

The New Criterion

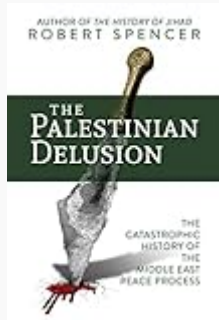
Books April 2020

State of play

by David Pryce-Jones

Spencer review of *The Palestinian Delusion: The Catastrophic History of the Middle East Peace Process* by Robert

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Robert Spencer

The Palestinian Delusion: The Catastrophic History of the Middle East Peace Process

Bombardier Books, 304 pages, \$28.00

The Palestinian Delusion is a discussion of one of the more troubling issues of international politics, and that is the refusal of the Palestinians to make peace with Israel. Two relatively small populations are at different stages of nation-building, and they quarrel over territory and sovereignty, the factors on which their futures depend.

European nations have long been accustomed to a procedure for settling contested territories and sovereignties. Warfare is of course a human failure, but, fairly or unfairly, it may bring about the end of a dispute. Victor and vanquished then meet in some neutral city, each party proposing rewards and punishments to the other in pursuit of their interests. A stark example would be the willingness of the French government to assent to the Germans occupying the country after the national collapse of 1940.

Ahead for the time being in the process of nation-building, Israel has had its way on the battlefield. Following European precedent, Israel has then met Palestinian spokesmen in places of good will such as Camp David and Oslo. On one occasion after another, the state of Israel since its foundation has made six separate proposals for settling territory and sovereignty, all of which have been rejected. In this respect, President Trump's recently touted "deal of the century" is merely a repeat. The Palestinians have made no counter-proposals.

There is an obvious bargain that would lay to rest this whole long-running drama. Israelis are in a position to give land to the Palestinians, and the Palestinians are in a position to give peace to the Israelis. Robert Spencer makes the forceful point that the bargain always fails to materialize because land is tangible, a real asset, whereas peace is abstract, a matter of promises that might or might not be kept. Trust is impossible when there are no means of guaranteeing the delivery of peace and also no means of holding back those who prefer war. The passing of time has therefore left the asset of land in Israeli hands. Palestinians are right to protest that each Israeli proposal for partition diminishes what remains to be handed over, but the Palestinians themselves are to blame for this because they keep on ensuring that they are losers. The parties then charge one another with bad faith and prepare for the next round. The repetition is exhausting and damaging. If this continues, a day appears to be arriving when the Palestinians will have nothing more to lose. Militant Palestinians evidently convince themselves that war serves their purpose. Motivated by the anti-imperial spirit spreading throughout the Middle East, they mislead whole generations by promoting a false stereotype of Israelis as settlers and colonizers without ties to the country and therefore bound to run away from it as soon as they face resistance.

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After a careful study of the sources, Spencer makes the case that the Palestinians live with cultural and religious values that are incompatible with those of the West. In his view, the Koran and the supporting commentaries known as the Hadith are instruments which deliberately generate

hatred of Jews. He writes for instance, "There is a strong native strain of anti-Semitism in Islam, rooted in the Qur'an." Or again: "The Qur'an puts forward a clear, consistent image of the Jews: they are scheming, treacherous liars and the most dangerous enemies of the Muslims." Educated imams preach with conviction that Jews are descendants of apes and pigs. To a committed Muslim, bargaining about territory and sovereignty would be a sinful surrender in the devotional and eschatological struggle against great spiritual enemies. Islamic theology and law make it unmistakably clear that the proper response of Muslims to Jews is jihad, the term for war against unbelievers. Nothing else will do. The exhortation to kill Jews occurs three times in the Koran.

Islamic society furthermore has a secular values system that locks behavior in so tightly that reform is impossible. The high and mighty in Palestine, as well as the poor and humble, have to act

in ways that gain honor and avoid whatever might bring shame down on them. That is how all-important public opinion is determined. Repeated defeat at the hands of the despised Jews is a shame so absolute that only military success is able to wipe it away. Supremacy is the desired end. In the circumstances, bargaining is out of the question. Any Palestinian who conducted himself according to the Israeli value system of compromise would become a self-declared loser, disgraced and humiliated by the shame of it and immediately rejected by his society. Any normalization of the relationship with Israel is considered a crime. In his day, Yasser Arafat exploited peacemaking as an opportunity to deceive. The assassinations of King Abdullah I of Jordan and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt serve as a warning to anyone tempted to act outside the traditional values system.

Madness, we have been told by some wise fellow, consists in doing the same thing over and over again in the expectation of getting a different outcome. Spencer rightly deplores the Islamic prejudices that he describes. But outsiders have no means of knowing if Muslims secretly repudiate jihad and would make the same sacrifices for peace as Israelis but are too intimidated to say so aloud. The real moral of this polemic is that those with responsibility for the good order of the world give priority to Islamic codes of behavior, and this doesn't work out.

David Pryce-Jones is the author, most recently, of *Openings & Outings: An Anthology* (Criterion Books).

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