

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

ISRAEL, THE PALESTINIANS AND THE UN

I just returned from conducting my annual study tour of Israel. As usual, it was an invigorating trip. While I was there, the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, petitioned the 66th session of the United Nations to in effect unilaterally declare a Palestinian state. The move was anticipated and was not much of a surprise to Israel. From much of the world's perspective, it was a liberating move. Indeed, at the UN Abbas received thunderous applause and a standing ovation. But it was an incongruous gesture on the part of the Palestinian Authority. It was, in fact, good theater, the theater of the absurd. In this *Perspective*, I want to present a multifaceted analysis of this development.

- First, Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinians have built their case around the proposition that Israel has not negotiated seriously and that the UN declaration of statehood is the only way they can get the territory and state that they argue is their destiny and right. What Israel is offering, they contend, is only a fraction of the territory to which they are entitled. Is this true and it is an accurate justification for this radical and unjust course of action? Understanding this action requires a review of what has occurred nearly 64 years ago at the UN: On 29 November 1947, the General Assembly voted to partition British-controlled Palestine into two states—one Arab and one Jewish, which would then live side-by-side in peace. Obviously, the Jews accepted this agreement, but the Palestinian rejected it and joined with five Arab armies to destroy the Jewish State of Israel. They failed! Similar wars to liquidate the Jewish state occurred in 1956, 1967 and 1973. In 1993, the Palestinians received another chance to accept the two-state solution. During the Oslo Accords negotiations, Palestinians and Israelis pledged to resolve all outstanding issues through face-to-face negotiations. This pledge produced two Israeli peace proposals—one in 2000 and one in 2008—that met virtually all of the Palestinians' demands for a sovereign state in the areas won by Israel in the 1967 war, including concessions in the West Bank, Gaza and even East Jerusalem. [Incredibly, in the 2008 offer by Ehud Olmert of Israel, Israel was willing to give the Palestinians 100% of the West Bank, with appropriate land swaps, Palestinian statehood, and the division of Jerusalem with the Muslim parts becoming the capital of the new Palestine. Olmert even offered to turn over the city's holy places, including the Western Wall, to an international body on which sit Jordan and Saudi Arabia!] However, Yasser Arafat rejected the first offer and Mahmoud Abbas, in effect, ignored the second. Why? Because both offers required that the Palestinians accept that Israel is a Jewish state—something they have been unwilling to do since 1947! Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren writes: “In between Israeli peace offers, the Palestinians waged a terror war that killed and maimed thousands of Israelis. When Israel uprooted all of its settlements from Gaza in 2005, the Palestinians failed to create a peaceful enclave and instead created a Hamas terrorist

stronghold that fired thousands of rockets at Israeli civilians. Yet, in spite of their rejection and trauma, Israelis continued to uphold the vision of two peaceful adjacent states.” Since 2009, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ordered the removal of hundreds of checkpoints in the West Bank, facilitating remarkable economic growth and dramatically increased transport in and out of Gaza. When President Obama asked him to freeze construction in West Bank settlements, Netanyahu announced an unprecedented 10-month moratorium on such settlement construction. Oren concludes, “But over the course of two and a half years, Mr. Abbas negotiated for a total of six hours, and then refused to discuss Israel’s security needs.” The bottom line of all of this is that the Palestinians are unwilling to accept that Israel is a Jewish state—the homeland for the Jewish people all over the world. Unless and until they are willing to accept that, there will be no peace! Israel has demonstrated again and again that it is willing to give up land for peace. But peace with the Palestinians requires that they acknowledge Israel’s right to exist and to exist as a Jewish state. All events since 1947 have demonstrated that they are unwilling to do so! By going to the UN and insisting that the UN recognize the Palestinian state, Abbas is in effect trying an end run around that fundamental requirement—that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state. He apparently is unwilling again to acknowledge that fact. Unless he does, the UN has no right to grant the Palestinians this kind of recognition.

- Second, Israel has lived under a cloud of perpetual dread since its creation. As columnist Bret Stephens has argued, just consider the two months that Israel had in August and September 2011: 1. On 18 August, 8 Israelis were killed in a sophisticated cross-border ambush near the frontier with Egypt. 2. From 18-24 August, some 200 large-caliber, factory-made rockets and mortars were fired at Israel from Gaza. 3. On 1 September, the head of Iran’s atomic energy entity announced that it was moving the bulk of its enrichment facilities to a heavily fortified site near the city of Qom. 4. On 2 September, the UN released a report on the May 2010 Turkish flotilla incident, which defended Israel’s right to enforce a naval blockade on Gaza and noted that Israeli commandos faced “organized and violent resistance.” The Turkish government then pulled its ambassador from Tel Aviv and expelled Israel’s ambassador from Ankara. 5. On 8 September, Turkey’s Prime Minister announced that Turkish warships would escort future Gaza-bound flotillas. 6. On 9 September, thousands of hooligans stormed and nearly sacked the Israeli embassy in Cairo. 7. Finally, the world community enthusiastically embraced Mahmoud Abbas at the UN but has never held it accountable for its atrocities against Israel. The world community holds Israel to a totally different standard when it comes to moral legitimacy. The world community insists that Israel ends its “occupation” of the West Bank but has never insisted that the Palestinians accept Israel as a Jewish state, a state where Jews can have homeland. The world community insists that Israel recognize a new Palestinian state as a homeland for the Palestinian people but does not insist that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people. No Israeli leader should be required to accept terms for the creation of a Palestinian state that does not include the recognition of the Jewish nature of the Israeli state. The Jews of Israel are asking one simple thing of the world community and of the Palestinians: Accept that Israel is a Jewish state—a homeland for the Jewish people. End your demands of the “right of return” and accept us as a Jewish state. When I was in Israel a few days ago, I heard again and again from Jewish leaders that they are willing to accept the Palestinian state and exchange land for peace—but it must be a peace where the Palestinians, Hamas included,

accept that Israel is a Jewish state. Once they do so, Israel is willing to share its technology and its considerable resources with the Palestinian people to develop this entire region. But the Palestinians will not do that! The demand by Abbas that the UN recognize the Palestinians state is an effort to get a state without settling on peace with Israel. They want a state without recognizing Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. Abbas cannot do that and the world community must not permit Abbas to accomplish his end-run! It is ethically and morally wrong to do so!

See Bret Stephens in the *Wall Street Journal* (13 September 2011); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (30 September 2011); and Michael Oren in the *Wall Street Journal* (24-25 September 2011).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

POSTMODERN MORALITY AMONG TODAY'S YOUNG ADULTS

Sociologist Christian Smith recently led a research team that conducted in-depth interviews with 230 young adults from across America, all of which focused on the moral lives of today's young adults. The results are quite depressing. Columnist David Brooks summarizes several of the salient findings:

1. When asked to describe a moral dilemma they faced, two-thirds of the young people either could not answer the question or described problems that are not moral at all, like whether they could afford to rent a certain apartment or whether they had enough quarters to feed the meter of a parking lot.
2. When asked about wrong or evil, they could generally agree that rape and murder are wrong. But aside from these extreme cases, moral thinking did not enter the picture, even when considering things like drunken driving, cheating in school or cheating on a partner. "I don't really deal with right and wrong that often" one interviewee stated.
3. The default position most cited was that moral choices are just a matter of individual taste. "It's personal," the respondents typically said. "It's up to the individual. Who am I to say?"
4. Many were quick to talk about moral feelings but hesitant to link these feelings to any broader thinking about a shared moral framework or obligation. As one respondent argued: "I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But different people feel different ways, so I couldn't speak on behalf of anyone else as to what's right and wrong."
5. Smith and his researchers found an atmosphere of extreme moral individualism—of relativism and nonjudgmentalism. They have concluded that today's young adults (18-23 years old) "have not been given the resources—by schools, institutions and families—to cultivate their moral intuitions, to think more broadly about moral obligations, to check behaviors than may be degrading." America is now characterized by the erosion of shared moral frameworks and the rise of an easygoing moral individualism. Brooks writes that "morality was once revealed, inherited and shared, but now it is thought of as something that

emerges in the privacy of your own heart.” We are no longer a nation that has a shared religion that defines rules and practices. We are no longer a culture that structures people’s imaginations and imposes moral disciplines. The free-floating individual is now the essential moral unit of American culture. It is difficult to be optimistic or to see this development as a positive.

Conclusion: Here, then, is the center of postmodernism—the doctrine of the autonomous self living in community. In postmodernism, the self defines and really creates its own reality. There are virtually no boundaries for behavior and there are few authority figures that matter anymore. For example, the 7 May 2000 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* devoted an entire issue to this concept of autonomy. Autonomy impacts all aspects of culture – entertainment, business, law, leisure and religion. I, the self, define all aspects of reality. There really is nothing transcendent that defines it for me; I am autonomous. Such a claim has a haunting ring of familiarity to it, for the book of Judges has as its refrain, “Every man did what was right in his own eyes.” When individual autonomy is mixed with America’s deep-seated commitment to rights and liberties, one sees how lethal this becomes in areas of sexuality, ethics and morality. There are no boundaries or absolutes. It is the right of the individual that is absolute. This, therefore, frames the discussion on the key cultural issues of our day – e.g., abortion, homosexuality, cohabitation before marriage, genetic and reproductive technologies and their use, and the right to die with dignity. When “every man does what is right in his own eyes,” the limits to freedom and rights are boundless. A 2002 Zogby International poll of college seniors demonstrates the impact of this radical relativism. Nearly 73% of students surveyed said that when their professors taught ethics, the normal message was that uniform standards of right and wrong do not exist. Instead, what is right or wrong depends on differences in each individual and in the individual’s culture. So, if all beliefs are equally valid, there is nothing to debate. Nothing separates personal “truth” from self-delusion. If students currently in college are convinced that ethical standards are simply a matter of individual choice, they are less likely to be reliably ethical in their careers. We are now living in a culture where there is no shared ethical framework, no ethical foundation and no institutions that help young adults construct a framework for ethical decision-making. All that is left is the autonomous self firmly anchored in mid-air! Indeed, sociologist, James Davison Hunter has written: “We say we want a renewal of character in our day but we don’t really know what we ask for. To have a renewal of character is to have a renewal of a creedal order that constrains, limits, binds, obligates and compels. This price is too high for us to pay. We want character but without conviction; we want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms that we want it.”

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (13 September 2011), James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character*, p. xv, and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 1-10.