

The Thirty Years' War

MIDDLE ISRAEL

• By AMOTZ ASA-EL



It took a while for everyone – even Yasser Arafat – to understand this, but 30 years ago next week the Palestinians took charge of the war on the Jewish state.

Yes, Arab-Israeli violence had raged for 40 years, but ever since the non-Palestinian Arab armies' takeover of that war in May 1948, the Palestinians were marginalized, as neighboring states effectively hijacked their cause.

True, Palestinian gunmen had fought since November 1947, sniping at Jewish neighborhoods in mixed cities such as Haifa, Jerusalem and Safed and attacking drivers on major roads, and yes, there was much Palestinian terrorism between 1949 and 1987. Yet in the great Arab-Israeli wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973 the Palestinians were bystanders, and even in the First Lebanon War, where they did play an important role, from Israel's viewpoint the real challenge was the Syrian Army.

In December 1987 all this changed.

Fueled by rumors that a car accident's four Palestinian fatalities were intentionally targeted by Israel, thousands flocked to the funeral in Gaza's Jabalya refugee camp shouting "Jihad, jihad" and stoning an IDF outpost.

The following day the multitude returned to the streets, setting up roadblocks and throwing rocks at

IDF troops, who soon opened fire at the mob, killing a teenager. Rather than die down, the rioting persisted and spread to the West Bank, where thousands attacked IDF patrols in multiple locations.

What began with stones made way in subsequent months to Molotov cocktails and grenades, and what initially focused on soldiers soon targeted civilians as well. The Palestinian masses had gone to war, marching through the kind of flames in which nations are often born.

HISTORIANS will debate the causes of the violent outburst which by 1993 had cost the lives of more than a thousand Palestinians and 160 Israelis.

Some will note Israel's release, in return for three IDF soldiers, of 1,150 Palestinian terrorists who agitated the Palestinian population since returning home in spring 1985.

Others will cite the era's oil glut which made a barrel's price drop in 1986 from \$27 to \$10, causing the Gulf states to fire thousands of Palestinians, who returned home unemployed and ceased to deliver monthly remittances of millions of dollars.

Some – like journalists Ehud Yaari and the late Zeev Schiff in their book *Intifada* – would note Israel's failure to create jobs in the West Bank and Gaza, an economic tun-

nel vision that led nearly half their workforce to cross the Green Line daily, thus feeding ordinary Palestinians' hatred and envy of Israel.

On the diplomatic side, some historians will note – as Benny Morris did in *Righteous Victims* – Palestinian despair after an Arab summit, held just before the violence erupted, which ignored their cause and approved a restoration of ties with Egypt, that had been severed after its peace agreement with Israel.

The length of the First Intifada will also be a subject of debate. Some will argue that it ended with the convening of the Madrid Conference in the autumn of 1991, and others will extend it to the signing of the Oslo I Accord two years later.

Both views will be wrong.

THE FIRST Intifada, the Second Intifada, the Madrid Conference, the Oslo Accords, the 2000 Barak-Arafat summit at Camp David, the 2003 Sharon-Abbas summit in Aqaba, the 2005 retreat from Gaza, the 2007 Olmert-Abbas summit in Annapolis, Benjamin Netanyahu's Bar-Ilan speech in 2009, and the cycles of Fatah-Hamas embraces and brawls are all episodes in one 30-year war that has so far taken some 10,000 lives on both sides.

The common denominator among all these events is that they resulted from a grassroots Palestinian choice to take over the war on Israel, and were underscored by a mental refusal to accept the Jewish state's legitimacy and the Jewish people's nationhood.

Thirty years on, the record of the

struggle is mixed.

On the one hand, the Thirty Years' War made most Israelis seek some kind of separation from the Palestinians.

That is what made them replace Yitzhak Shamir, that is what made them build the West Bank barrier, that is what made Ariel Sharon cede Gaza, that is what made Ehud Olmert offer the West Bank, that is what made Netanyahu endorse Palestinian statehood, and that is what is now making ministers Naftali Bennett and Ze'ev Elkin try to sever Arab neighborhoods from Jerusalem.

The Thirty Years' War also gave the Palestinians self-rule, including an elected parliament, a taxing government, security forces, and a judiciary led by a 35-judge supreme court.

On the other hand, the Palestinians remain poor, underemployed and splintered, and continue to live in the shadows of Israel's economy, politics and military rule.

Politically, the Palestinian cause remains hijacked, with today's Islamism succeeding yesterday's Arabism. Diplomatically, the Palestinians' abandonment has only intensified since 1987, as the East Bloc is gone, the Arab states are up to their necks in their own civil strife, and Europe is busy struggling to keep itself intact, fending off Arab migrants while diagnosing the tumors of its fascist disease.

The world is no longer impressed with the Palestinians' cause and – worst of all from their viewpoint – Israel gradually learned to contain

their violence, both militarily and psychologically.

Yes, there is now a president in Ramallah who routinely rolls out a red carpet on which foreign leaders review a well-tailored guard of honor beneath fluttering flags, but back where those guests come from people realize that the Palestinians' plight – unlike the popular impression in 1987 – is not the cause of the Middle East's political

decay, but its result.

The Thirty Years' War will therefore end after enough Palestinians understand – like the Jews who followed Theodor Herzl in 1897 – that no one will salvage them but themselves; and the Palestinians will salvage themselves by realizing – like the Middle Israelis they fought since 1987 – that he who insists he deserves everything will end up owning nothing.



IDF SOLDIERS seize a Palestinian suspect in the West Bank city of Nablus during confrontations in February 1988, weeks after the Intifada erupted. (Reuters)

The balance sheet of the showdown the Palestinians launched in December 1987 indicates more failure than success