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# PALESTINIAN AUTONOMY, SELF-GOVERNMENT, & PEACE



**HARVEY SICHERMAN**

**WESTVIEW PRESS**

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**HARVEY SICHERMAN**

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## FOREWORD

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Describing the changes of heart and mind that reordered the Middle East in the wake of the First World War, Albert Hourani, one of the great scholars of the modern Middle East, has written: "Wars are catalysts, bringing to consciousness feelings hitherto inarticulate and creating expectations of change." The Gulf War of early 1991 bears the signs of having been such a catalyst. Having proved its assertiveness and strength, and having led a wide-ranging coalition into battle, the United States has, since the war's end, embarked on an energetic diplomatic effort aimed at settling the long-standing conflict between the majority of the Arab states and Israel. The peace conference that Secretary of State James A. Baker III has organized will grapple with a number of issues. One of the most contentious and significant will be the future of the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank.

We have been down this road before. When Egypt and Israel signed the historic Camp David Accords in 1978, they pledged to negotiate a workable future for the Palestinians, beginning with an interim period of self-government, or autonomy. This first interim goal was never achieved, despite years of diplomatic effort, in large part because the Palestinians themselves chose not to take part in the discussions, a stance that thoughtful Palestinians may now regret. Today, as negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis get under way, the concept of autonomy is sure to be revived, and with it a number of questions: What exactly is this "autonomy" or, as it is now called, "self-government?" Where does the idea come from? What kinds of rights and responsibilities might it

encompass? What are the chances of its success? And, finally, is it a good idea?

Fortunately, these questions need not be answered in a vacuum. The post-Camp David negotiations between Egypt and Israel and the fits and starts of Mideast diplomacy in the 1980s left behind a fascinating, if largely unexamined, record. Many of the questions sure to arise during the course of this latest round of peacemaking were discussed during earlier diplomatic rounds, and looking at that record can help us understand autonomy's meaning, limits, and possibilities.

There are few scholars better equipped to examine the meaning of Palestinian autonomy than Dr. Harvey Sicherman, a seasoned diplomatic historian and veteran of government and a long-time associate of The Washington Institute. In anticipation of the Middle East peace conference he has scoured the written record of earlier autonomy negotiations, interviewed many of the participants, and exhaustively thought through the meaning of that past experience and the message it bears for today. This exceptionally timely, judicious, and gracefully written study is a fine example of the special contribution that scholarship can make to current policy debates.

*Barbi Weinberg*  
President

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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## PREFACE

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On November 19, 1977, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt astounded the world when he visited Jerusalem to pursue peace talks directly with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Addressing the Knesset the next day, Sadat insisted that a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict include a Palestinian “right to statehood.” Thus challenged, some six weeks later Begin unveiled Israel’s response: “self-rule” or “autonomy” for the Palestinian Arabs under Israeli military government.

After excruciating negotiations, a version of this idea of autonomy became part of the Camp David Accords signed by Egypt, Israel, and the United States on September 17, 1978. Unlike the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, however, Camp David’s “full autonomy”—a five-year transitional arrangement for a freely elected self-governing authority (sometimes referred to as an administrative council) for the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza—never came to fruition. The Palestinians (and Jordan) rejected the idea and, despite intensive negotiations, Egypt, Israel, and the United States could not agree on all of its terms. Then, after three years of effort, Egypt suspended the talks in August of 1982 in response to Israel’s invasion of Lebanon.

This grim record would seem at first of merely academic interest, another dead end in a conflict full of dead ends. But the autonomy concept—that of an interim agreement in the West Bank and Gaza giving more government to Palestinians and less control to Israelis—did not perish. The 1980s showed that neither international pressure on behalf of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) nor the *intifadah* would force

Israel to yield Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza District (as it is known in Israel), or the West Bank and Gaza (as it is known to everyone else), to an Arab sovereignty in a single step—if ever. While the Palestinians and their allies have spent their time and energies pushing for statehood, the number of Israeli settlers in the territories (excluding Jerusalem) has steadily increased from 10,000 in 1980 to more than 100,000 in 1992.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian situation has also grown measurably worse. The hopes raised by the *intifadah*, by the PLO's dialogue with the United States, and then by Saddam Hussein have all been dashed. Even the demographic situation that for so long argued in favor of the Palestinians has been altered by the influx of great numbers of Soviet Jews into Israel. Clearly an independent Palestinian state seems further than ever from fruition, and a more realistic Palestinian (and Arab) approach may be under way. As Secretary of State James A. Baker III said after his flurry of trips in the spring of 1991, he had found "agreement that the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians would proceed in phases, with talks on interim self-government preceding negotiations over the permanent status of the Occupied Territories."

Notably, of course, the current discussions of such an interim agreement do not include the words "autonomy" or "Camp David." For although the Palestinians and the Arabs may be well on their way toward accepting both the concept and the framework, they do not wish to encumber their journey with embarrassing historical baggage.

The way is marked, nonetheless, with the signposts of irony. Although in the dictionary autonomy means "self-government," to the Palestinians the word represents an Israeli attempt to limit their sovereignty. The Israelis for their part see "self-government" as a term fairly bursting with sovereignty, and at Camp David they insisted successfully that the Self-Governing Authority, as autonomy was to be known, be described parenthetically as an administrative council.

It may therefore be both more convenient and still quite accurate to describe the matter differently by calling the proposed regime "Palestinian Self-Government (Autonomy)." This term expresses both the Palestinians' greatest hope for the concept's future and its necessary bloodline to the past—its roots in limited powers that respect Israeli aspirations and interests. Throughout this book these terms—"self-government" and

“autonomy”—will be used interchangeably unless otherwise noted.

My main purpose, however, is not to preoccupy otherwise gainfully unemployed political philologists. Now that self-government (autonomy) is once again of interest, two important questions must be answered: Will it solve the Palestinian problem, or at least put it on the road to solution? And how could the United States help to bring this about?

This book hopes to answer such questions through a review of autonomy's past and an exploration of its potential as a form of self-government. Revisiting the past will surely not amuse the reader or titillate the diplomats; there is precious little entertainment in the record. It does, however, establish these points:

(1) *Interim Agreements Are Not the Last Word*: Attempts to “guarantee” the end game through an interim agreement will make even the interim step impossible. Self-government (autonomy) does not assure Palestinian national independence nor does it guarantee Israeli sovereignty over the territory.

(2) *The “Last Word” Will Still Intrude*: Notwithstanding autonomy's deliberate ambiguity, long-term consequences flow from different negotiating positions, and the fear of those consequences will intrude even as interim steps are discussed.

(3) *Outside Help Will Be Needed*: Given the risks to be run by both sides on issues such as security, land, water, settlements, and Jerusalem, outside help in reducing these risks and overcoming the obstacles will be necessary. The United States remains best suited to play the role of mediator, but other international support will also be needed both within the region and outside of it.

(4) *The Deal Must Work on Its Own Terms*: Autonomy *can* facilitate state-to-state peace diplomacy (it did so for Egypt and Israel) *but only* if those states have decided to seek peace on sound bilateral foundations. Conversely, a larger peace process involving state-to-state negotiations can work to encourage an autonomy agreement, but it cannot be a substitute for an Israeli-Palestinian deal that works for both sides.

I then take these lessons and explore (1) the impact that subsequent peace plans—Reagan (1982), Peres-Hussein (1985), Shultz (1988), Shamir-Rabin (1989), and Baker (1989-1990)—have had on the autonomy concept, and (2) the probable

development of Palestinian self-government, should it occur, with special emphasis on the role of the United States.

My general conclusion is this: If ever there were a time for Palestinian self-government (autonomy), that time is now, and the parties to the dispute would seem to agree. Encouraged by the United States, several rounds of negotiations on this issue have already occurred, following the successful convening of the Madrid Peace Conference on October 30, 1991. Moreover, the victor in the June 1992 Israeli election, Yitzhak Rabin, has made plain his intention to reach agreement soon. Finally, the Palestinians, through their own plan submitted to the Israelis, have begun to grapple at last with the concept.

The reasons for this renewed interest are clear. Only on the much-disputed ground between Israelis and Palestinian Arabs in the territories can there be found the strongest common interest in changing the status quo. Only through the transitional device of Palestinian self-government (autonomy) can that change be most safely made to each party's advantage, without forcing them to yield what they will not yet yield: namely, their conflicting claims of sovereignty. And, ultimately, only through lasting improvement in Israeli-Palestinian relations can the decades-long strife in the Holy Land draw to a close.

United States policy, then, should focus on facilitating an agreement on self-government (autonomy) by (1) using its good offices to recruit broader Arab and international support, (2) isolating those who would obstruct it, (3) helping the parties, which must include both recognized Palestinian representatives and, at some point, Jordan, to overcome the obstacles, (4) concentrating in particular on the land, water, and security issues, the essence of any agreement on self-government, and (5) offering some guarantee of support for the result, whether political, economic, or military, as was done in every successful Arab-Israeli agreement thus far. The history of the Arab-Israeli conflict is a chronicle of missed opportunities. This latest chance to improve relations between those fated to live together is an opportunity that the parties—and the United States—should not miss again.

*Harvey Sicherman  
Washington, D.C.*

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Finally, thanks to my wife, Barbara, and my children, who need suffer no longer the embarrassment of unexpected mutterings, public and private, as thoughts congealed on this work.

*H. S.*

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# CONTENTS

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Foreword	<i>ix</i>
Preface	<i>xi</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>xv</i>
I	
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT	1
Stage One: Two Peoples, One Land, Many Interests, 2	
Stage Two: Israel Emerges, Pan-Arab Nationalism Grows, and the Superpowers Dominate, 7	
Stage Three: The U.S. Tries Peace, the Arabs Try War, the Israelis Are Surprised, and a Peace Process Begins, 13	
II	
ORIGINS OF AUTONOMY	19
What Was Autonomy and How Did It Originate? 19	
“To the Ends of the Earth,” 22	
“Self-Rule of the National Minority,” 23	
Begin Goes to Washington, 26	
III	
“A LITTLE AIR”: AUTONOMY AND CAMP DAVID	29
Autonomy Makes the Deal, 30	
A Misty Penumbra, 31	
The Peacemakers Fight, 34	

IV	THE "GOOD FAITH" NEGOTIATIONS: 1979-1980	39
	Stumble and Recovery, 41	
	Spring Crisis, 45	
	A Summing Up, 50	
V	BAD LUCK AND BAD TIMING: 1981-1982	53
	Restarting Autonomy, 55	
	Sadat's Murder: Camp David Under Siege, 58	
	The Third Special Negotiator, 61	
	The Reagan Plan and Autonomy, 65	
	Summing It Up, 69	
VI	FROM AUTONOMY TO SELF-GOVERNMENT	73
	The Shultz Initiative, 74	
	The Shamir-Rabin Peace Plan: Autonomy Becomes Self-Rule, 77	
	The Gulf War and Its Aftermath: "Interim Self-Government," 81	
VII	AMERICAN POLICY AND PALESTINIAN SELF-GOVERNMENT	85
	Lessons from the Past, 86	
	The Palestinian Problem and the Politics of Consent, 88	
	The Jordanian Option Revisited, 96	
	Israeli Choices, 100	
VIII	LAND AND WATER, SECURITY AND PEACE	105
	Land and Water, 107	
	Security, 111	
	Conclusion: The Counsel of Imperfection, 115	

## APPENDICES

119

- I Security Council Resolution 242 Concerning Principles for a Just and Lasting Peace in the Middle East—*November 22, 1967*, 121
- II Security Council Resolution 338 Concerning the October War—*October 22, 1973*, 122
- III The Peace Plan of Israel as Presented in a Speech of Prime Minister Menachem Begin in the Knesset—*December 28, 1977*, 122
- IV The Camp David Accords—*September 17, 1978*, 125
- V Letter from Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat to President Jimmy Carter—*March 26, 1979*, 135
- VI The Israeli Autonomy Model—*January 16, 1980*, 136
- VII The Egyptian Autonomy Model—*January 29, 1980*, 141
- VIII Linowitz Report—*January 14, 1981*, 149
- IX Israel's Final Autonomy Proposal—*January, 1982*, 153
- X President Ronald Reagan's Talking Points Sent to Prime Minister Begin—*September 1, 1982*, 157
- XI Reagan Peace Initiative—*September 1, 1982*, 160
- XII Peres-Hussein Agreement (The London Document)—*April 11, 1987*, 161
- XIII Palestinian "Fourteen Points" Proposal—*January 14, 1988*, 163
- XIV The Shultz Initiative—*March 4, 1988*, 165
- XV Israeli Government Peace Initiative—*May 14, 1989*, 167

- XVI Excerpt from Secretary of State James A. Baker III's Testimony on the Peace Process—*May 22, 1991*, 171
- XVII Selected Palestinian Quotes, 171
- XVIII Israeli Proposal—*February 20, 1992*, 175
- XIX Proposal from the Palestinian Side of the Joint Jordanian-Palestinian Delegation to the Israeli Delegation—*March 3, 1992*, 178

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# I      AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

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Among the conflicts that dominate the history of the twentieth century, that between the Arabs and the Israelis occupies a special place. Other struggles have been equally violent, but few have been punctuated as frequently by large scale war and enduring hatreds. To understand it, therefore, one must answer the question not only of why the conflict, but why it has been so intractable.

The best, though not the simplest, answer may be this: two peoples want the same land, each conceives of it to be a life or death struggle, and their fight also intersects with both regional and great power rivalries. The student of the Arab-Israeli conflict must master several situations at once: the rights and wrongs of historic claims; a complex and dizzying round of regional rivalries, sometimes near the scene of conflict, sometimes affecting it from afar; and finally, the continuous competition among powers foreign to the Middle East but determined to protect their vital interests in a vital area.

Added to this tangle is the impact of personality on history. The tale is teeming with colorful leaders, villains, gamblers and the occasional statesman all bidding for the brass ring of fame. Many a diplomat's reputation has found its burial place in the Arab-Israeli conflict, but there is also a goodly share of surprises, including those most unlikely peacemakers, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin.

It has also proven uncommonly difficult for observers to remain detached from the emotions that pervade the Arab-Israeli conflict. Few who study the situation can escape the

irony that Arabs and Israelis fight over land sacred to three great religions which preach the virtues of peace. And fewer still, especially Americans, who put little stock in history, can remain unfazed as the protagonists argue over the events of long ago, the better to wound each other.

Three distinct stages of the Arab-Israeli struggle may be discerned before the great breakthrough at Camp David in 1978. The first stage predates the state of Israel: it sets the Jews and Arabs of British-ruled Palestine on a collision course. The second stage brings the full play of Arab national rivalries and Great Power competition to the boil in the wars of 1956 and 1967. Finally, the third stage, while full of the same elements, prepares the way for the peacemaking of 1978 and with it, the subject of this book—autonomy or self-rule for the Palestinian Arabs.

The patterns traced here offer clear guidelines for the future. Peacemaking between Arab and Israeli, and especially between the Palestinian Arab and the Israeli Jew, needs American mediation to succeed. But American mediation alone does not guarantee success unless the parties want it. The greatest risk and burdens to achieve peace and then to sustain it fall finally upon them.

### STAGE ONE: TWO PEOPLES, ONE LAND, MANY INTERESTS

The ethnic and religious antagonisms that disfigure the Middle East often find their roots in distant history. But for all intents and purposes, the Arab-Israeli conflict as we know it is but a hundred years old. Political Zionism was founded suddenly in 1897 by Theodor Herzl, a Viennese journalist, who saw a Jewish state as the only alternative for Jewish survival in a world destined to be shaken by national antagonisms.

Zionism, defined as Jewish attachment to the Biblical land of Israel, was not new. Ever since the Romans destroyed the ancient Jewish state, there had been an ebb and flow of Jews to the country, stimulated by religious zeal or messianic expectation. Aided by philanthropists such as the Rothschilds, immigration had expanded in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Then, after the assassination of Russia's Tsar Alexander II in 1881 dashed expectations of reform in that

despotic empire, Zionism took on a secular tinge. Small groups of Jewish socialists and Marxists left Russia to establish model communes in their own sort of Holy Land. The going proved difficult, however, for both the traditional and newer Jewish settlement schemes. Palestine was then part of one of the more impoverished provinces ruled by the so-called “Sick Man of Europe”—the Ottoman Empire.

Herzl’s “political Zionism” was something much more dramatic and far less patient than either the religious or revolutionary Jews could conceive. It was intended to be a sudden secular redemption that raised the Jew to equality, respect and security among nations. What Herzl sought was nothing less than the sanction of all the Great Powers to establish a new Jewish state, thereby solving at a stroke what he called the “Jewish problem”: a people who would neither be accepted as part of other nations nor disappear on its own.

To nearly everyone’s surprise but his own (he confided to his diary at the opening of the first Zionist Congress that a state would be a reality in fifty years), Herzl’s political Zionism struck a deep chord among the Jews.<sup>1</sup> It tapped the historic yearnings for Zion kept alive by Judaism and the nationalist political ferment disturbing the decaying Hapsburg and Romanov empires, where the Jews had much to fear. And although Herzl did not achieve his diplomatic purposes by the time of his premature death in 1904, his Zionism won surprisingly wide support among statesmen and leaders known more for their skill at the balance of power than their fondness for ideals—or for the Jews.

One such man was the British nobleman, Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, famous in his time for an acidulous wit, feline political skill and keen understanding of that least romantic of enterprises, the British empire. Balfour’s conversion to Zionism and his personal relationship with the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann—a Russian-Jewish immigrant to Britain, trained as a chemist—is an improbable story with an even less probable result: the commitment of the British government on November 2, 1917, to the establishment of a “Homeland” for the Jewish people in

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<sup>1</sup>Diary, September 1897. Quoted in Amos Elon, *Herzl*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975), p. 247.