

Anyone concerned about the Middle East

will have been affected by the Palestinian-Israeli agreement of September 1993. Of course this agreement is a dangerous one, and leaves many questions unanswered. It may well go wrong. It has been made by two quite precarious national leaderships. It is, in historical perspective, greatly unjust to the Palestinians, who will end up with, at best, around a quarter of what was once their territory, and for whom there is not yet a guarantee of a sovereign state. Within both Palestinian and Israeli societies it has aroused anxieties. Nonetheless, it is a welcome event, of potentially great significance: it arouses some hope, it sets a marker for future advance. The principle of mutual recognition by Palestinians and Israelis has been established, with the assent of much of the outside world, and the possibility of two states is now there. That, at least, provides a basis, and one to go back to, even if things break down in the months and years to come.

Can the agreement work? The international context suggests some optimism. The agreement is one of several that have been reached in the past four years, some of them in conflicts that have involved much greater loss of life than the Arab-Israeli conflict. Some of these agreements have failed (Afghanistan, Angola), others are stymied (Sahara, Cyprus) or in a state of uncertainty (Cambodia, Mozambique, South Africa). But others

have, more or less, worked: El Salvador, Nicaragua, Namibia, Eritrea. The odds are that the Palestinian-Israeli agreement will be, for some time, in the middle category, but this comparative listing suggests that surprising things may happen.

What are the reasons — beyond mutual exhaustion and the workings of years of secret contacts — that led Arafat and Rabin to agree to this compromise? Here again the international context is important. The end of the cold war lessened the sense of both sides that they had an unconditional external patron. The Gulf war, through Saddam's missiles, highlighted Israel's vulnerability and undermined the self-confidence of the PLO. Perhaps most importantly, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism promises to present many dangers to both Arafat and Rabin in the years to come. They will be the better able to face these threats if they have worked out some deal between them. Whatever happens in Jericho or Jerusalem, these are enduring and major trends that are pushing the two sides, and the other secular Arab regimes around them (particularly Egypt), to the table. They are battening down the roof before the storm breaks.

The agreement signals a shift in attitudes by the protagonists, and forces a comparable shift amongst those following Middle Eastern affairs from the outside. This is particularly true in regard to the legitimacy of the Palestinian case. Outsiders found it easy to criticise the Palestinians for not accepting the reality and legitimacy of an Israeli state. The Palestinians "should," in some abstract sense, have accepted the legitimacy of an Israeli state in 1947, when the partition plan was first mooted; the idea of the two peoples living in one state, "secular democratic" or whatever, already seemed naive. All sorts of explanations in terms of the particularly unrealistic, or intransigent, or anti-Jewish, propensities of the Palestinians were invoked. But these arguments were unrealistic: no people in the world could easily accept that, in the space of two or three generations, the majority of their national territory had been taken by a settler population. The Palestinians resisted with whatever means were at their disposal; some, but by no means most, were reprehensible. One can only wonder what the response would have been, on America, or British, or French, territory if a

comparable demographic and territorial shift had occurred.

For Palestinians and Israelis the agreement opens up at least the possibility of a better future — one in which over time the two peoples could free themselves from the fear of war, from the agonies of the past. But it is not just for those directly involved that the agreement may offer some emancipation. Throughout this conflict, the discussion outside the Middle East has been polarised and embittered, repetitive and selective. Everyone knows the arguments on the Jewish side and on the Arab side: you can read them all in the correspondence columns of the press to this day. The left, until 1967, denied the rights of the Palestinians to their own state because of the quite separate issue of the genocide of Jews in Europe. Even after 1967 many continued to take this position. The most perceptive, and enduring, commentary on the whole issue from the left was produced in separate studies in the aftermath of that war by two Jewish Marxists, Isaac Deutscher and Maxime Rodinson, each of whom took issue with the nationalist myths of both sides and the misuse of the genocide.

On their side, supporters of the Palestinians denied the legitimacy of an Israeli state on all sorts of grounds, many of them spurious. The zenith of this aberrant solidarity was the 1970s debate on "Zionism as racism." If this is taken to mean that Israeli nationalism contains prejudices against Arabs, then of course it has an element of truth to it; but according to this argument all nationalisms are racist. There is a difference between identifying racist elements in a nationalism, and denying the legitimacy of that nationalism entirely. Or "Zionism is racism" could be interpreted as meaning that the ideology of building a Jewish state in Palestine denied the rights of the Palestinians: this is also certainly true. But there was another message mixed up in all this, itself a racist one, namely that the Jews in Palestine had no right to their own state, and, for that reason, the whole campaign was pernicious, and in the end backfired.

Much of this debate invoked history. For outsiders the richness of the Biblical and classical resonances invested the conflict with a special significance, and special difficulty. But

one may wonder whether all this history did anyone much good, and indeed whether the sense of historical uniqueness, the aura of tragedy and doom, is justified. Perhaps the Arab-Israeli dispute is no more peculiar or apocalyptic than any other. The Israelis and the Palestinians behaved and will continue to behave in much the same way as other people in the world. This is because of something neither side will admit: namely that they are essentially creatures of contingency, products of an arbitrary and recent history which has created two nations in a matter of a few decades. Reconciliation rests not on arbitrating their ancestral claims, but rather on denying the relevance of history at all.

The Jews invoke their biblical claims, the Palestinians see themselves as the heirs of centuries of occupations, and as descendants of the Canaanites before them. But here, as in so many other parts of the world, these invocations of history are spurious. Nationalism — the division into nations each claiming a separate state on the basis of distinct identities — is a recent phenomenon, a product of political change in the past century. The Palestinian nation emerged from this process, and was forged in the conflict with the Zionist project itself, i.e., since the 1920s. Although the Jewish people has existed for millennia, there is no Jewish "nation" in the modern political sense. The basis of the historic claim to the land of Israel is one that few people not directly involved could accept: the argument that a particular piece of land was "given by God" hardly allows for rational assessment, while a claim based on historical occupation fares little better, given that the historic kingdom of Solomon and David lasted for only around eighty years. Any argument for the legitimacy of an Israeli state has to rest on contemporary, and generalisable, criteria: although most Jews did not and do not live in Israel, out of a part of the Jewish people an Israeli nation, Hebrew-speaking and resident in the Middle East, has emerged. Its opponents deny its legitimacy on the grounds that it was created through immigration and settlement, but this would, if generalised, be true of many other nations the world over.

Nationalists refuse to acknowledge the modernity, the contingency, of their claims. They insist on harking back into history. Long history there is, and of course one can track down

the peoples and traditions who are the ancestors of today's nations. But the map of nations as we see it today is not the result of ancient patterns. Rather, it is a result of a series of accidents, many of them recent. History cannot predict which nations would in fact emerge in the modern era, nor can it give us answers to questions of legitimacy.

In the chaos of the post-communist world, all sorts of nationalisms have arisen. What is striking about so many of them is how, in feverish invocation of the past, they ignore the lessons of other conflicts and reproduce the origin myths of other nationalisms. It is one of the paradoxes of nationalism that while each one claims to be original they are, in their essentials, all the same. Croats denounce Serbs who, it is said, were brought by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century. Both Armenians and Azeris talk nonsense about the claim to Nagorni-Karabakh. In Northern Ireland nationalists deny the rights of Protestants on the grounds that the latter were colonisers — in the sixteenth century. The search is on for "pure" members of nations, and this is linked to the maximum claim on territory. Traditions, some genuine, many not, are cobbled together to create new nationalisms.

The common ground of Israelis and Palestinians, shared with many other nations in conflict in the world, is the very contingency and the very arbitrary nature of the entities they now claim to represent. This does not mean they have no right to states of their own, or that, in the name of some higher cosmopolitan or binational ideal, they should live together. Obviously, given the animosities and fears that now exist, they cannot live together in one state. They are, in this as in other respects, normal nations. The Arab-Israeli dispute was not, and is not, some conflict of "another" kind.

The solution does not depend on the reconciliation of ancient or traditional antagonisms, but rather on the acceptance that Israelis and Palestinians are entitled to what other peoples have, neither more nor less. The outside world, too, would then be freed from the mire of historical retrospection and association.

London, 1994