

Clarity with Michael Oren

The Core Conflict and the Jews

Linkage—the belief that the Israeli-Palestine conflict is the root of all Middle East instability—is not only factually wrong and deleterious to peace, it is fundamentally antisemitic.

[MICHAEL OREN](#) FEB 12, 2024

Shortly after entering office, in 2009, President Barack Obama's National Security Advisor, Lt. General Jim Jones made a startling pronouncement. "If God had appeared in front of the President and said he could do one thing on the planet," he [declared](#), "it would be the two-state solution." That is, not eliminate global hunger, end the civil wars then raging across Africa and parts of the Middle East, not even find the cure for cancer. No, the one goal the White House sought above all others was the creation of an independent Palestinian state which would live side-by-side in peace with Israel.

Though startling, Gen. Jones's position was anything but unique. On the contrary, it reflected the belief of virtually everybody in the Obama administration, in the State Department, and almost the entire media. Most of academia would have agreed. All subscribed to the supreme notion of linkage.

Linkage meant, simply, that while the Middle East was rife with violence of every stripe, the core conflict was not between Sunnis and Shiites, Iranians and Arabs, and even between the Arabs themselves, but between Israelis and Palestinians. Solve that—so the advocates of linkage held—and all the region's other disputes would cease. And the core cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not Palestinian rejectionism and terror, but rather Israel's occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, and the expansion of Israeli settlements.

Linkage lay behind organizations such as the U.S./Middle East Project and the Institute for Middle East Understanding which, contrary to their titles, deal only with what they identified as the central Middle East conflict and the country—Israel—responsible for it.

General Jones's response to God's offer of conflict resolution was not, therefore, surprising. Nor was the White House's subsequent fixation on Israeli settlements which, over the course of the next eight years, were identified as the central cause of the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

Throughout, the concept of linkage remained unassailable. "Of all the problems the administration faces globally," Jones told a J Street conference, " I would recommend...to solve this one. This is the epicenter."

Linkage attained a sacred status among American policymakers, and like so many religious beliefs, it remained impervious to facts. These documented how successive administrations, Republican and Democratic alike, had striven to forge a two-state solution only to utterly fail. International peace conferences, in Madrid and Annapolis, had been convened, and entire libraries of academic and think tank papers published, to promote the two-state dream, all without consequence. Secretaries of State and a cavalcade of special emissaries had shuttled back and forth between Ramallah and Jerusalem, often ignoring far more pressing issues in the world, in mediating missions that produced nothing more than frustration, suspicion, and resentment. Most, such as Secretaries of State Condoleezza Rice and John Kerry, blamed Israel's settlement-making for their failures.

Believers in linkage also overlooked the Palestinians' record of turning down offers of statehood—in 1937, 1947, 2000, 2001, 2008—almost always with violence. Linkage proponents also ignored the Palestinians' rejection of America's own "two states for two peoples" formula, denying that the Jews had any historical connection to the land or were even a people at all. No Palestinian leader ever accepted the two-state solution

as final but rather regarded as an interim step toward the creation of a unified Palestinian state stretching from the Jordan to the sea. No Palestinian leader had ever questioned the policy of paying stipends to Palestinian terrorists serving sentences for murder in Israeli jails or of teaching successive generations of Palestinian children to hate and, if possible, kill Jews. Supporting linkage meant forgetting the Palestinian Authority's complicity in terrorist attacks that killed more than 1,000 Israelis or the viciously antisemitic and Holocaust denying speeches of its president, Mahmoud Abbas.



Blinken and Abbas, Feb 7, 2024, Ramallah (@secblinken on X)

U.S. policymakers could not, in fact, adduce one piece of evidence from over the previous century to prove that the Palestinians were in any way capable of sustaining a nation-state. On the contrary, the record showed that, even when given the opportunity of self-government, the Palestinians failed to build stable institutions, maintain security, and

prevent the breakdown of central authority. In 2020 and 2021 alone, the Palestinians received more aid per capita than the entire war-torn Europe under the Marshall Plan, yet much of that money was stolen by their own leaders and deposited abroad. The Palestinian Authority—the presumptive pre-state government—was riddled with corruption.

American leaders might forget all that, but Israelis most certainly could not. Palestinian terror attacks, beginning shortly after the signing to the Oslo Accords in 1993, eroded the support which many Israelis initially gave to the two-state solution. In 2000, following on the heels of a U.S.-Israeli offer to create a Palestinian state in Gaza, East Jerusalem, and almost all the West Bank, the Second Intifada all but killed the Israeli Left. The coup de grâce, however, came in 2006, a mere two years after Israel unrooted twenty-one settlements and their 9,000 Jewish inhabitants in Gaza to provide a precedent for peaceful coexistence. Rather than build on that gesture, the majority of Palestinians threw their support behind Hamas. A year later, in a bloody coup, the terrorists seized control of Gaza and immediately launched rocket attacks against Israel. Mahmoud Abbas, meanwhile, refused to stand for reelection—he would eventually serve 15 years beyond his four-year term—knowing that Hamas would win.

The overwhelming majority of Israelis understood that the establishment of a Palestinian state in what they called Judea and Samaria would swiftly devolve into a launching pad for terror that would put most of their homes not only within range of Hamas rockets but also of Hamas rifles.

None of these facts seriously influenced the American officials, journalists, and academicians who continued to blame Israeli settlements, rather than Palestinian belligerency, corruption, and incompetence for their failure to attain the two-state solution. But a sizable number of Israelis would have greatly restricted the settlement project had they believed in the possibility of a permanent, secure, and legitimate peace with the Palestinians. Remarkably, despite the Intifada

and Hamas's takeover of Gaza, most Israelis backed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 2009 Bar-Ilan University speech intimating support for a Palestinian state as well as the subsequent ten-month moratorium on settlement building. A majority also welcomed the Trump peace plan of 2020 which, though allocating less land to the Palestinians, nevertheless provided for a two-state reality.

For that reason, precisely, the Trump plan was opposed by the extreme right wing parties in Israel. Proponents of linkage no doubt viewed them as a primary cause for the absence of peace. Downplayed, once again, would be the role of Palestinian terror in the rise of the Israeli right. Ignored would be the murder of 30 Israelis in the year before the Gaza war.

Then came October 7. Ironically, the first victims of Hamas's barbarous onslaught were the relatively few Israelis who still clung to the two-state dream. Abbas and the Palestinian Authority not only refuse to condemn the atrocities, but at times even lauded them. Meanwhile, 85% of the West Bank Palestinians express support for Hamas and reject the two-state solution.

In the shadow of October 7th, even left-of-center Israelis regard the very idea of a Palestinian state as madness. [Speaking at Davos](#), President Isaac Herzog, former head of the left wing Labor Party, asserted, "Nobody in his right mind is willing now to think about what will be the solution...Everybody wants to know: Can we be promised real safety in the future?" Why, Israelis ask, would the United States want to reward the Palestinians for committing and applauding terror?

Yet President Joe Biden has proceeded to do exactly that. "We need to renew our resolve to pursue this two-state solution where Israelis and Palestinians can one day live side by side in a two-state solution," he [proclaimed](#) on November 24. "Two states for two peoples. And it's more important now than ever."

Not only Washington but virtually every state in the world—including China, Russia, India, Germany, France, and Britain—adopted an identical policy. UN Secretary General António Guterres rejected Israel’s right to object to the creation of a Palestinian State while Joseph Burrell, the European Union’s foreign minister, went further by calling for Palestinian statehood to be imposed on Israel. “I don’t think we should talk about the Middle East peace process anymore,” he opined. “We should start talking specifically about the two-state-solution implementation process.”

The United States did not go that far, but it definitely went deeper, specifying that the Palestinian state would be governed by a “[revamped](#)” or “[revitalized](#)” Palestinian Authority and never pose a threat to Israel. How this revitalization was to take place and by what criteria and by whom would the threat to Israel be measured remained unclear. Nor was it in any way certain that Israel would even be invited to help determine the nature of that Palestinian state. Indisputably, though, was the connection which the White House drew between the two-state solution and the resolution of the region’s other conflicts.

“[The Biden Doctrine](#),” as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman dubbed it, calls for the conclusion of a Saudi-Israeli peace treaty and the construction of a regional front against Iran. Both of these goals, however, are contingent on the creation of a Palestinian state. In short, once again, linkage.

A half million Syrians could be massacred in recent years, hundreds of thousands of Yemenis and Sudanese can be killed, but for the disciples of linkage Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians remains the nucleus. Forget, too, that the signing of the Abraham Accords without the creation of a Palestinian state definitively disproved linkage. That dogma, defying all logic and flying in the face of thirty years of facts, calls to mind another irrational, myth-based belief: Jew-hatred.

For what is antisemitism but the insistence on saddling the Jews with the responsibility for all of society's ills, plagues, and wars? Similarly, by regarding the Israel-Palestinian conflict as the nub of all Middle Eastern violence, and the Jewish state as that conflict's core, linkage is itself linked to the world's oldest hatred.

For centuries, antisemites would have answered that question—"What problem would you most like to solve?" with the same "epicenter" cited by General Jones, that is, the Jews. This is not to assert that he or the legions of linkage devotees are prejudiced against Jews, at least not consciously. Nor does it mean that Israel does not bear a degree of responsibility for the conflict or is above reproach.

Nevertheless, by pointing out the antisemitic undertones of linkage, decision-makers might be given pause before once again embracing it. They might be freed to pursue policies that address the other, far more dangerous, conflicts of the Middle East. They may even - through federal or expanded autonomy solutions - make real strides toward Israeli-Palestinian peace.

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