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## On the Thorny Road Toward a Peaceful Resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A Palestinian Perspective

by  
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### **Reassertion of Palestinian Identity and the Palestinization of the Arab-Israeli Conflict**

The interplay between Palestinian feelings of alienation as a result of the Nakbeh and the implications of 1948, the feeling of being uprooted and treated as a sub-human in the refugee camps amid world apathy, and Palestinian insistence on the preservation of their identity has led to the reassertion of Palestinian-Arab identity and national consciousness since 1967. Between 1948 and 1967, Israel and others were intent on liquidating and negating “Palestinianism,” that is, the attachment of Palestinians to their native land. And it was not surprising in the early 1970s that Golda Meir, then Prime Minister of Israel, articulated the idea that Palestinian identity did not exist at all. Palestinians under occupation or in the Palestinian Diaspora insisted on their collective identity despite arguments against it, including hostile Arab regimes and western powers as well as a powerful mass media in the West which has made the terms “Palestinian identity” and “terrorism” seemingly synonymous.

The June 1967 War was a decisive Israeli victory but a thoroughly humiliating experience for Arab regimes and the Palestinians on the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Arab Jerusalem. For Palestinians, however, it was an historical turning point which was given impetus by fierce Palestinian resistance in the Battle of Karameh in March 1968 against Israeli incursions into the East Bank of Jordan.

This was in response to the dire need after the 1967 War for a Palestinian organizational structure that directed the growing sentiment of Palestinianism and a Palestinian quest for self-determination and statehood. From this point on, the PLO became synonymous with Palestinian national identity as well as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people as acknowledged by the Arab Summit Conference and the United Nations in 1974.

The PLO's anti-Israel operations worldwide and the resistance of the 1968 Battle of Karameh led to a renewed sense of Palestinian self-respect and a determined activism, something in sharp contrast with the low state of morale in other Arab countries resulting from the June 1967 defeat. In the words of the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence "And as a result of long years of trial in ever mounting struggle, the Palestinian political identity emerged further consolidated and confirmed. The collective Palestinian national will forged for itself a political embodiment, the Palestine Liberation Organization, its sole legitimate representative recognized by the world community as a whole, as well as by related regional and international institutions, even as it suffered massacres and confinement within and without its home."<sup>1</sup>

The massacres at Sabra and Shatilla in 1982 and the resistance in refugee camps in Lebanon in the 1980s further intensified the reassertion of Palestinian national identity. But the 1983 expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon only underlined the importance of the occupied Palestinian territories. And this was the prelude that would form the preparatory groundwork for the outbreak of the popular uprising (al-Intifada) in December 1987 against Israeli occupation in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The PLO's insistence on destroying the Israeli entity in the 1960s and early 1970s gave way gradually to a more pragmatic approach, more in tune with changes in the balance of world powers. This pragmatism became an argument for a two-state solution on the historical soil of Palestine.

### **From the First to the Madrid Middle East Conference**

THE INTIFADA WHICH BROKE OUT IN DECEMBER 1987 WAS a turning point in Palestinian life and in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Young Palestinians in the occupied territories were motivated to change the status quo: the unbearable political and economic realities associated with the Israeli military occupation since 1967. Palestinians from all walks of life, young and old, men and women, participated in this massive, unarmed and for the most part non-violent resistance to Israeli occupation whose major goal was to achieve self-determination and a Palestinian state with Arab Jerusalem as its capital. The resistance led to hundreds of martyrs, mostly young, from all walks of life.

The Intifada was successful in generating world sympathy and in putting the Palestinian dilemma on the agenda of regional and world powers. Various peace initiatives were introduced by Arab, European and American leaders. In addition to the 1991 Gulf War, the Intifada was one of the major catalysts that led to the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference and “The Land for Peace” negotiations in October 1991.

Palestinian national identity was clearly defined in the 1988 Declaration. It states that Palestine “is an Arab state, an integral and indivisible part of the Arab nation ... in heritage and civilization. It is the state of Palestinians everywhere where they enjoy their collective national and cultural identity ... under a parliamentary democratic political system which guarantees freedom of religious convictions and non-discrimination in public rights of men or women, on grounds of race, religion, color or sex.”<sup>2</sup>

The PLO’s 1988 peace initiative for a two-state solution and the PLO’s espousal of a secular ideology are not admired by many Palestinians who refuse to accept the reality of the state of Israel. Those espousing political Islam, among such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, reject the secular orientation of this conception of Palestinian national identity. An Islamic identity assumes a greater role among these groups who have been playing a greater role in Palestinian society since the outbreak of the Intifada in 1987. They consider Palestine a Muslim land and the Palestinian problem a Muslim problem of concern to the Muslim world. The priority of Hamas and Islamic Jihad is the transformation of Palestine into an Islamic society as a first step toward the total liberation of the land from the Jewish State. In this group’s vision of society, religion and politics are interdependent parts with the Qur’an and Sunna serving as a guide to people in every aspect of life.<sup>3</sup>

This trend toward political Islam in Palestinian society is an important part of an Islamic resurgence in the Arab world since the Arab defeat in 1967 and the emergence of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and it has drawn much of its strength from the pathetic state of the Arabs in their historical confrontation with Israel and from the unmitigated failures of the Arab regimes to build viable societies.

### **From the Oslo Accords to the Camp David Summit Conference**

Secret Palestinian-Israeli talks in Oslo, Norway were held under the mediation of the Norwegian Foreign Minister. They eventually led to a draft of the Oslo Accords (Declarations of Principles) signed secretly on 20 August 1993. On 13 September, PLO Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Rabin exchanged letters of mutual recognition. Shortly after, The Oslo Accords were officially signed at a White House ceremony on 19 September 1993. In the ensuing months several interim agreements were signed between the PLO and Israel<sup>4</sup> including the control of Border Crossings and the Area of, Protocol on Economic Relations Cairo Agreement on Gaza-Jericho Self-Rule Accord, Early Empowerment Agreement on the Transfer of Civilian Authorities, Oslo II / Second Stage of Palestinian Autonomy, Hebron Agreement, Wye River Memorandum for the implementation of Oslo II and the resumption of the final status talks, and Sharm Esh-Sheikh Agreement, 4 September 1999, for the implementation of Wye River Memorandum.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that the Oslo Accords stipulated that Palestinian-Israeli negotiations would comprise two phases: an “interim period” (Oslo Accords), not to exceed five years, during which time Israel would gradually withdraw from Palestinian areas; and a second phase in which a “final status” agreement based on U.N. Security Resolutions 242 and 338 would be reached concerning Jerusalem, the refugee problem, settlements, final borders and water resources, the original target of which was set at 4 May 1999.<sup>6</sup>

The more positive aspect of the Oslo Accord was the arrival of Palestinian police forces followed by Chairman Arafat and Diaspora Palestinians to the Palestinian homeland to set up the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). Likewise, on 20 January 1996, free Palestinian elections took place to elect 88 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council and the President of the PNA. Eighty percent of Palestinians in the PNA areas supported the Oslo process by early 1996. And 75 per cent of Palestinian eligible voters participated in the 1996 elections.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Palestinian-Israeli people-to-people programs and other similar Palestinian-Israeli NGO activities were established between 1993 and 2000. These people-to-people activities comprised the social, cultural, economic, political, educational and religious spheres. For example, these initiatives by Palestinians and Israelis, which were usually sponsored financially by a third party (European, American or Japanese), saw participants from all ages and at all levels: secondary schools, university students, academicians, politicians, economists, clerics and lay people. For

example, one can point to the *Seeds of Peace* summer camps for young people, *Peace Research Institute Middle East (PRIME)* which was organized by academicians from Palestinian and Israeli universities, and tens of inter-faith dialogue activities which included, among them, joint activities by the *Israeli Interfaith Association*, *Rabbis for Peace* and the *Palestinian Christian-Muslim Al-Liqa' Center*.

Otherwise, the record of the Oslo process, 1993-2000, was dismal, marred by instability and bloodshed chiefly resulting from the confrontations of September 1996 following the Israeli inauguration of an underground tunnel below Al-Aqsa Mosque. And with the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada of in late September 2000, seventy percent of the above mentioned agreements remained ink on paper mainly due to the inherent pitfalls of the asymmetrical formula of the Oslo Accords which left the Palestinian National Authority area—its air, land, borders, economy, including imports and exports, to mention a few areas—under total Israeli control. Palestinians came under the mercy of Israeli security-oriented policies and measures which were pre-empting as well the “final status” talks through the creation of new facts on the grounds in regard to Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, all of which led to Israeli strangulation of Palestinians psychologically, economically, geographically and politically. For example, Palestinians from the PNA areas have been prevented from entering Jerusalem since March 1993 thus preventing Christians and Muslims from reaching and praying freely in their holiest shrines, The Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Al-Aqsa Mosque and from reaching their work places, receiving medical attention, as well as educational and economic services.

Israeli strategies of minimizing the Arab presence in Jerusalem are also seen in Israeli policies which aim to control the number of Palestinians who legally reside in the city. This includes the confiscation of East Jerusalem identification cards, in the case of those Jerusalemites who live abroad or in the West Bank for more than seven years, or those who travel abroad but do not possess re-entry visas, or those who apply for residency / citizenship elsewhere. If a Jerusalemite marries a non-resident spouse from the West Bank or Gaza or from abroad they must endure a painful family reunification process. A Jerusalemite can register their children as residents only if the father holds a valid Jerusalem identification. As a result of these policies thousands of East Jerusalem identification cards have been revoked since 1967.

Further Israeli measures to hamper Palestinian land developments are seen in the methods used to expropriate Arab land and to control

development in East Jerusalem and neighborhoods. These methods include military orders and other measures issued between 1967 and the 1990s, with the following justifications: “closed military area,” “absentee property,” “public use,” “unregistered land as state land,” “fallow farm land,” and “green areas.” In addition, strict licensing and permit requirements are geared toward the same Israeli goals. And while Palestinians in Arab Jerusalem used to control 100 percent of the land before 1967, they now control less than 20 percent of the land due to land confiscation for the purpose of settlement projects, opening of roads and building inside Arab quarters.<sup>8</sup>

As a prelude to a comprehensive and just peace Palestinians insist that the Israelis annul all measures of annexation of Arab Jerusalem and must remove all settlements established in the 1967 occupied territories which Arab Jerusalem is an integral part. Furthermore, not a single Palestinian, whether at home or abroad in the Palestinian Diaspora, will accept a Palestinian State without Arab Jerusalem as its capital. It is very clear that much creative thinking and good will are needed to defuse the present volatile situation and to solve the thorny problem of Jerusalem.

In July 2000, President Clinton hosted a 15-day three-way summit in Camp David with the aim of reaching an Israeli-Palestinian “final status” agreement. The two thorny issues of Jerusalem and the refugees prevented the two sides from reaching an agreement and proved once more the complexities of the Palestinian-Israeli impasse and the difficulties of reconciling the deeply entrenched differences: Israeli claim of Jerusalem as its eternal and undivided capital under Israeli sovereignty and Palestinian demands for Arab (East) Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian State. Likewise, a one-time “family reunification” of some 100,000 Palestinian refugees proposed by the Israelis at Camp David totally contradicted Palestinian insistence on the “right of return” for all Palestinian refugees (U.N. Resolution 194) including to inside Israeli borders.<sup>9</sup>

The high expectations of the Camp David summit were shattered with the return of Israeli and Palestinian delegations. Thus, a highly volatile situation continued to prevail in Palestinian-Israeli relations on the eve of the outbreak of the Intifada of Al-Aqsa on 29 September 2000.

### **From the Outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada to the Present**

ON THE MORNING OF THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2000 LIKUD opposition leader Ariel Sharon and members of his Likud party made a provocative visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque under maximum security and protection of thousands of police forces. Clashes with Palestinians ensued which left many injured. After Friday prayers on September 29, Israelis used excessive force against worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque leaving five Palestinians dead and over 160 injured. The Friday bloodshed soon sparked a widespread uprising in the West Bank, Gaza and among Arabs who live in 1948 areas.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the outbreak of the Intifada was not only a direct result of Sharon's provocative visit to Al-Aqsa, but was a result of accumulating Palestinian frustrations and grievances since 1967 and the failure of the Oslo process, 1993-2000, to provide them with minimum sense of individual and collective security from Israeli military, economic and political hegemony.

By October 2000, tens of Palestinians and Israelis were killed and hundreds were injured. In Israel alone 13 Arabs were killed in an uprising which broke out in the aftermath of Al-Aqsa Mosque disturbances. By mid-October 2000, a Middle East Peace Summit was held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. At the conclusion of the summit, attended by leaders of the PNA, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, U.S., UN and the E.U., a fact-finding committee was established to examine the outbreak of the Intifada. The committee was headed by former Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate, George Mitchell and included among its members E.U.'s Javier Solana, Turkey's Suleyman Demirel, Norway's Thorbjørn Jagland and Warren B. Rudman, former member of the U.S. Senate. The report was published on 20 May 2001 and included an examination of events leading to the outbreak of the Intifada and ways to rebuild confidence and resume negotiations and commitment to existing agreements. Immediate unconditional cessation of violence and resumption of security cooperation were also highlighted. The Mitchell report was accepted by all sides of the conflict.<sup>11</sup>

The Americans put forth a "Bridging Proposal" in November 2000 to overcome the post-Camp David deadlock. These proposals included Israeli withdrawals, settlement blocks, early-warning radar systems, the refugee problem, and Palestinian and Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem. Israeli and Palestinian delegations met in January 2001 in Taba (in the last days of the Barak government) to study the American proposals. At the conclusion of the Taba negotiations, both delegations declared "they have

never been closer to reaching an agreement.”<sup>12</sup> However, the Sharon government completely ignored the Taba peace negotiations and their optimistic tone when it took over from the Barak government.

In the meantime, Palestinian-Israeli confrontations continued unabated and no opportunities for the realization of the Mitchell Report could be glimpsed. In June 2001 CIA Director George Tenet proposed a ceasefire and a security plan to end the violence, both of which were accepted by Israelis and Palestinians. The plan foresaw security cooperation between both sides, measures to enforce ceasefire, etc., followed by Israeli redeployment to positions held before 28 September 2000 as well as lifting of internal closures and border crossings.<sup>13</sup> The plan was intended as a prelude to the realization of the Mitchell Report and the eventual Palestinian-Israeli “final status” political negotiations based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and the “land for peace” formula.

October 2001 through March 2002 brought destruction to the Palestinian people, the Palestinian National Authority and its infrastructure, and Palestinian cities, towns, rural areas and refugee camps. Israeli occupation of Palestinian major cities, towns and refugee camps resulted in death and hundreds of casualties, not to mention the severe destruction that was done to the Palestinian economy and other sectors, including educational institutions. Response by young Palestinians to Israeli assassinations of key activists in the Intifada and Israeli incursions into the territories and daily humiliation of Palestinians, likewise, led to Israeli military and civilian casualties.

American reluctance to mediate in the closing months of 2001 and the early months of 2002 only accelerated the bloodshed and eventually led to the bloodbaths of March and April 2002 from the Israeli occupation of PNA areas and refugee camps and from suicide bombings. However, the reactivation of American role in mid-March 2002 saw American sponsorship of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1397 which called for the establishment of a Palestinian state. The arrival of Bush’s envoy General Zini shortly after to arrange for Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire in accordance with the George Tenet Plan of 13 June 2001, which would serve as a prelude to the realization of the Mitchell Report and the resumption of the “final status” talk, gave impetus to optimism. Likewise, the introduction of the much-heralded initiative of Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah concerning total Arab recognition of Israel and normalization of relations in case of total Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 boundaries, which was translated into the Pan-Arab resolution in

the Beirut Arab Summit on 28 March 2002, was a very positive development.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, this optimism did not last long and once again Israel began reoccupying West Bank PNA areas on March 29 following the suicide bombing at the Park Hotel in Natanya. President Arafat was put under virtual house arrest in his Ramallah headquarters while the whole governmental complex surrounding it was destroyed and completely surrounded by Israeli tanks and troops. The Israeli reoccupation of Palestinian territories was highlighted by the destruction of the Jenin Refugee Camp—dubbed a massacre by Palestinians. The tragic events in Jenin led to the formation of a United Nations fact-finding mission (UN security Council Resolution 1405) which was aborted by Israeli conditions. Other highlights of the reoccupation were the standoff between the Israeli military and Palestinians besieged in the ancient Nativity Church of Bethlehem and the bloody reoccupation of Nablus and the destruction of its ancient quarters. The United Nations Security Council reacted to Israeli reoccupation by sponsoring Resolutions 1402 and 1403 which call for Israeli withdrawal from occupied West Bank PNA areas. For its part, Israel declared its intentions to withdraw as soon as its forces' mission is completed, that is the destruction of the so-called terrorist infrastructure.

### **Conclusion**

Palestinian quest for peace with Israel is not tactical but strategic. In the above mentioned *Palestinian Declaration of Independence* (Algiers, 15 November 1988) it is clearly stated that “despite the historical injustice inflicted on the Palestinian Arab people resulting in their dispersion and depriving them of the right to self-determination, following UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (1947), which partitioned Palestine into two states, one Arab and one Jewish, yet it is this resolution that still provide those conditions of international legitimacy that ensure the right of Palestinian Arab people to sovereignty.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, since 1988 all factions of the PLO have given their full support to the two-state solution with Jerusalem being the capital of both peoples.

The majority of Palestinians, thus, do not aim to throw the Israelis into the sea. Instead, they want to live in dignity in their Palestinian state within the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1967 borders and next to their Israeli neighbors and in less than 22% of the total area of Palestine. This Palestinian position is

fully supported by Arab leaders in their Pan-Arab resolution of 28 March 2002.

Hopefully, more and more of the Israeli grassroots will become aware of Palestinian and Arab quest for healing and reconciliation since 1988.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Documents on Palestine*, Volume 1, PASSIA, Jerusalem. 1997, pp. 331-332.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> On the Charter of Hamas, see *Documents on Palestine*, Vol. 1, PASSIA, Jerusalem, 1997, pp. 314-325, and Ziad Abu Amr, "Hamas: A Historical and Political Background," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Summer 1993, pp. 5-19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-364.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Khalil Shaqqaqi, "Victims of the Death of Oslo," *Wajhat Nazar* (Points of View, Cairo, March 2002, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> See Adnan Musallam, "The Volatile Politics of Jerusalem", *The Jerusalem Times* weekly publication (East Jerusalem), Friday 27 October 2000; and Allison B. Hodgkins, *Israeli Settlement Policy in Jerusalem: Facts on The Ground*, Jerusalem, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> PASSIA Diary 2001, pp. 278-279.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>11</sup> PASSIA Diary 2002, pp. 291-292.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>14</sup> See *Al-Quds* daily (East Jerusalem), p. 22 for the full text of the Pan-Arab Resolution.

<sup>15</sup> *Documents on Palestine*, Volume 1, PASSIA, Jerusalem, 1997, pp. 331-332.

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