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## **Letter to Palestinians**

By [YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI](#)



Once, before the Terror War, a time that seems now to belong not just technically but substantively to another millennium, I undertook a one-man pilgrimage into your mosques and churches, seeking to know you in your intimate spiritual moments.

I went as a believing Jew, praying and meditating with you wherever you allowed me to enter into your devotional life. My intention was to transcend, however briefly, the political abyss between us by experiencing together something of presence of God.

And I wanted to learn how to feel comfortable in the Middle East's religious cultures, because I believed that the Jewish homecoming would be complete only when the Jewish state were no longer in exile from the Middle East.

During my journey, which took me from Galilee to Gaza, I was privileged to be admitted into the Muslim prayer line. I learned to venerate its choreography of surrender, in which one becomes a particle in a great wave of devotion, a wave that preceded our arrival on this earth and that will continue long after we are gone.

I learned to appreciate the fearless heart of Islam, which knows how to impart in its believers a frank acceptance of their own mortality – something which Western culture too often tries to conceal, with diversions like black humor about death.

The dark side of the Muslim reconciliation with death, of course, are the suicide bombers. But I learned, too, that acceptance of mortality can be the basis for a religious language of reconciliation. Repeatedly, Palestinians would say to me, "Why are you and I arguing over who owns the land when in the end the land will own us both?" That wise ability to place our earthly claims and struggles in the context of our shared condition of mortality gave me hope that peace between us may some day be possible.

But I learned too, during numerous candid conversations with Palestinians at all levels of society, that, in practice, few within your nation are willing to concede that I have a legitimate claim to any part of this land. I will cite one telling example.

During my journey into Islam in Gaza, I met General Nasser Youssef (who at the time of our meeting was head of one of the Palestinian security forces and is now the PA Interior Minister). At one point during our conversation, I asked the general to describe his vision of the relations between a Jewish state and a Palestinian state after we signed a peace agreement.

Let's assume, I said, that Israel withdraws to the 1967 borders, uproots the settlements and redivides Jerusalem: What then? He replied that, once the refugees begin returning to the area, so many would gravitate to those areas in Israel where their families once lived, that eventually we would realize there was no need for an artificial border between Israel and Palestine.

The next step, continued the general, was that the two states would merge. "And then we'll invite Jordan to join our federation. And Iraq and Syria. Why not? We'll show the whole world what a beautiful country Jews and Arabs can create together."

But, I asked the general, aren't we negotiating today over a two-state solution? Yes, he replied, as an interim step. And then he added, "You aren't separate from us; you are part of us. Just as there are Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs, you are Jewish Arabs."

This story is particularly relevant because General Youssef is widely known as a moderate, deeply opposed to terror as counter-productive to the Palestinian cause. And so what I learned in my journeys into your society is that moderation means one thing on the Israeli side and quite another on the Palestinian side.

An Israeli moderate recognizes the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a struggle between two legitimate national narratives.

A Palestinian moderate, by contrast, tends to disagree with the extremists about method, not goal: He opposes the destruction of Israel through terror and war, perhaps because that option isn't realistic; yet he advocates the disappearance of Israel through more gradualist means, like demographic subversion. Like General Yusuf, he sees a two state solution as an interim agreement, a step toward Greater Palestine. When your moderates speak of peace and justice, then, they usually mean a one-state solution.

Before my journey into Palestinian Islam and Christianity, I took it for granted that you, the occupied, knew far more about Israelis than we could possibly know about you. The occupied, after all, tend by necessity to pay more attention to the ways of the occupier, who in his arrogant blindness, remains obtuse about the life of the occupied all around him.

I no longer believe this is true. My journey into the faiths of my neighbors was part of a much broader attempt among Israelis, begun during the first intifada, to understand your narrative, how the conflict looks through your eyes.

Your society, on the other hand, has made virtually no effort to understand our narrative.

Instead, you have developed what can be called a "culture of denial," that denies the most basic truths of the Jewish story. According to this culture of denial, which is widespread not only among your people but throughout the Arab world, there was no Temple in Jerusalem, no ancient Jewish presence in the land, no Holocaust.

Nowhere is The Protocols of the Elders of Zion as popular as in the Arab world, which has also become the international center for Holocaust denial. The real problem, then, is not terrorism, which is only a symptom for a deeper affront: your assault on my history and identity, your refusal to allow me to define myself, which is a form of intellectual terror.

In your society's official embrace, through media and schools and mosques, of the culture of denial, you have tried to reinvent us, to redefine us out of our national existence.

We too once tried to define you out of national existence, insisting that you weren't a real people but an appendage to the Arab world. Today, though, only the Israeli hard Right repeats Golda Meir's insistence that there are no Palestinians.

Yet your political and spiritual leadership routinely insists that there is no Jewish people – only a Jewish faith, or an invented identity like General Yusuf's "Arab Jews," or an ersatz people descended from the Khazars. In so doing, you ignore how Jews have always defined themselves: as a people with a faith.

True, it's easier for the powerful than it is for the powerless to develop more nuanced attitudes toward the conflict. When you have an army and a thriving economy, you can afford to rethink your own history and even accommodate a competing narrative. Yet in truth you have never understood us, never understood that we aren't a modern version of the Crusaders but an indigenous people returning home.

Your inability to understand who we are has been a disaster not only for us but also for you, because it has repeatedly led you to underestimate our vitality and ability to persevere. And now, it seems, you are once again about to disastrously misread the Israeli public.

According to polls, a majority of Palestinians believe that the decision to withdraw from Gaza was prompted by terror. And that conclusion may well lead you to the next round of terror.

In fact, we are leaving Gaza because a majority of Israelis concluded – already in the first intifada – that it is in our existential interest to minimize the demographic threat to a Jewish majority and the moral threat of permanent occupation to our souls. At the same time, we are strengthening our hold on those areas that we believe are essential for our well-being: the settlement blocs and greater Jerusalem.

Here, then, is the irony of what you call Al-Aksa Intifada: In choosing terror, you lost the Jerusalem capital you could have gained through negotiations.

The key to understanding the meaning of unilateral withdrawal – a point missed not only by your people but by the Israeli Right as well – is that "unilateral" is no less important than "withdrawal." Most Israelis have concluded that our Left was correct in its warnings against the moral and demographic dangers of occupation, and our Right was correct in its warnings that the Palestinian national movement had no intention of living in peace with a Jewish state in any borders. And so, if we cannot occupy you and we cannot make peace with you, the only option left to us is unilateral withdrawal and the fence – that is, determining our own borders in the absence of a negotiated peace.

The new Israeli determination to stop waiting for a nonexistent Palestinian partner and take our fate in our own hands is an Israeli, not a Palestinian, victory.

The Terror War has given Israeli society another crucial victory: a restored faith in the justness of our position. Aside from a vocal but fringe Left, most Israelis know that, at every crucial historic juncture in the last 70 years, when an offer to end the conflict was placed on the table, our side said yes and your side said no. That has given us the strength to withstand the current jihadist assault.

You have always found ample justification for saying no to compromise. And from your point of view, you had absolute justice on your side. But, with each violent rejection of an international attempt to end the conflict, the map of potential Palestine has gotten smaller.

In 1937, you were offered 80 percent of the land; in 1947, 45 percent; in 2000, 22 percent. And now that self-destructive pattern has once again played itself out in the Terror War; with unilateral withdrawal and the fence, the map of potential Palestine has just gotten smaller.

A majority of Israelis, I am convinced, are ready in principle to make previously unthinkable concessions to end the conflict. Yet that same majority is likewise convinced that, no matter what concessions we offer, we will not win peace and legitimacy in return. For that reason, I believe that the onus for ending this conflict has now shifted to your side.

Many Israelis have made the conceptual breakthrough necessary for peace between us; but we will remain entrenched behind our fence until we sense a shift in attitudes on your side.

The fence represents the antithesis of my hope for an Israel integrated in the Middle East, the hope that sent me into your mosques in search of your devotional life. Yet, like almost all Israelis, I too support the fence.

Reluctantly but inexorably, I have come to the conclusion that instead of working toward an end to the conflict, I must accept reality and protect myself from your refusal to accept my legitimacy. Forcing Israelis like me into the camp of despair hardly seems a Palestinian victory worth celebrating.

During the Oslo process, leaders of the Israeli peace camp assured the Israeli public, increasingly anxious over Palestinian incitement against our existence, that legitimacy would follow reconciliation – that is, first the occupation needed to end and the formal mechanics of peace implemented, and then the Palestinians would gradually accept Israel's right to exist. We now realize that the reverse is true: Legitimacy is the precondition for reconciliation.

The tragedy of our conflict is that history gave each of us no choice. The logic of our history demanded our return here – and not just because we were persecuted in exile, but because exile from this land was always seen by Jews as an unnatural condition, a spiritual offense against Judaism's deepest sense of itself. Yet just as the logic of our history impelled us to return, so the logic of your history impelled you to resist our return. The conflict between us is over intangibles and mutual perceptions, not over a precise point on the map.

When we look at each other, we see the embodiment of our worst historical traumas. When you look at us, you see an expansionist power that recalls your defeat and humiliation in recent centuries – a perception that was reinforced by our military victories against the Arab world and the subsequent expansion of our borders. When we look at you, we see the incarnation of the latest in a long line of genocidal enemies who have tried to destroy us – a perception reinforced by the suicide bombings, which are mini-preenactments of the genocidal impulse.

Just as you see in us colonialists and crusaders, we increasingly see in you Nazis.

Having been privileged to spend time among you, I know that most of you are not Nazis, just as I know that most of us are not colonialists. We are two traumatized peoples who, tragically, have projected their most demonic images onto the other.

In withdrawing from Gaza, we have begun our territorial contraction. Yet can your side stop actively dreaming of destroying us – through terror, demographics, the Muslim bomb? Can you accept the moral legitimacy – not just temporary political necessity – of a two-state solution?

I wrote above that your people has made "virtually no effort" to understand who we Jews are.

One remarkable exception was a pilgrimage of Palestinian Israelis to Auschwitz, two years ago. For Palestinian citizens of Israel to reach out to Jews at the height of the intifada was the deepest expression of the generosity of Arab culture. I was privileged to be among the Jewish participants in that Arab initiative. We stood at the crematorium, Arabs and Jews holding each other in silence, facing the abyss together. At that moment, anything seemed possible between us.

Lately, perhaps because of the terror lull, I have been thinking again about that journey, and about the journey I took into your devotional life. I have even allowed myself to miss the intimacy and uplift I felt in your mosques, the conversations about faith and meaning and destiny over endless cups of coffee and tea, the sense of leisurely time expanding into God's time.

I approached you then b'gova einayim, without apology for my presence here or dismissal of your presence. And that is how I dream of being with you again: as fellow indigenous sons of this land, which one day will claim us both.

*The writer, resident in Jerusalem, is a frequent contributor to The Jerusalem Post. A Hebrew version of this article was originally published in Eretz Acheret magazine. [www.acheret.co.il](http://www.acheret.co.il).*