

# Stasis of belligerence

Mitchell Bard argues that the Arab-Israeli conflict has never really been about land, but about ideology and religion

By Tibor Krausz

**ASK MOST** commentators about a solution to the seemingly intractable Arab-Israeli conflict, and they'll offer up the usual answer: For peace to reign in our time, Israel must withdraw from the West Bank, allow Jerusalem to be administratively divided, and let the Palestinians have their own state with its borders hugging the contours of the pre-1967 armistice line.

There's just one problem. Israeli leaders have offered exactly those concessions repeatedly to the Palestinians (first Ehud Barak in 2000 and 2001, then Ehud Olmert in 2008), only to have Palestinians reject all three offers. Not only that, but after rebuffing Barak's offer in 2000, Palestinians embarked on a ruthless five-year terror campaign of suicide bombings and other attacks against Israeli Jews, indicating that they hadn't been negotiating in good faith in the first place.

So what gives? What if received wisdom about the true cause of the conflict – namely Israel's occupation of "East Jerusalem" and "the West Bank" (both of which are fairly recent geographical concepts, as it happens) – has it all backwards? What if the Palestinians do not really want an end to the conflict until and unless Israel first ceases to exist as a Jewish state? What if it's not Israel's actions but rather its mere existence that lies at the heart of Arab opposition to the country?

In his new book, "Death to the Infidels: Radical Islam's War against the Jews," American foreign policy analyst and prolific author Mitchell Bard argues just that. At its heart, he insists, the Arab-Israeli conflict

has never really been about land, but about ideology and religion. Because of both pan-Arab nationalist sentiments and deeply held Islamic beliefs that do not permit any inch of formerly sovereign Muslim territory in the Arab world's heartland "desecrated" by the presence of its new Jewish overlords, most Arab Muslims (be they religious or largely secular) have refused to reconcile themselves to Israel's existence.

Bard, who is director of the online encyclopedia Jewish Virtual Library, marshals some convincing evidence. In 1938, he points out, "long before the creation of Israel, the Shiite Chief Mujtahid of Iraq asserted that a jihad for Palestine was everyone's duty, and that if the Arabs lost they would suffer 'humiliation, death and eternal shame.'"

At the same time, King Saud of Saudi Arabia was objecting vociferously – to any foreign dignitary who cared to listen – to the Zionists' presence in the region. In a letter to US president Franklin D. Roosevelt in May 1943, Saud insisted that "Jews have no right to Palestine." Openly flaunting his hatred of them while citing teachings of the Koran and the hadiths emphasizing the Jews' alleged turpitude and treachery, "Saud threatened to execute any Jews who tried to enter [his] kingdom," Bard writes.

In other words, one thing many Shiite and Sunni leaders at the time could agree on was this: the Jews had no place in the Middle East, except as subjugated dhimmis (second-class minorities), as had been their lot for centuries in Muslim lands. Implacable

hostility to the Jewish state still unites often warring Muslim sectarians worldwide. Shi'ite Iran, whose leaders routinely state their desire to annihilate "the Zionist entity" and are actively seeking nuclear weapons, remains a leading sponsor of the Palestinian Sunni terror groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which share their goal of eradicating Israel with Iran's proxy Shi'ite terror group in Lebanon, Hezbollah.

**SAUD WAS** remarkably prescient. Even if "the Jews succeed in gaining support for the establishment of a small state," he asserted to US president Harry Truman, a supporter of the Zionist project, "the Arabs will isolate such a state from the world and will lay siege to it." True to his word, as one of its first acts in 1945, the newly founded Arab League declared a universal boycott on "Jewish products and manufactured goods." (The same mission is now carried on under the banner of the global Palestinian-sponsored Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.) "As Israel was still nearly three years from declaring independence, Arab animosity was clearly directed against Jews and not a Jewish state," Bard observes.

The spiritual lightning rod of nascent Palestinian nationalism wasn't a fan of the Jews, either. Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, urged his followers to work against any viable Jewish-Arab coexistence in Palestine. An odious rable-rouser and Nazi sympathizer, al-Husseini instigated one murderous riot after another against Palestine's Jews throughout



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Implacable hatred: Jews evacuate the Old City of Jerusalem after Arab riots in 1936

the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1941, he relocated to Berlin, where he allied himself with Hitler in the hopes of receiving the Nazis' help for the massacre of Palestinian Jews. "Kill the Jews wherever you find them," the mufti urged his Arab listeners during a radio address from Berlin in March 1944. "The world will never be at peace until the Jewish race is exterminated." The mufti's modus operandi – a refusal to accept any compromise with the Jews and a penchant for orchestrating violent attacks against them – served as a template for all subsequent Arab resistance to the Jewish state. The tactic worked then and it works now.

Then: Arab attacks against the beleaguered Jews during the British Mandate convinced the authorities to limit Jewish immigration, while turning a blind eye to Arab immigration.

Now: Relentless spates of terror attacks against Israelis are seen by much of the

world as a legitimate means of resistance by a disenfranchised people, thereby turning the Israeli victims of Arab violence into the unspoken instigators of it.

## THE 'ISRAELI POLICIES ALONE ARE THE ISSUE' VIEW OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT HAS AIRBRUSHED OUT A CENTURY OF VIOLENT ARAB REJECTIONISM

Nor have the triggers for violence changed much, either.

Then: In August 1929, Arab malcontents began spreading rumors that the Jews were planning to usurp the Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount to Jews) in Jerusalem's

Old City and destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque there. A riot and a massacre of Jews ensued. Over six days of murderous mayhem, the Arabs slaughtered 135 Jews; they killed 67 of them, including women and children, in Hebron alone, cleansing the town of its centuries-long Jewish presence.

Now: In the fall of 2014, Palestinians began spreading rumors that Israeli Jews were planning to take over the Haram al-Sharif and destroy the Muslim shrines there. Promptly, several Palestinians went on murderous rampages, running down Jewish pedestrians with their cars or knifing civilians to death in Jerusalem and elsewhere. In the worst atrocity, in late November, two Palestinians entered a synagogue in West Jerusalem and proceeded to hack worshippers to death with meat cleavers, murdering four rabbis and a Druse police officer.

From an Arab perspective, terrorism has brought ample political benefits. The more violent Palestinians have been toward Jews,

## Books

the more their bellicosity has come to be widely seen in the West as the result of their “oppression” and disenfranchisement by Israelis. The Palestinian “freedom fighter” with his obligatory *keffiyeh* and AK-47 has long been idealized by faux-rebel poseurs, Marxist ideologues and radical chic aficionados worldwide as a poster boy for the modern Third World revolutionary.

### THE MORE VIOLENT PALESTINIANS HAVE BEEN TOWARD JEWS, THE MORE THEIR BELLICOSITY HAS COME TO BE WIDELY SEEN IN THE WEST AS THE RESULT OF THEIR ‘OPPRESSION’ BY ISRAELIS

Yet there is nothing remotely romantic about murdering men, women and children in cold blood. Palestinian terrorism has over the decades taken its toll almost exclusively on Israeli and Jewish civilians, who have been deemed legitimate targets – openly by Palestinian terrorists, tacitly by their sympathizers – because of their alleged complicity in the “crimes” of the Jewish state. In 2002 alone, for instance, a total of 457 Israelis, the vast majority of them civilians, were killed in Palestinian terror attacks, 130 of them in March alone. “Nowhere else in the world,” Bard points out, “is the murder of civilians considered a legitimate form of resistance.”

**FROM THE** sidelines, Arab nations have cheered the Palestinians on while using them as their proxies in their war of attrition against the Jewish state. Religious fundamentalists and pan-Arab nationalists, Bard notes, have found “one unifying principal: hatred of Israel.” Their actions in dealing with Israel have likewise been in tune: a stasis of belligerence through repeated wars (in 1948, 1967 and 1973) and, when those failed, through a prolonged campaign of terror both inside Israel and abroad with occasional spells of pragmatic moderation.

Working in Israel’s favor have been age-

old divisions among Middle Eastern Muslims along ethnic, tribal and sectarian lines, which have frequently foiled the prospects of a truly unified front against it. On the other hand, just like Israel with its West Bank settlements, the Arabs, too, have been adept at creating facts on the ground. Unlike Israel’s perennially “disputed” territorial claims, however, Palestinian assertions of sovereignty have become accepted at face value despite their often tenuous basis in historical reality. The geographical concept of “East” Jerusalem, for example, owes its origin to a mere 19 years of Jordanian rule of Jerusalem’s eastern part, which was promptly cleansed of Jews in 1948 by the Jordanians, who went on to destroy and desecrate Jewish places of worship and cemeteries in the Old City.

Yet ever since Israel recaptured the area in 1967, “East Jerusalem” has served as an enduring emblem of Palestinians’ dispossession with their claims of historical sovereignty over it taken for granted. The Arabs, Bard insists, “never showed any special interest in the city during the Jordanian occupation; their concern only arose when Israel reunited Jerusalem in 1967.”

What has changed over the decades, in the author’s view, aren’t the Arabs’ means of seeking to delegitimize Israel but the ideological underpinnings of their hostility to Israel: animus that was once driven largely by Arab nationalism has taken on ever more extreme religious overtones. “[The PLO’s] terrorists saw their actions as a means to a political end,” he writes, “unlike the Islamist terrorists who seek martyrdom, believe the killing of Jews is a route to Paradise, and see the destructions of Israel as their goal.”

That’s certainly true insofar as Islamist terrorists are even more implacably hostile to the Jewish state than their secular counterparts once were. Any sort of meaningful compromise with the likes of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, the Islamic State, and Iran’s theocrats is doomed to failure. Many Islamists’ monomaniacal obsession with Israel, despite often crippling poverty and cultural malaise in their own societies, is alone proof of that.

The history of militant Arab opposition to the Jewish state makes for a sordid tale and Bard tells it well. Here and there, minor slipups mar an otherwise well-researched and edifying tome. The author attributes the Arabs’ hostility to Jewish immigration

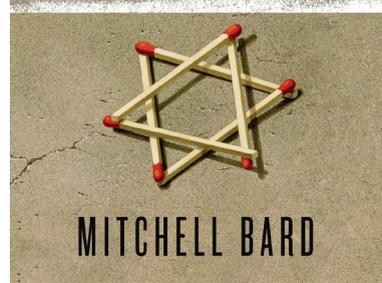
to Palestine in the early 20th century to their “unfamiliarity with Jews or Judaism beyond the teachings of the Koran and the pejorative interpretations of many clerics.” That may have been true in some isolated rural areas, but it could hardly have been so in Jerusalem, where by then Jews had long been a significant presence. More likely, many local Arabs objected to a formerly powerless minority growing in strength and numbers while simultaneously staking their own claims on the land.

Overall, “Death to the Infidels” is a rich and wide-ranging source of facts and common-sense arguments in support of Israel. Part history, part current affairs analysis, it serves as a valuable corrective to the dominant “Israeli policies alone are the issue” view of the Arab-Israeli conflict that has airbrushed out a century of violent Arab rejectionism and the chauvinistic, nationalistic and religious ideologies underpinning it.

“The media and diplomats often divide the Muslim world into moderates and radicals,” Bard observes, “but those involved in the conflict with the Jews would be more accurately described as radical and more radical.” ■

## DEATH TO THE INFIDELS

RADICAL ISLAM’S WAR AGAINST THE JEWS



**Death to the Infidels: Radical Islam’s War Against the Jews**

Mitchell Bard

St. Martin’s Press  
288 pages; \$20.35