain noted that all the states defined as 'Islamic' in their constitutions had voted for the resolution, while Israel's constitution guaranteed equal rights to all citizens regardless of religion or race – but nor was the resolution enthusiastically opposed by any nation or significant political faction outside Israel and the US. It took until 1991 for the General Assembly, under intense US pressure, to rescind the resolution, with 25 member states still voting to retain it and 13 abstaining. At the same time, continuous US pressure to recognise *anti-Semitism* as a form of racism was resisted until 1993. Over the years, Arab delegates to the UN have repeatedly, and sometimes successfully, attempted to introduce anti-Semitic blood libels into the official records of the UN. Israel has often been censured both by the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council, but neither body has ever censured the PLO or any Arab state for any attack on Israel.

In Lebanon, a civil war began in 1975. It centred on the tensions between Lebanese Christians and Lebanese Muslims, but, as order broke down, many different factions fought for turf and influence on behalf of many kinds of religion and ideology. Among the foreign parties to participate with armed forces were Syria and the PLO. The PLO established what was often called a 'state within a state' in southern Lebanon. By 1982, it maintained an army of some 15,000 there, with artillery and long-range rockets, with which they mounted a continuous bombardment of northern Israel. They were protected by an anti-aircraft missile network, and a range of other

weapons including tanks. Almost daily, they sent teams into Israel

to make terrorist attacks,

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon. The Syrian army and air force intervened with aircraft and tanks but were defeated – in the case of the air force, humiliatingly. The PLO retreated northwards, entered the city of Beirut and made a stand there. After holding out there for several months as the Israelis systematically shelled or bombed every building containing PLO fighters, an operation that cost many civilian as well as PLO lives, they agreed to leave Lebanon, and set up a new base in Tunisia.

Israel withdrew from most of Lebanon, retaining a 25-mile buffer zone to protect its northern border.

The Israelis had been welcomed in Lebanon by the Christian factions, who held the PLO responsible for destabilising the fragile balance that had previously existed between them and the Muslims. The Christian militias became allies of the IDF. During the Israeli advance northwards, one of those militias, the Phalangists, was assigned the task of rooting out PLO fighters in two Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Sabra and Shatila. The Phalangist leader, Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel, and 25 of his followers, had just been assassinated in a bomb attack widely attributed to the PLO. The Phalangists took revenge on the civilian inhabitants of the camps, murdering hundreds. An Israeli commission of inquiry subsequently found that Ariel Sharon, then Israel's Defence Minister, had been negligent in not foreseeing such an event, and he was forced to resign from that post.

The Israeli political movement *Peace Now*, which had been founded in 1978 and advocated unconditional withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights (and now from the Lebanon buffer zone) followed by negotiations suing for peace, received a surge of support. On September 25, 1982, a Peace Now demonstration in Tel Aviv attracted 400,000 participants, 10% of Israel's population at that time.

In 1981, Israel had annexed the Golan Heights, but although Begin mooted a plan to give the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza full Israeli citizenship and then to annexe those territories, no serious steps were ever taken to implement it because there was insufficient support for it from almost any side in Israel, including the Likud Party itself. Israel had become deeply split on the issue of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The right-wing and religious parties, though they could agree on no long term policy for the territories, were nevertheless enthusiastically in favour of Jewish settlement. Thanks, again, to the electoral system, the settlement movement attracted more and more government assistance – to the extent that the traditional Zionist project of building settlements in Israel proper all but ceased. New immigrants and people on low incomes were now being attracted in large numbers to the settlements, not out of any prior connections, religious feelings, or nationalistic zeal, but because they received heavily subsidised housing and a living standard not available to

them elsewhere. And every additional settler enlarged the

constituency for more subsidies.

Part 10 **...And Then The World Changed**

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The 1982 September War

What would your response be to Martin Gilbert's reading of the war in Lebanon in 1982? It seems to me that this is the turning point in his book away from a sympathetic account of Israeli history to something openly disapproving (I wonder whether it is contributed to by the rise of Likud which is not where his political sympathies lie?)

by [emma](#) on Thu, 08/23/2007 - 21:56 | [reply](#)