

Sovereignty to the Extent Possible

What Kind of Statehood Was Offered
to the Palestinians

Andrey G. Baklanov

Andrey G. Baklanov, PhD in History

Association of Russian Diplomats

Deputy Chairman of the Board;

National Research University–Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

School of International Regional Studies

Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies

Professor and Head;

Ambassador to Saudi Arabia in 2000–2005;

Member of the Multilateral Working Group on Regional Security and Arms Control
in the Middle East

ORCID: 0000-0002-5913-616X

E-mail: springfield13@yandex.ru

Tel.: +7 (495) 772-95-90

Address: Office 119, 17 Malaya Ordynka Str., Moscow 119017, Russia

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2025-23-1-162-174

The establishment of a Palestinian state was first formally mandated by UN Resolution 181 on 29 November 1947, but it remains unimplemented to this day. The latest upsurge of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has returned to the international agenda the question of fulfilling the UN's decisions on creating a Palestinian state. But what kind of state? Will it possess all the aspects of statehood in full? Some suggest that it will, and that the Middle East will soon see the emergence of one more state, similar to all its neighbors. However, this is not only unrealistic, but also inconsistent with the results of the

negotiations launched at the Madrid Peace Conference on the Middle East on 30 September–1 November 1991.

Numerous meetings and consultations, often held behind closed doors, have produced the general understanding that a future Palestinian state will have certain peculiarities to account for Israel's concerns, whether real or intentionally inflated. This article examines the peculiarities that a future Palestinian state may have in the spheres of security, external relations, and relations with Israel.

THE MADRID RESOLUTIONS AND TWO PHASES

At the 1991 Madrid Conference and subsequent meetings, it was decided that Palestinian statehood would materialize in two phases. First, the Palestinian Arabs would be granted limited autonomy, initially on an experimental basis in the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area, and then throughout the West Bank. Based on this experience of Palestinian autonomy, a second phase of negotiations would define the parameters of a higher form of self-organization, which would be considered an internationally recognized Palestinian state.

On 4 May 1994, in Cairo, the Palestinian and Israeli delegations met in the presence of the foreign ministers of the Madrid Process's co-sponsors—Russia and the U.S.—to conclude the Gaza-Jericho Agreement. It provided for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank city of Jericho, and for the establishment there of a self-governing body, the Palestinian Council. The residence of the Palestinian leadership was located in the Gaza Strip, where the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yasser Arafat, moved from Tunisia in July 1994. The experimental period was to be completed no later than 4 May 1996, followed for three years by the transitional period, culminating in the establishment of a “Palestinian state” with characteristics agreed upon at the negotiations on its “final status.”

These agreements were reached amid tensions in the Palestinian territories. The transfer of power to the new authorities created an opening for criminal and terrorist groups. The Palestinian self-governing bodies, established in the Gaza-Jericho area, had limited

powers, weak cadres, and correspondingly low efficiency. Crime, terrorist attacks (including against Israel), robbery, theft, and looting thrived.

Palestinians were ambivalent towards the limited Gaza Strip and West Bank autonomy. Many hoped that this was a real step towards a fully-fledged state, and supported Arafat. But there were also those who suspected that the Americans and Israelis would again fool the Palestinians, that “autonomy” would become a ghetto for the Arabs that would never lead to independence.

Palestinian attacks on the Israeli military and settlers multiplied, empowering those in Israel who criticized liberal politicians for softness and voluntary surrender to the Palestinians who had never actually given up on “throwing Israel into the sea.”

At the end of 1993, the peace process’s co-sponsors (the U.S. and Russia) and the negotiations’ (main regional and extra-regional participants (Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinians, Israel, Norway, and the EU) agreed that proper preparations should be made for the final status negotiations, primarily by defining the future state’s parameters—especially regarding law enforcement and security, and more specifically the nature, size, and arms of Palestine’s security forces.

In November 1993, Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Victor Posuvalyuk was invited to participate in the Cairo Forum on Informal Methods of Reaching the Compromise Agreements. (The Americans claim they actually prepared this track of the peace process. But this is not so. Victor Posuvalyuk, a leading Russian Arabist and a recognized expert on the Middle East, played a huge role: his assessments served as a guideline for the Egyptians, Palestinians, Israelis, and Norwegians.)

To maintain the peace process’s momentum and alleviate “excessive caution,” a common decision was made to rely on verbal gentlemen’s agreements and on non-papers that do not require signature or ratification. This did accelerate the search for compromise, but it also had its downside—it allowed for the neglect or arbitrarily interpretation of what had been achieved previously.

The agreements reached at the November 1993 meeting were of crucial importance for further negotiations.

BARGAINING OVER SECURITY

On 24 March 1994, an Emergency Meeting to Coordinate Assistance and Early Deployment of the Palestinian Civil Police Force (PCP), convened at Norway's initiative, was held in Cairo (AVP RF, 1994a). Besides the Palestinians, Israelis, Russian, and U.S. co-sponsors, Norwegians, and Egyptians, the meeting was attended by representatives of the UN, the EU, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Greece, Japan, Jordan, Tunisia, Turkey, the UAE, and the Republic of Korea (as an observer). The Russian delegation was led by Victor Posuvalyuk. The parameters of the future Palestinian Authority's law enforcement topped the agenda. The Israelis were adamant that the Palestinian Authority should not have any armed forces and that its foreign and security policy should be systematically coordinated with Israel. The PLO pointed to international criminal groups, extremists, and terrorists as necessitating the immediate establishment of Palestinian security forces.

By the end of the first day, it was clear that a thorough and probably lengthy expert examination of the matter would be required. The Emergency Meeting established a high-level group of experts as an official body of the Madrid peace process to outline the framework within which a Palestinian National Authority, and subsequently a Palestinian state, would maintain public security and order. The meeting was represented by Russia and the U.S. as cosponsors, Egypt and Norway as the hosts of confidential negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, officials of Israeli and Palestinian political structures and security services, as well as experts from the EU and Japan. Egypt was to become the regional caretaker of the PCP (Ibid, p. 21).

The new expert group, appropriately named the Palestinian Police Establishment Group, was to meet regularly in Cairo to work out proposals regarding the establishment, financing, and equipment of the Palestinian police force. The plenary session of the Emergency Meeting agreed on specific candidates representing the Palestinian side, Russia, the U.S., and Israel to be included in the group: selected Nabil Shaath (Palestine), David Sultan (Israel) (ambassador to Egypt),

the author of this article (deputy head of the Russian embassy in Cairo and member of the Multilateral Working Group on Regional Security and Arms Control in the Middle East), and Edmund Hull (deputy head of the U.S. embassy in Cairo and overseer of the multilateral working groups). Vladimir Trofimov, a counsellor at the Russian embassy, and Vladimir Babekin, the embassy's first secretary, also participated in the meetings, which were held once or twice a week.

The group's secretariat (mostly Egyptians, Israelis, and Palestinians) prepared draft documents, distributed them among the participants, and sent communiqués to Egyptian and foreign authorities. Norway's ambassador to Cairo, Thelin Haugestad, chaired the secretariat. Oslo sent to Cairo its security experts, some of them senior police officers. The Norwegians also assumed responsibility for coordinating the Palestinian security structures' establishment with interested countries in the region.

In mid-April 1994, the Norwegian foreign minister notified his Russian counterpart, Andrei Kozyrev, of plans to send a joint delegation to the region, comprised of Ambassador Hans Jakob Bjorn Lian from Norway's Foreign Ministry, and Faisal Husseini from the PLO Executive Committee. On the Norwegians' initiative, the delegation first visited Moscow before traveling to the region (AVP RF, 1994b).

The convocations of the emergency meeting and the expert group showed that regional and extra-regional actors were ready to provide immediate assistance in training and logistical support for the PCP. Egypt, for example, immediately committed 5 million Egyptian pounds to train 4,400 police officers. Funds for the PCP's ongoing needs turned out to be harder to raise: about \$47 million, out of the requested \$95 million, were collected. But the Norwegians and Japanese confirmed commitments of \$2 and \$3.5 million, respectively. The Israelis promised to provide buildings, infrastructure, and equipment previously used by the Israeli army and police.

The following provisions were agreed upon at the March 1994 Cairo Emergency Meeting and subsequent meetings of the expert group:

First. The Palestinian Autonomy and future Palestinian state "shall not have" an army or armed forces in their traditional sense. Specifically,

the Palestinians were not entitled to air defenses, an air force, or a navy beyond light ships to counter illegal trade and border crossings).

Second. The composition and armament of Palestinian forces should be consistent with their task of protecting the population from criminals, extremists, and terrorists, in the manner agreed upon with Israel.

Third. The Palestinians could create three types of law enforcement agencies: police, intelligence services, and bodyguards for senior officials.

Fourth. Close partnership was to be established between Israeli and Palestinian agencies in order to facilitate their work against criminal and extremist groups.

Equipping of the police forces and security units with arms was negotiated for each set of issues. Commitments of communications equipment, small arms, and vehicles were easily secured, as foreign countries seemingly saw this as an opportunity for a political “bridgehead” into Palestine. The Americans and Norwegians especially agreed to provide fairly large amounts of arms, equipment, and vehicles. The U.S. pledged 200 cross-country vehicles, a thousand pairs of special boots, and 2,300 blankets, collectively worth \$6 million (AVP RF, 1994c). Canada promised \$1 million in assistance, and Turkey also promised small arms, medical equipment, etc.

The chief Palestinian delegate, Nabil Shaas, said that the fate of not only the Palestinian Authority but also of the peace process in general depended to a large extent on when and how the PCP would be established, as opponents of negotiations would be strengthened if the Palestinian population could not be adequately protected (Ibid, p.14).

THE APC CONTROVERSY

The main point of contention concerned the defenses available to the PCP and security services in the event of a terrorist attack. The Palestinians insisted on light tanks or armored personnel carriers (APCs). (Yasser Arafat repeatedly told the Russians this before the emergency meeting in Cairo.) The Israelis were unequivocally against tanks or tracked APCs, which they argued are “attributes of an army,” which the Palestinian state was not supposed to have. Lengthy negotiations ended after the

co-sponsors and Norwegians proposed a compromise of light wheeled APCs, to which the Israelis and Palestinians agreed.

This essentially closed the question of a Palestinian “army.” Everyone, including the Palestinians, had implicitly agreed to the Israeli concept of a “powerful police force” capable of countering attacks by international terrorist organizations. (The concept suggested that the Palestinian police would be enhanced with units to fight militants in situations requiring more powerful armed army units to join the police.)

General Abdel Razzaq al-Yahya, a military expert in the Palestinian Expert Group, said that the PCP’s outline had been agreed upon in separate Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. It would consist of civilian police, riot police, intelligence, and emergency civil defense units (Ibid) of about 10,000 men in total.

Secretary General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry Uri Savir preferred to stay reserved: he emphasized the Israelis’ readiness “to work constructively with their Palestinian colleagues.” Yet the Israeli delegation’s chief military expert, General David Amon, said that the Israelis and Palestinians had also bilaterally agreed on the PCP’s composition and deployment in Gaza and Jericho.

The Expert Group also addressed personnel issues: the training of specialists in criminal investigation, forensics, hand-to-hand combat, counteraction of organized crime, etc. (AVP USSR, 1994a).

In confidential conversations with Russians, the Palestinians said that they had little hope that the Israelis would actually let the PCP have APCs, even light, wheeled ones. They therefore decided to fast-track the APC agreement’s implementation. After consultations with the Egyptians and Norwegians, they asked for the delivery of APCs from Russia as soon as possible. Palestinian and Egyptian representatives argued that Russian vehicles had performed remarkably well in Egypt and other Arab countries with hot climates and sandy soil. The Palestinians initially requested 160 vehicles, but the Israelis wanted far fewer, and a compromise of about 45 was eventually reached (AVP RF, 1996a).

Arab countries informed the Palestinians regarding their options for military procurement from the world’s leading manufacturers.

The Palestinians made requests, primarily for APCs from the Russian embassy in Cairo.

Russia was at the time in severe financial-economic crisis due to the collapse of the USSR. Moscow's borrowing from Western countries, the IMF, and the IBRD was growing. The defense industry and the armed forces were insufficiently funded. In this context, gifting APCs was an extremely hard decision, but the Russian leadership agreed to it (AVP USSR, 1994c). The Russian Foreign Ministry informed the Rosvooruzhenie corporation that: "In connection with Ya. Arafat's confirmed interest in receiving specifically Russian APCs, we believe it would be advisable to explore the possibility of providing the Palestinians with this equipment on terms suitable for them. If necessary, it would be possible to ask the government of the Russian Federation to supply the APCs free of charge or at a discount, given the socio-political effect for Russia of such an action" (Ibid).

The supply of APCs was costly. According to the Russian military, the selling price of one BTR-80 was \$180,000. The manufacture and delivery of the 45 APCs—along with their ammunition, spare parts, and auxiliary and training equipment—cost the Russian budget at least \$20 million (AVP USSR, 1994c).

Thus, in the midst of its own crisis, Russia made a major contribution to the PCP's formation.

THE LAST ATTEMPT

On 28 September 1995, the Interim Agreement between the PLO and Israel on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo 2) was concluded in Washington. The document was also signed by Russia, the U.S., Egypt, Jordan, Norway, and the EU, and it provided for the expansion of Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and the election of an 82-member Palestinian Council for a five-year transitional period (starting from the Gaza-Jericho agreement's signature on 4 May 1994).

However, the Palestinian Council's authority covered only 41 percent of the West Bank, a quite limited claim for the future Palestinian state. Many Palestinians were dissatisfied, and radicals used this in populist campaigns that were otherwise short on muscle and political reasoning.

1995 had perhaps the most favorable conditions for the implementation of Palestinian statehood. PM Yitzhak Rabin and the Israeli leadership in general were committed to creating a “favorable regional environment” based on the implementation of the agreements that had been reached. Negotiations progressed steadily, in particular during Russian FM Andrei Kozyrev’s visits to Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel in April 1995. Rabin vowed to implement the agreements with Arafat, including on the sensitive redeployment of Israeli troops from part of the West Bank and elections to the Palestinian Council. This progress seemed to open the way to the final stage of creating Palestinian statehood, in line with the agreed-upon “adjusted” parameters (AVP RF, 1996b).

However, the situation abruptly changed with Rabin’s November 1995 assassination. The Israeli peace faction began to lose its positions. Figures heavily critical of the Rabin-Peres policy elbowed their way to power, calling for an end to the negotiation process meant to give the Palestinians their own state.

Nevertheless, a certain inertia persisted. In early May 1996, the Egyptian city of Taba hosted what many hoped would be a “historic meeting” of the peace process’s key participants, to launch the negotiations’ second and final stage, regarding Palestine’s borders, capital (presumably in East Jerusalem), and relations with Israel (especially in terms of security and foreign relations).

The Palestinian delegation was led by Mahmoud Abbas; the Israeli delegation by Uri Savir. Russia was represented by Andrei Vdovin, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, and by the author, still deputy head of the Russian embassy in Cairo. The plan under consideration, if implemented, could have led to the transformation of the Palestinian Authority’s organizations into state organs.

Regrettably, the plans for the establishment of Palestinian statehood were ruined by the radical change in Israeli policy after the May 1996 general election, won by Benjamin Netanyahu and hardline conservative nationalists who made no secret of their skepticism about negotiations.

NEGOTIATIONS BY INERTIA

The period (1994–May 1996) of greatest progress towards implementing a Palestinian state was over. The peace process began to stagnate, taking again the form adopted at the 1991 Madrid Conference. Russian Foreign Ministry documents of that time are evidence of this. A memo addressed to Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, signed in mid-July 1996 by two of his deputies, Victor Posuvalyuk and Vasily Sidorov, called for taking into account the Netanyahu government's categorical rejection of Palestinian statehood. Both the Israelis and Americans changed tactics, insisting that the Palestinians' right to self-determination and a state be linked to the increasingly sluggish peace dialog. Palestinian statehood in principle was overshadowed by momentary political, economic, and humanitarian problems (AVP RF, 1996c).

In this situation, the Palestinians themselves became increasingly passive and preoccupied with improving the operation of their existing institutions. During a meeting of the Consultative Group for Assistance to the Palestinian National Authority in Frankfurt in February 1999, the term 'Palestinian state' appeared only once in Yasser Arafat's lengthy speech. He mainly spoke of the money needed for economic development (Arafat, 1999).

Also noteworthy was the discussion of the Palestinian-Israeli issue at the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council's meeting of experts (from NATO and Russia) on 6 November 1998 in Brussels. The experts unanimously agreed that the peace process was suspended and had bleak prospects. NATO countries urged Arafat to refrain from attempts to unilaterally declare statehood within the previously-designated timeframe of May 1999, insisting that this would bring no practical benefit but might prompt Israeli reprisals that could seriously harm Palestinians' socio-economic situation (NATO/EAPC, 1998).

The issue of a Palestinian state was raised again in 2000 as part of the Clinton Parameters—guidelines for a permanent status agreement to resolve the conflict. The document was authored by competent specialists, but the lack of trust between the Israeli leadership and the Palestinians prevented its implementation. Since the second half of 2001,

meetings on the conflict were convened by Russia, the U.S., the EU, and the UN. This “quartet of international mediators” was enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 1397 (March 2002), somewhat replacing the previous mechanism of Russian-American co-sponsorship.

In December 2002, the Quartet’s meeting in Washington produced a three-year, three-phase road map for a Mideast settlement through synchronized concessions by Israel and the Arab countries.

Its second, key phase envisioned the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the condition of the “successful reform” of the Palestinian civil and security institutions and the Palestinians’ abstention from unfriendly ideological, political, and military actions against Israel. Notably, the plan included all previously-negotiated limitations on the Palestinian state: no army, and an obligation to cooperate with the Israelis in security and foreign affairs, to be enshrined in the future state’s constitution. However, this plan proved unable to reanimate the peace process.

IS THERE STILL A CHANCE?

A number of separate rapprochements between Israel and various Arab states were attempted around 2020. The Abraham Accords were concluded in 2020 between Israel and Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and in 2021 also Sudan. When signing, all of these Arab states made reservations about the need to “achieve a Palestinian-Israeli settlement,” but virtually no mention of a Palestinian state. In the Middle East and beyond, some began to speculate that the Palestinian issue was fading away.

The Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, and the subsequent flareup of regional confrontations showed that turmoil would not end until Palestinians receive a state per the UN’s resolutions. A number of politicians and specialists have raised the issue of transforming the Palestinian Authority’s organizations into structures resembling those of a state. *Foreign Affairs* published an article entitled “The Case for Palestine: The Palestinian Authority Has Outlived Its Purpose—It’s Time for the State” (Khalidi, 2024). However, the practical implementation of such ideas is complicated by the diverging positions

of virtually all stakeholders, both regional and non-regional. Restarting the Mideast peace process is likewise hopeless, given the current relations between its key extra-regional participants.

The Mahmoud-Abbas-headed Palestinian leadership has intensified its efforts to win “recognition” of a Palestinian state—or, rather, of its right to exist. In 2024, nine states—Armenia, the Bahamas, Barbados, Ireland, Jamaica, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, and Trinidad and Tobago—officially recognized the State of Palestine. A number of others are mulling such a move. “Nearly as many countries now recognize the state of Palestine (149...) as recognize Israel (165)” (Efron and Koplou, 2024).

However, intra-Palestinian rifts obstruct the emergence of a Palestinian state. The Gaza Strip, from where Israeli PM Ariel Sharon conducted a “unilateral disengagement” of troops and settlements in 2005, has been taken over by Hamas, which does not recognize the Abbas-led Palestinian Authority. Attempts by Egypt, Russia, and other countries to reconcile the Palestinian factions have not yielded lasting results.

The Hamas attack on Israel has had contradictory effects on the question of Palestinian statehood. Many now point to the need for it, but extreme hardline politicians in Israel have also been strengthened. They argue that the Palestinians have failed to settle the problems of the Autonomy, and so are unlikely to successfully govern a state. Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu and other leaders argue that the “eradication of terrorist ideas” among the people of Gaza and the West Bank is what is needed—not plans to give “extremists” the chance to grow.

The settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the improvement of the political climate in the Middle East, as quickly as possible, are in Russia’s interests. Peace negotiations, including between Palestinians and Israel, must be resumed on the basis of past agreements, including those regarding the fundamental but extremely difficult issue of Palestinian statehood’s parameters.

References

Arafat, Yassir, 1999. *Speech by H.E. President Yassir Arafat, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO, President of the Palestinian Authority to the Consultative Group.*

Frankfurt, Germany. 5 February, 1999. Frankfurt: Secretariat of the Consultative Group, p. 8.

AVP RF, 1994a. Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Federation (AVP RF). Record 118. *Palestine*. Inventory 12. File 3. Folder 13. “Conference on Rendering Support for Establishing the Palestine Police”. Registration #70 as of 25 March 1994.

AVP RF, 1994b. Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Federation (AVP RF). Record 118. *Palestine*. Inventory 12. File 3. Folder 13. Registration #8574 as of 15 April 1994.

AVP RF, 1994c. Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Federation (AVP RF). Record 118. *Palestine*. Inventory 12. File 3. Folder 13. Registration #70 on 25 March 1994, p. 13.

AVP RF, 1996a. Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Federation (AVP RF). Record 861. *The Middle East*. Inventory 10. File 5. Folder 45. Department of the Middle East and North Africa. Registration #909 as of 28 February 1996.

AVP RF, 1996b. Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Federation (AVP RF). Record 863 of the MFA History and Diplomacy Department. *The Middle East*. Inventory 9. File 3. Folder 45. Registration #1847 as of 15 April 1995; Registration #7024/IS as of 17 March 1996; Registration #406 as of 23 March 1995.

AVP RF, 1996c. Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Federation (AVP RF). Record 861. *The Middle East*. Inventory 10. File 6. Folder 49. Registration #1928 as of 19 July 1996.

AVP USSR, 1994a. Foreign Policy Archives of the USSR (AVP USSR). Record 118. *Palestine*. Inventory 12. File 2. Folder 13. “Letter to Russian Foreign Minister Deputy B.L. Kolokolov.” Registration #1/873 as of 3 March 1994.

AVP USSR, 1994b. Foreign Policy Archives of the USSR (AVP USSR). Record 118. *Palestine*. Inventory 12. File 2. Folder 13.

AVP USSR, 1994c. Foreign Policy Archives of the USSR (AVP USSR). Record 118. *Palestine*. Inventory 12. File 2. Folder 13. “Letter of Rosvoorushenie Director General to Russian Foreign Minister A.V. Kozyrev”. Registration #8001–1/1 40 as of 17 March 1994.

Efron, Sh. and Koplou, M.J., 2024. The Palestinian Authority Is Collapsing. *Foreign Affairs*, 17 July. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/palestinian-authority-collapsing> [Accessed 1 October 2024].

Khalidi, R., 2024. The Case for Palestine: The Palestinian Authority Has Outlived Its Purpose—It’s Time for the State. *Foreign Affairs*, 19 March. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/palestinian-territories/case-palestine> [Accessed 1 October 2024].

NATO/EAPC, 1998. *Expert Working Group Meeting with Cooperation Partners on Development in the Middle East and Maghrib. Brussels, Belgium, 1-2 October, 1998.* Brussels: EAPC Secretariat, pp. 3-4.