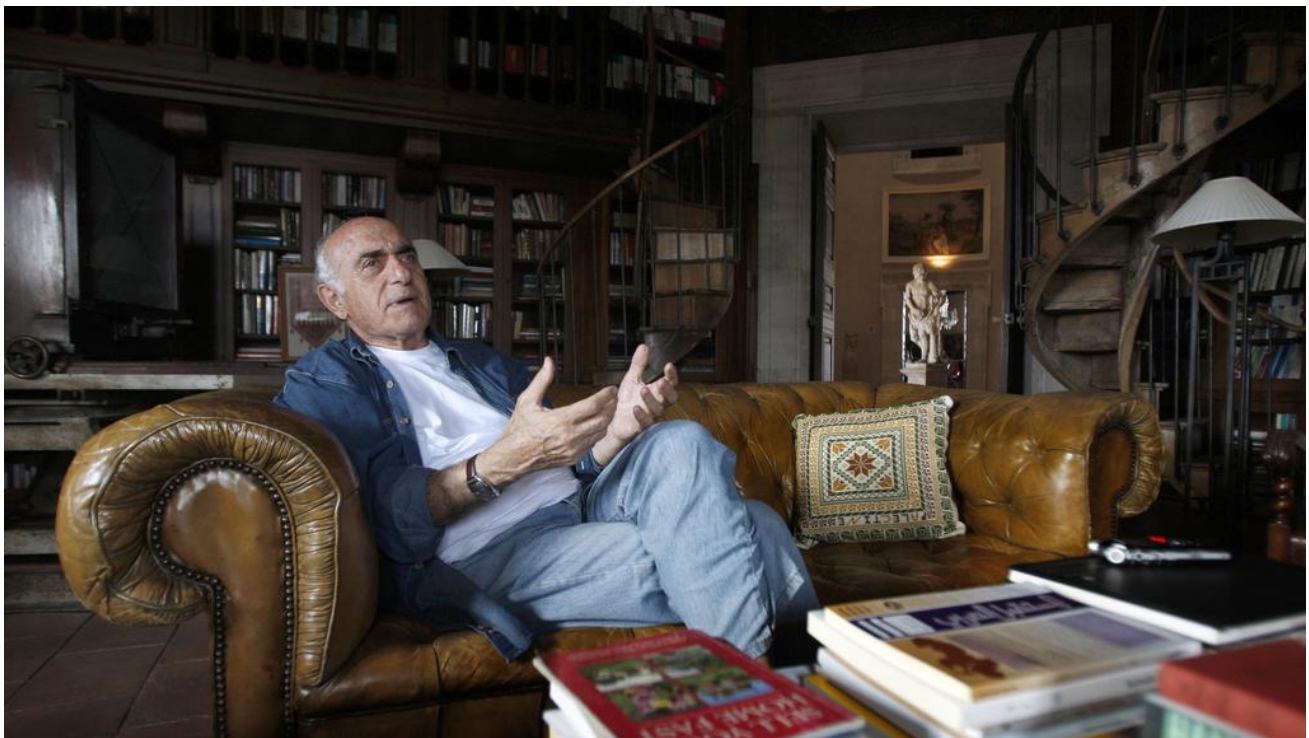


Palestinian Business Tycoon: Israel Has Driven Out Christians, Plans “Greater Israel” From the Nile to the Euphrates

by Hugh Fitzgerald



MEMRI.org makes available many important news items, including interviews, sermons, speeches, and more, from the Arab and Muslim world – translating them whenever necessary, and always offering transcriptions. Some of its archival material has enduring relevance, such as [an interview](#) that business tycoon Munib al-Masri, who with a \$1.5 billion fortune is known as “the richest Palestinian in the world” (two Hamas leaders, Abu Marzook and Khaled Meshaal, who each have at least \$2 billion, apparently don’t count) gave to France 24 Arabic TV, and that was aired on November 28, 2018. The number of false, even

semi-demented, statements made in such short compass by Munib al-Masri was impressive.

First, Al-Masri said, Israel had “deliberately created the rift between Hamas and Fatah.” But everyone knows perfectly well how that rift started. It began after the death of Arafat in November 2004 left a leadership vacuum, and the subsequent fight for power and money within the Palestinian movement had nothing to do with Israel. After the Palestinian legislative election on January 26, 2006 resulted in a Hamas victory, relations between Hamas and Fatah were marked by sporadic factional fighting. This became more intense after the two parties repeatedly failed to reach a deal to share government power, escalating in June 2007, and resulting in Hamas’ takeover of Gaza. Fighting between Hamas and Fatah then began in Gaza.

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, Hamas leader Ismail Haniya had formed what was billed as a national unity government for the PA on March 29, 2006, comprising mostly Hamas members, after Fatah and other factions refused to join. Violence continued, mainly in Gaza, between Fatah and Hamas. In the end, 83 Hamas members, and 165 Fatah members. were killed, with 98 civilians also killed, and 1,000 people wounded on both sides.

There was a brief attempt at a unity government and for a cessation of violence between Fatah and Hamas in the Fatah-Hamas Mecca Agreement of February 2007. The Hamas government was replaced in March 2007 by a national unity government headed by Haniya, and including both Hamas and Fatah ministers. But then, in June 2007, Hamas fighters took control of the Gaza Strip and removed all Fatah officials, killing some while others fled to the West Bank. In the West Bank, President Abbas declared a state of emergency on June 14, dismissed Hamas leader Haniya’s national unity government, and appointed an emergency government. Mahmoud Abbas now runs the West Bank as his fiefdom, unopposed since 2005, while Hamas remains firmly in control of Gaza. The Israelis have had

nothing to do either with creating, or prolonging, this split between Fatah and Hamas. It's a classic conflict for power and, above all, a fight over money. Billions in aid for the "Palestinians" have come in over several decades from rich Gulf Arabs, from well-off Muslims in America, and from generous Western governments. Much of that money has been diverted by the PA and Hamas leaders for their own benefit.

Mahmoud Abbas and his family, for example, have a net worth of \$400 million.

The Hamas leaders have done even better. Abu Marzook is considered one of Hamas's wealthiest billionaires. Arab sources estimate his wealth at \$2-3 billion.

Another Hamas leader-turned-tycoon is Khaled Mashaal. Estimates around the world are that Mashaal is currently worth \$2.6 billion, but the numbers mentioned by the Arab commentators (based on their many sources) are much higher, varying from \$2-5 billion invested in Egyptian and Persian Gulf banks, and some in real estate projects in the Persian Gulf countries.

The next tycoon on the list is Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh. His fortune is estimated at \$4 million. He simply hasn't been enough a thief, but he'll learn. In addition, there are believed to be 600 Arab millionaires – cronies of the rulers – in Gaza and the Palestine Authority.

Al-Masri, of course, would prefer to ignore that whole embarrassing subject of how the leaders of Fatah and Hamas came to be so rich, and why they have been, and still are, fighting over power, because power gives them the access to the aid and other moneys they have proven so skillful at diverting to themselves. It's far easier for Al-Masri to simply blame Israel for internecine Palestinian warfare.

Munib Al-Masri continues:

“Look, Israel has been planning for 400 years. It had been planning even before the year 1800. It created the Balfour declaration and created the Jewish state – all of it was planned by a think tank they have, which tells them what to do. They have [a plan] from now until 2118.”

Israel has not been planning anything “for 400 years.” The modern state of Israel dates from 1948; the First Zionist Congress was held in Basel in 1897. Chronology is not Al-Masri’s strong suit, though no doubt he means to imply that a sinister cabal of Jews have for centuries – all the way back to 1618 or so – been scheming among themselves to establish a mighty Jewish state in the Middle East. Who were these sinister Jewish planners? Where were they living, either in Europe or in the Ottoman domains? How did they hope to wrest the land from the mighty Ottoman Turks, then at the apogee of their power? And how is it that no one, including Jews themselves, seemed to have noticed any such planning by Jews “for 400 years”? And how could Israel have “created the Balfour Declaration” in 1917, when Israel only came into existence 31 years later? Does Al-Masri not know that Balfour was an Englishman, and a Christian, and he was nobody’s puppet? And this “think tank” Al-Masri mentions the Jews as having is yet one more comical solecism: “Think Tanks” did not exist in 1618, or 1800, or 1917, or in 1947, and there is no Jewish “think tank” that has all along been telling them, the Jews, “what to do.”

Why did Al-Masri claim that “It [the Jews] had been planning [their state] even before the year 1800”? I suspect it was because around that time the restrictions in Europe on the Jews first began to crumble. Until then, Jews had had little power and were not full citizens. They were first emancipated in France, that is, given full rights as French citizens, in 1791, and it took decades for them to be fully integrated into French life. Meanwhile, other countries in Western Europe steadily followed suit, with Jews given full rights in Great

Britain in 1859, and in Germany in 1871.

Al-Masri: "They already declared a Jewish state, and now they want to complete it. They say that the greater State of Israel stretches from the Nile to the Euphrates. It includes half of the Arabian Peninsula, from the northern Hijaz on and up."

This is the myth of a Greater Israel that for many Arabs and Muslims will never die. Al-Masri claims that the Israelis will not be satisfied until their state extends from the Nile to the Euphrates and, furthermore, until the Jews can incorporate the northern half of the Arabian Peninsula into Greater Israel. This is projection: in Islam, the Jihad continues until everywhere Islam dominates, and Muslims rule, everywhere. Islam must eventually cover the globe. So why shouldn't they imagine that Israel, too, has big ideas about expanding its territory? The real territorial ambitions of the Jews are quite modest, being limited to that part of historical Eretz Israel, the Land of Israel, that lies to the west of the Jordan River; Israelis have long ceased to stake a claim, as Jabotinsky's Revisionists once did, to territory east of the Jordan River.

Where does this claim that Jews plan to annex the northern half of the Arabian Peninsula originate? It's not known. But this wild charge made against Israel has been around for at least the last few decades. In a May 1998 interview with ABC's John Miller, Osama bin Laden himself noted what he saw as "Zionist plans for expansion of what is called the Great Israel ... to achieve full control over the Arab Peninsula which they intend to make an important part of the so called Greater Israel."

Israelis have hardly been empire-builders. They have never shown the slightest interest in laying claim to a single dunam of the Arabian Peninsula. And in 1967, when Israel could easily have pushed deep into Jordan on the eastern side of the eponymous river, its forces halted at the Jordan River; they

had no intention of pushing further eastward, much less all the way through Jordan and then also through Iraq – presumably rolling up Saddam Hussein's powerful military – all the way to the Euphrates. But this from-Nile-to-the-Euphrates claim keeps coming up. Arafat himself said that the two blue stripes on the Israeli flag represented the two rivers, the Nile and the Euphrates. Since the flag was first made, in 1891, for the Zionist movement, everyone has known that the two blue stripes were meant to represent the Tallit, the Jewish prayer shawl with its blue stripes – everyone, that is, except for Arafat and other Arabs promoting the “Greater Israel” myth.

Israel took the Sinai from Egypt twice, by force of arms, and twice Israel returned it. The first time was after the Sinai Campaign in 1957. The second time was when Israel again won the entire Sinai in the Six-Day War, and then returned it, to Sadat, in three tranches, in exchange for a treaty of peace with Egypt. If Israel had been intent on expanding from the Nile to the Euphrates, giving back the entire Sinai twice was hardly the way to go about it. What's more, in 2005 Israel also pulled entirely out of Gaza, even removing Israelis who had been living there for nearly 40 years. Had Israel been hellbent on a “Greater Israel,” it would, beginning in 1967, have deliberately made life for the Gazan Arabs more difficult, so that they would emigrate. Israel instead tried to help the Gazans economically, giving tens of thousands of Gazans work in Israel, and handing over to them a turnkey operation potentially worth hundreds of millions of dollars. This consisted of dozens of greenhouses, and a thriving business that Israelis had built growing strawberries, cherry tomatoes, sweet peppers, herbs, and spices, mainly for the European market. It was the Gazan Arabs who refused the gift, and ran amok, vandalizing and destroying many of those greenhouses that had been given to them on a platter.

“They have fixed plans, especially concerning Jerusalem. Jerusalem is suffering. They have detailed plans and they know

exactly what they want to do with regard to Jerusalem and to Palestine.”

Jerusalem is “suffering”? Jerusalem is thriving, in fact, for Jewish and Arab (Christian and Muslim) residents alike. The Palestinian population has grown 25% since 1967, when Israel first took control of East Jerusalem, and now the Arabs, who were about 24% of the population in 1967, have increased to 40% of the city’s much larger population in 2018. Meanwhile, the Jewish population has decreased from 76% in 1967 to 60% today. These are not figures that suggest ruthless expansionism at Arab expense. Had Israel been such, in the first flush of its crushing victory in the Six-Day War it would have been pushing Palestinians out of East Jerusalem into Jordan, instead of allowing them to remain, and their numbers to grow so dramatically. In fact, today thousands of West Bank Arabs have been trying to become Israeli citizens and to move to Jerusalem, where life for the Arabs, under Israeli rule, is much more secure, and they are economically better off, than in either the West Bank (under the PA) or in Gaza under Hamas.

Finally, Al-Masri charges the Israelis with discouraging Christians from remaining in Israel. He says that “our Christian brothers were 29% [of the population], but they [the Israelis] drove them out and now they [the Christians] are only 1%. I consider our Christian brothers to be the *crème de la crème*. They drove them out and now they want to do the same thing to the Palestinians. But we tell them that we are here to stay.”

Everything Al-Masri says is wrong. These are made-up figures, plucked from the air. Where in Mandatory Palestine, or in Israel, or in the West Bank under either Israeli or PA rule, or in Gaza, were Al-Masri’s “Christian brothers” ever 29% of the population? Nowhere. He simply made the figure up. And from where did Israel “drive” all those Christians out? And why would Israel have done so? Al-Masri doesn’t tell us.

Perhaps he is thinking of the Christians, who are now only 1% of the Arab population in Gaza. But Israel had nothing to do with causing many of them to emigrate so that now only 3,000 are left. Rule by Hamas, a local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, made living in Gaza distinctly unpleasant for Christians. Such events as the firebombing of the only Christian bookstore in Gaza, and the murder of its proprietor, Rami Ayyad, have contributed to the palpable fear of Christians. That is what "drives them out."

And if life for Christians was difficult under rule by Fatah, it became downright dangerous under Hamas. In 2006, there were 5,000 Christians living in Gaza, when Hamas took power from the more moderate Fatah party. In 2016 there were just 1,100 left, according to Samir Qumsieh, the owner of Nativity TV, the only Christian TV station in Palestine, and a researcher focusing on Christian issues.

In the West Bank, which was under Arab (Jordanian) rule before 1967, Christians made up only 2% of the population. When Israel controlled the entire territory from 1967 to 1995, that figure more than doubled, to 5%. Now, with much of the West Bank back under the Palestinian Authority, the Christians again account for less than 2 percent of the population.

Bethlehem, the city we naturally think of as the preeminent Christian outpost in the region, was under Arab (Jordanian) rule until 1967, then under Israeli rule until 1995, and then again under Arab (PA) rule, as it remains today. In 1950, Bethlehem and the surrounding villages were 86 percent Christian. But by 2016, the Christian population dipped to just 12 percent, according to Bethlehem mayor Vera Baboun. Most of that decrease was between 1950 and 1967, when many Christians left, mainly for Europe, the U.S., and Canada, for they saw little future for themselves in a Muslim sea. But when the Israelis took over in 1967, the Christian population stopped its long decline. When Israel handed Bethlehem over, most unwisely, to the Palestinian Authority in 1995, the slide

in the Christian population resumed, and is now 12%.

Munib Al-Masri may be a brilliant businessman. He's said to be the richest "Palestinian," and he apparently didn't steal all his wealth, unlike Abu Marzook and Khaled Meshaal of Hamas, and Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority. As a "Palestinian" propagandist, with his farrago of nonsense and lies about Israel and "the Jews," attributing to them a 400-year plan to build a "Greater Israel" that supposedly would not just extend from the Nile to the Euphrates, but include the northern half of the Arabian Peninsula, he leaves a great deal to be desired. He seems to think the Balfour Declaration was composed not by Lord Balfour, but by the Israelis, 31 years before the State of Israel was even declared. He wants you to believe that somewhere in "Palestine" – place unspecified – 29% of the population was once Christian, but thanks to those sinister Israelis, so many were driven out that now only 1% of the population is Christian.

So three questions for Munib Al-Masri:

First, Mr. Al-Masri, decreases in Christian populations there have certainly been, in Iraq, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Egypt, in Gaza, in the West Bank, and in only one place – Israel – has the Christian population remained steady. Please explain.

Second, Mr. Al-Masri, you keep referring to a "Greater Israel" that you say the Jews have for the last 400 years been planning to create. If the Israelis are so intent on creating this "Greater Israel," then why is it, do you think, that just after their victory in the Six-Day War, the Israelis immediately offered to give back every bit of territory they had won, to Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, in exchange for peace treaties? And why, for example, did they later return the entire Sinai to Egypt – for the second time – when, if they had been serious about this "Greater Israel," they would certainly have held onto it?

Third, you are held up as an example of success, the “richest Palestinian in the world,” with a fortune of \$1.5 billion. Yet two leaders of Hamas, Abu Marzook and Khaled Meshaal, have fortunes larger than yours, estimated at between \$2 and \$5 billion each. Mahmoud Abbas and his two sons are said to have a fortune of some \$400 million. Mohammed Rashid, the former financial adviser to Yasser Arafat, is said to be worth \$500 million. And Arafat himself was said to be worth billions at his death, though much of that money mysteriously disappeared. Would you care to comment on the remarkable economic success of so many “Palestinian” leaders?

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