

THE SKINNY TRUTH

David Ben-Gurion explained it to the Zionist Action Committee in 1938: "The Arabs do not acknowledge our right to a homeland because, in their eyes, this is their homeland."

That is what is known in some circles as the "skinny truth," hard to come by in the Middle East, where we often get fat rhetoric instead. Ben-Gurion was, of course, referring to the Palestinian Arabs.

The large number of Palestinian Arabs living in San Francisco will attest to Ben-Gurion's skinny truth. Most of them grew up in Judea and Samaria, as had their ancestors before them. It is literally their homeland, the site of their childhood memories. One Palestinian Arab told how she could look out her window, when she was growing up in Nazareth, and see "the oaks and blossoming plum trees, spaced out between stone fences; the sheep grazing in the open spaces; the terraced hillside planted with ancient olive trees."

Within the Palestinian Arab community in San Francisco there is an increasing number who do not have such memories. They are young American citizens who grew up in San Francisco. They may have been on their way to "assimilation" before the late 1960s.

One San Franciscan of Palestinian Arab origin tells about his own children:

"They grew up in San Francisco and did not spend much time having political thoughts about the Middle East. They were too busy doing things here and thinking about the future. They thought we were crazy to be so preoccupied with a land so far away. One day they went to visit some relatives in Ramallah, and arrived at a time of trouble. Among other things, they were detained and examined. They saw what happened to their relatives. They came back angry and involved."

And so they were politicized. It is somewhat reminiscent of American Jews, the majority of whom were rather indifferent to the idea of a new state of Israel until they were politicized by what happened to the Jews of Europe -- and further politicized in 1967 by an awareness that the new state could be obliterated.

There are a number of ways in which Palestinian Arabs resemble Israeli Jews. Among the Arab populations, for example, the Palestinian Arabs resemble the Israelis in their drive for educational achievement. Indeed, in the U.S., the Palestinian Arabs are following the same mobility patterns as the Jews had.

But, most of all, the Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs make the most natural allies in the Middle East because, as the two major victims in the Middle East, they share the same enemies. Syria, for example, doesn't want Israel there; and it doesn't want an independent Palestinian Arab entity there, either in Judea/Samaria or in Jordan. Most of the major Arab states have demonstrated that they have no positive interest in the Palestinian Arabs, and want to keep that conflict going for their own purposes.

One skinny truth, therefore, is that a "solution" of the Palestinian Arab problem will not bring peace to the Middle East because it will not serve the real agenda of the Arab nations. On the other hand, there is a genuine conflict between Israelis and Palestinian Arabs, for reasons Ben-Gurion described. Someday there must be an accomodation between the security needs of Israel and Palestinian Arab aspirations. But needed flexibility on both sides is critically impeded by the inflexibility of the Arab nations, which are opposed to both Israeli security and Palestinian Arab aspirations. That is the skinny truth around which American diplomacy must turn.