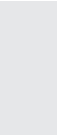


VIEWPOINTS FROM PALESTINE



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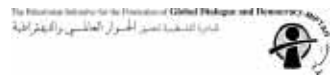
Selected MIFTAH essays from 2006-2008

DEDICATION

To our people in the Gaza Strip, who have endured unimaginable suffering and loss, we dedicate this book.

Prepared by: Joharah Baker and Nadia W. Awad

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About MIFTAH

The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, MIFTAH, seeks to promote the principles of democracy and good governance within various components of Palestinian society; it further seeks to engage local and international public opinion and official circles on the Palestinian cause. To that end, MIFTAH adopts the mechanisms of an active and in depth dialogue, the free flow of information and ideas, as well as local and international networking.

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FOREWORD

Since its inception, MIFTAH's media department has always sought to offer its readers a unique insight into the Palestinian condition through its weekly editorials and viewpoints. Covering everything from internal Palestinian politics to the Israeli occupation over Palestine, one of our main goals has been to disseminate analysis and information that is honest, accurate and professional, from the unique perspective of the Palestinians. In this sense, our purpose is to try to counter some of the lopsided reporting and analysis offered in mainstream English-language media on both the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the general image of the Palestinians.

From this standpoint, we would like to present a compilation of some of our work over the past three years. We have divided the book into two categories: internal Palestinian affairs and the Israeli occupation. The articles are chronologically ordered under one of the two aforementioned categories.

We hope this book provides a glimpse into the Palestinian situation as seen through the eyes of those who live in it. In this context, we would like to thank MIFTAH for providing a forum to voice these opinions freely and independently and to its founders and staff for their ongoing support in this endeavor.

Mostly, we would like to express our gratitude to the writers who contributed to this book. Without them, none of this would have been possible: *Rami Bathish, Joharah Baker, Nadia W. Awad, Caelum Moffatt, Yasmin Abou Amer, Nathan Karp, Clement Leibovitz, Margo Sabella.*

INTERNAL PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS



In Hamas We Trust?

April 03, 2006

Now that the Palestinians have made their democratic choice, granting the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas its overwhelming majority of votes in January's Palestinian Legislative Council elections, the time has come to see what this "movement-turned-government" really has to offer.

In the March 29 swearing-in ceremony in Gaza and Ramallah, an outsider uneducated in the intricacies of Palestinian politics would find nothing out of order. All the trappings of a government were in place - the sharply-clad ministers, the distinguished President and the national flag propped neatly in the corner behind the Quran-toting table, where each and every minister took an oath of honor before being sworn into office. Still, anyone more versed in the conflict will know that the new government, however smart it may look, has plenty on its new plate.

When Hamas decided to run in PLC elections, unlike the 1996 elections which they boycotted, it knew undeniably that it had a strong platform on the street. The relatively fledgling movement - officially established in 1988 in the early stages of the first Intifada - had gained considerable power among the people over the years. For one, it posed as the most viable alternative to the mainstream traditional leadership under Fateh, which for years has endured ebbs and tides in its popularity among the populace because of rampant corruption within

the Palestinian Authority, historic political concessions and disunity in the movement itself.

In contrast, Hamas has been unified and disciplined albeit reactionary, setting unwavering goals for itself including the liberation of all of historic Palestine. In Hamas, many people found a voice for their aspirations and their frustrations. For years, the movement has played on the leadership's - namely the PA and Fateh's - shortcomings, their failures and their mistakes, none the least being the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, which the Hamas leadership staunchly opposed.

On the street, Hamas also delivered, both in terms of the resistance and in social services. Controversial as they may be, Hamas' suicide bombings in the heart of Israeli communities throughout the Aqsa Intifada became the antithesis for the Palestinian Authority's more nonviolent leadership. Given the disillusion of the Palestinians towards the leftist factions, who for years, have failed to provide a strong and effective opposition, coupled with the inability of the leadership under Fateh to produce a final solution to the conflict, Hamas and Fateh found themselves at opposite ends of a polarized society. Eventually, the society had split in two - those with the Authority and those against, and the overwhelming majority of those against had become supporters of the strongest standing opposition, Hamas.

This dichotomy reached its peak in the PLC's election last January. As the people became increasingly disenchanted with the PA's performance, represented in Fateh, they gravitated more and more towards Hamas. Just how much people would express their dissatisfaction with the leadership, however, only became clear when the final votes were tallied. Hamas had swept the elections, winning a shocking 74 of the 132 seats in parliament, and landed themselves, surprising, even to them, at the helm of the very Authority they had so long criticized.

Now, after failing to form a coalition government with other political factions, which would have been their preferred option, Hamas is now faced with a government marred by a myriad of predicaments. The tattered and torn PA, the soaring unemployment rate, the rising poverty levels and the aggressive and ongoing Israeli measures have all been dropped in its lap, so to say. Moreover, the leadership must also now deal with the international community, which under the command of the Bush Administration, has launched all-out war on the new Palestinian government.

Years ago, the United States and later the European Union added Hamas onto their list of terrorist organizations. Now, with Hamas in power, their condemnation has taken on a particular vengeance. Funding from donor countries, which was relatively steady under President Abbas' former government, has now been all but completely halted, save for humanitarian aid. The US administration has not only pledged to hold back aid to a Hamas-led PA, but has demanded that its diplomats and contractors hold no contacts with Hamas ministers. The European Union, although less severe in their positions than the United States, has more or less followed suit.

Israel, no doubt, is also cracking the whip. The PA's tax revenues, which must pass through Israel before reaching the treasury has over the years been sporadically withheld from the Authority at various points. Now the transfer has been completely halted. If nothing else, the new government is looking down the barrel of an economic embargo much worse than anything seen so far.

To say the least, Hamas has its tasks cut out for them. They must prove that they are worthy of the responsibility entrusted to them by the people and that their votes did not solely come from the people's knee-jerk reaction to the dysfunctional leadership. The question now is: can this newly elected government achieve what the former government under Fateh could not? It is unlikely that under the new government any final solution with Israel will be reached, not only for the seemingly radical

positions Hamas has taken so far vis-à-vis the Jewish state but also because Israel it seems, is bent on carrying out its long-term plans for this land no matter who is governing the people. Evidence of this is the West Bank Apartheid Wall, the construction of which has continued regardless of the positions of the Abbas government or even international condemnation of it by the International Court of Justice in July 2004.

Whether the new government will be able to mend the internal damage done during the previous leadership, namely eradicating the widespread corruption within Authority circles remains to be seen. It is too soon to judge how the newly elected Hamas leaders will conduct themselves or whether the people's choice will backfire. It was "reform and change" that the Palestinians voted for when they went to the polls and now they are looking to Hamas to see if they are up to the task.

It is unlikely that the Palestinians believe any viable state can be established in the near future, regardless of which government they are under. But if Hamas can prove that it can govern the people in a dignified and honest manner, than this is definitely a step in the right direction.



The Initiative Should Not Be Surrendered to Israel

April 14, 2006

Dr. Isam Sartawi was a moderate member of the PLO. He was assassinated in Portugal in 1983. Yitzhak Shamir, the then-Israeli minister for foreign affairs, in an interview with Time Magazine, was asked if he was sad at the death of a moderate PLO member. He answered that he was not sad at all, quite the contrary. Israel, said Shamir, is not afraid of the extremists. No country in the world would pressure Israel into negotiating with them. He added that the dangerous people are the moderate Palestinians. There is pressure on Israel to negotiate with them, and peace is not in the interest of Israel.

I do not say that Hamas is extremist, but I do say that Hamas is perceived as being so. That in itself is enough for the Israeli expansionists to be happy at the electoral victory of Hamas. Their task is then much easier. There have often been periods of calm, when armed hostilities and suicide bombings had ceased for a while. During these times, the Israeli expansionists provoked Hamas to resume the hostilities. The provocation was often caused by the targeting of Hamas leaders for assassination. Israel is now demanding that Hamas recognize the state of Israel. Indeed, the Israeli expansionists would prefer that Hamas abstain from that. It is enough to consider the past when the PLO refused for long years to recognize the existence of Israel. When the PLO finally did recognize Israel, Israel refused to “recognize” that recognition. They tried for some time to convince the Israeli people that the recognition was not a valid one. The Israel expansionists did and still do not want the expression of a moderate policy by Palestinian popular leaders.

Today, the international community supports Israel and concentrates on the extremist aspects of Hamas' charter or in the vows of the martyrs. The recognition of Israel in its pre-1967 borders would be a severe blow to the Israeli expansionists. We saw that in the last 50 years they were afraid of the moderates, not of the “extremists”. The expansionists deal with the Palestinian “extremists” using military power. However, they feel powerless with popular Palestinian moderates. Mahmoud Abbas was a moderate, but not a popular one. The Palestinian people want a moderate who will not give up Palestinian rights, who will recognize Israel within its pre-1967 borders, and who will pursue a strategy to ensure the right of return of refugees, if not immediately, then within a foreseeable future.

The Palestinians have suffered for too long. By fulfilling the Israeli expansionists' dreams, Hamas will prolong the suffering of the Palestinian people, isolating Palestine from the international community and facilitating the building of new Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Hamas has other options, but the Palestinian people are entitled to know what course Hamas intends to take.

Recently, snippets of news indicated that Hamas might be preparing to recognize Israel, provided that the latter evacuates the territories it conquered and occupied in 1967. Israel is not ready to respond positively because it suits them at the moment to demand recognition from Hamas, all the while banking on their refusal to do. Instead, Hamas should call Israel's bluff and recognize the state within its pre-1967 boundaries, leaving the ball in Israel's court. Israel would no longer be in a position to hide behind the pretense that Hamas does not recognize its existence. Indeed, if Hamas took on this initiative, it would certainly leave Israel in a difficult position.



Democracy under Occupation?

October 04, 2006

The lethal clashes in Gaza and the ongoing demonstrations in Ramallah have left nine dead and scores injured in the worst case of infighting since Hamas came to power in January 2006. More than ever, it is time to reassess the political climate of Palestine, a quasi-state in constant transition, and steer it in a new direction. If Hamas and Fateh leaders are unable to quell the current confrontations, lethal clashes will increase, the prospect of civil war will become a frightening reality, and the illegal occupation will fade into the background as Palestinians fight themselves. The international community, in the form of the Quartet, has proven unwilling to provide any real assistance to the Palestinian cause, so Palestinians will inevitably have to diffuse this powder keg on their own. How will they do it? President Mahmoud Abbas and other Fateh officials have already called for early elections in 2007 in an attempt reshuffle the political deck and put Fateh back in control of the government. Unfortunately, early elections will bring calm, but will eventually raise tensions and the probability of increased violence. If Palestinian political leaders have learned any lessons from the January 2006 elections, they will rebuff these hasty calls for a new electorate.

The reality is that Palestinian elections should never have been held in January 2006. After Yasser Arafat's death in 2004, the Bush administration took this opportunity to promote their own political reforms by pushing for elections. After Mahmoud Abbas won the presidential election in January 2005, parliamentary elections were

slotted for July. Given the growing insurgency in Iraq and the failure of American foreign policy there, it is not surprising that the Bush administration suddenly became a huge proponent of "democratic" reforms in Palestine. A foreign policy victory in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would certainly bolster American efforts in shaping a "new Middle East," and since Bush's posse rarely ever learns from its mistakes, elections remained the order of the day. After several more months of unforeseen disagreements between various Palestinian factions, elections were finally held in January 2006.

As numerous analysts have pointed out, Hamas did not win the January 2006 elections so much as Fateh lost them. Poorly run campaigns (in which multiple Fateh candidates competed with one another in a district against a single Hamas candidate, for example) helped Hamas win a majority of the seats, and an increased frustration with party corruption turned many Fateh-loyalists in search of an alternative. When Hamas' leadership agreed to participate in the elections, they did so as part of a measured and tactful method of slowly entering mainstream Palestinian politics. Hamas leaders understood that the transition from opposition movement to political party could not be made hastily, and so they hoped to win only a few seats in parliament in the hope that they could exert some small but noticeable influence on future legislation and presidential decisions. When Fateh's poor performance in the elections propelled Hamas into the leadership position, Hamas leaders faced the exact problem they had hoped to avoid in the first place-making the 180 degree turn from resistance movement to governing body without sacrificing ideology and political aspirations.

Free elections are an integral part of any democratic system, but they do not in and of themselves bring democracy. Contrary to the opinion of US foreign policy makers, elections are a means, not an end; much more is needed to sustain democracy than the casting of ballots. Iraq is a case in point, where the United States orchestrated elections and waited for democracy to magically appear out of a vacuum. As the American government has painstakingly learned, elections and

constitutions are meaningless if there is no degree of peace and security to nourish the difficult process of reform. If freedoms are not protected, the roots of democracy remain weak and fragile, easily uprooted by the smallest disturbances.

Democracy under occupation is a humiliating paradox. The world demands reform from the Palestinians while turning a blind eye to the very institution that has crippled Palestinian growth for nearly 40 years: the Israeli occupation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In spite of international condemnation of Israeli policies in the occupied territories, and the myriad of international conventions/laws and court decisions broken repeatedly by the Israeli government, the occupation remains more lethal than ever. As soon as Hamas emerged victorious in the January 2006 elections, they faced economic strangulation from Israel and the international donor community. The unfortunate reality of ongoing military occupation is that the occupied population is rendered completely dependent upon outside forces, and the occupying power itself, for the delivery of necessary aid and services. Even though the United States had been one of the strongest proponents of the Palestinian elections, they were among the first countries to support Israel's economic boycott. This outrageous hypocrisy only goes to show the frightening insincerity of the American government's attempt to bring "democratic reforms" to the Palestinian people. Suppressing a government from exercising its democratically mandated authority does not set a positive example for future elections or political negotiations.

Of course Israel and the Quartet have justified their economic sanctions on the ground that Hamas is a terrorist organization, and is therefore barred from receiving any financial support. The fact that Hamas' leadership decided to participate in the January 2006 elections is, however, a testament to the flexibility of the movement, and their ability to compromise and adapt to changing political realities. Since the unexpected victory, Ismail Haniyyeh has expressed willingness to accept a long-term truce and even a Palestinian state with 1967 borders—something that never would have happened prior to the elections. In

the eyes of Israel and the West, however, Hamas remains a "terrorist" organization—an intransigent, hard-line organization that preaches violence and hate—undeserving of the political power granted to it by the Palestinian people.

The surprising outcome of the elections in January brought a newfound sense of optimism to many Palestinians and even some moderate Israelis. Fateh's domination of Palestinian politics had finally come to an end, the people had spoken, and perhaps a real and meaningful dialogue could begin between Palestinians and Israelis. All hopes, however, were shattered when Israel and the international community announced that they would not deal with the Hamas government. The economic siege began and it has been ongoing for over seven months. Today, Palestinians are closer to civil war than they have ever been. The blame for the situation cannot be leveled solely at Hamas, or Fateh, or the occupation, or the international community; all those involved share some culpability for the infighting.

In an attempt to regain control of the government, Fateh officials have been calling for early elections. The Palestinian leadership, from Hamas and Fateh, must remember that Israel alone benefits from Palestinian disunity. Internal problems only serve the interests of the occupation, and allow the occupying forces to continue their racist and lethal policies in the occupied Palestinian territories. Unity and dialogue between Palestinians is essential right now. The situation, however, is far too fragile for new elections. Touted as a panacea by American foreign policy makers, elections may return Fateh to power, but the political transition could very well embroil Palestine in a civil war.



Goodbye Palestine, We Are Sorry

November 23, 2006

In the mid 1990s, an evident sense of optimism had prevailed among Palestinians; the signing of the Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel was seen by both Palestinians inside the occupied territories and the expatriate community as a catalyst for positive change, and a promise of a long-awaited era of peace, stability, and prosperity. The fragile period between 1994 and 2000 witnessed a significant boost in foreign investment in the Palestinian private sector, a concerted effort aimed at public institution-building, and above all, the flow/return of educated and skilled Palestinian professionals back into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. After all, this was the beginning of a desperately-needed nation-building process, a noble cause of which all wanted to take part. Contrary to most developing countries, Palestine became a leading example for the reversal of the “brain drain” phenomenon, albeit temporarily.

Today, more than 12 years after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, and six years after the outbreak of the Intifada, not only have most Palestinian expatriates abandoned their once-idealistic aspirations to contribute their skills and expertise to the development of their impoverished homeland, but tens of thousands of Palestinians born inside the occupied territories are pursuing the sanctuary of more secure social and economic conditions abroad. An overwhelming combination of relentless Israeli military occupation and internal Palestinian instability may have finally taken its toll on Palestinian youth.

According to a recent survey conducted by Al-Najah University in the West Bank town of Nablus, one in three Palestinians are ready to emigrate out of Palestine. Ten thousand Palestinians have already left the Palestinian territories since June 2006, and 45,000 have applied for emigration. The 1,350 people surveyed by Al-Najah clearly identify the deteriorating economic situation as the main trigger for their aspiration to emigrate, while the prevailing lawlessness in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, internal political strife, and the continuing fear of potential civil war are cited as second, third, and fourth causes, respectively.

What adds more concern to an already alarming trend is the fact that the overwhelming majority of those determined to pursuing better lives outside the Palestinian territories are considered among the most enlightened, most educated, most skilled, and most talented segments within Palestinian society, leaving Palestine with an increasingly challenged and fragile population of low-income earners, a scarcity of skills, and the absence of socio-economic stability traditionally sustained by a professional middle class.

Without any visible end to Israel’s repressive occupation of the Palestinian territories, and its diverse impact on the development of Palestinian society, and in light of the continuing antagonism prevalent within the Palestinian political system, most notably the factional rivalry between Hamas and Fateh, there is little hope that this pattern of emigration would/can be reversed, if not further amplified.

Ironically, the underlying causes, in this particular case, are paradoxical: without progress on the internal Palestinian front and a decisive/just end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, more Palestinians are bound to contemplate emigration, yet equally, without the sustainability of valuable human resources and potential inside the Palestinian territories, the continuity, and even intensification, of both internal and external conflicts are guaranteed.

While those legitimately turning their backs on Palestine do so with a sense of bitterness and despair, we are left with the challenging task of addressing two vital questions: where did we go wrong, and how can we safeguard the spirit of the Palestinian cause?



The Demise of Leadership

November 30, 2006

Have we ever thought that perhaps the real crisis in the world today is a lack of genuine leaders - people in whom we can trust to not only speak out against injustices, but actually attempt to right wrongs? We forget that presidents and prime ministers are fallible, often falling into the trap of idealizing their role in our lives, often placing them on too high a pedestal so that we are sure to be disappointed with the results when they inevitably fall from grace.

So why has the person that embodies leadership become more important than the act of leadership itself, than policy-making, than diplomacy, than nation-building (in Palestine's case)? Not to trivialize it, but being a president, a prime minister or a minister is just a job, with huge responsibility; therefore, those in power must acknowledge the trust they were given in order to govern properly and should not use their positions for personal gain.

Sadly, politicians seem obviously ignorant to this reality or willingly turn a blind eye. They insist on going about their daily business forgetting that it is the voters that put them in that job in the first place and that it is to them that they are most accountable. They have attempted problem solving in secrecy, excluding the population that instated them, and silencing the voices of intelligent ordinary citizens whose experience and expertise, as well as moral conscience, should be taken into account when making decisions that inevitably affect the lives of the very people that politicians claim to serve.

The problem that ails most people in power, in Palestine, at least, is that they are condescending towards their constituencies. They claim that we do not understand the intricacies of politics, of negotiations or of diplomacy. That is a terrible mistake that Palestinian politicians have made throughout our modern history; if you ask any Palestinian what she thinks of anything, you will get a sophisticated political analysis. Decades pass and the same outspoken, fiery people are in the game, but with the passing of each year, their passion seems to have become lukewarm and their bellies seem to have expanded, symptomatic of the “fat cat” syndrome that has come to symbolize people in power everywhere across the “Third World” and indeed in the “civilized” West; corruption is not exclusive to the Middle East or Africa, but that’s a topic for another time.

A mark of a good leader is one that is able to see that time has run out on him, that it is time to pass the torch, so to speak, and bow out of the political limelight with grace and dignity. Yet, in the Middle East, leaders remain in power well after their expiration date, because they think they are indelible; that if they go, all else will fall apart and crumble into the sea. They have such high opinions of themselves that they do not see beyond the tips of their noses that they are actually a large part of the problem and in no way constitute even a minuscule part of the solution. Opposition is unacceptable and the budding of a new wave of promising leaders is quashed as soon as it dares to rear its head.

We see what’s going on; ordinary citizens are not gullible and understand that it is the privilege and power that come with leadership that people actually crave for. Leadership is not an Armani suit and tie, Italian leather shoes and suitcases. It is not bullet-proof Mercedes or an army of bodyguards. These are just the “pretty” trappings of leadership, but they do not make a leader and do not attest to his essence. And yet it is the lure of the spotlight that sometimes seems to be the motivating factor for people in influential positions and power itself become the ultimate goal rather than a means to an end. This is most clear from the

body language of politicians in television interviews, which more often than not belies the sincerity of any grand declarations that they may make in public.

Watching Hamas’ politburo chief, Khaled Mash’al, in a recent press conference in Cairo left no doubt in my mind that it is the limelight and the hunger for power and control that matters to him most, not the fate of the Palestinian people as he would have everyone believe. Unfortunately, he is not alone; the previous Palestinian ruling party “Fateh” did not act any differently and those at the top of the hierarchy still walk around with the air that the Palestinian cause and the common good are less important than their personal interests, even worse, that the Palestinian cause should serve their interests instead of the other way around. Sure many of them have made personal sacrifices, but the fact that they demand some sort of recompense now for what should be offered voluntarily has diminished respect for them even more. Hamas and Fateh each believe they, and they alone, will deliver us from the evils of the occupation, when it is clear that it is their narrow self-interests that will lead us farther and farther away from a resolution and closer to the brink of collapse.

How then does an ordinary citizen reclaim a drowning nation-building process, watching what was once a promising society sinking deeper and deeper into despair? How do we challenge those in a dysfunctional government in seeing us as more than passive voters, easily manipulated in any way suitable to their purposes? Far more difficult, how do we shake them into realizing that they are part of the problem in order to start finding a solution?

The time is ripe for Palestinian society to reject all forms of factionalism and refocus our attention on the real issues at hand; a creation of an independent Palestinian state, free from Israeli occupation. All segments of Palestinian society need to be part of the solution and should not abdicate power to people who have failed us time and again, especially

now when it is obvious that factional rivalries have clouded people's judgment to what is really important. Do we leave those holding the power to continue to disparage the integrity of the Palestinian cause or do we usurp power from under them? If we do not take steps to save ourselves from our own folly, who will? The bigger question that remains is how do we get out of this apathetic, tired mood we are in and make our leadership hear our demands?



We Have Become Our Own Worst Enemies

December 13, 2006

Nothing could be worse than the murder of a child, except perhaps the murder of three. As we, as a society, attempt to fathom the unthinkable act of violence that transpired in the early morning hours of December 11 in Gaza we are also forced to take a long hard look at ourselves and ponder on how we could possibly have drifted so far from our goal.

Three small children were on their way to first and second grade, with the youngest sitting on the lap of a bodyguard, on his way to preschool. Just minutes after pulling away from their home in the Rimal quarter of Gaza city, they were intercepted by three cars. A group of masked, armed men jumped out and opened fire, spraying the vehicle and those inside it with more than 60 bullets. After escaping, the men left a bloodbath behind - three children and one bodyguard dead, another passenger - the children's small cousin - injured, and four bystanders also on their way to school wounded and lying terrified on the Gaza street.

The attackers, widely believed to have been targeting Palestinian intelligence officer Baha' Balousha, have yet to be apprehended although the interior ministry announced on December 13 that they had made several arrests of people suspected of involvement in the crime.

Immediately, condemnations were abundant. From the presidency, the government, the factions and shocked individuals, everyone expressed their horror that such a crime could be committed among Palestinians, who have always prided themselves in drawing the line at "spilling

Palestinian blood.”

These days, it is not just Palestinian blood that is being spilt but the blood of innocents. It is irrelevant whether the target was their father, a well-known Fateh loyalist, or not. The fact remains that a mother is now bewailing the loss of her three beloved children - Osama, Ahmad and Salam - taken from her in a pointless act of violence, and our society is facing a perilous threat of unprecedented magnitude.

The perpetrators of this heinous act may or may not have been tied to a certain political faction. It would not be the first time hard-line loyalists of this or that faction took shots at each other. Just the other day, the convoy of Hamas-affiliated interior minister Said Siyam was shot at in Gaza city. Armed clashes have become the common mode of dispute lately between the rivaling Hamas and Fateh parties. It has even gotten to the point where firearms are drawn for the sake of a parking lot, a suspicious look or a heated argument.

What has our society been reduced to when parents cannot feel safe in sending their children off to school in the morning and not because they fear an Israeli tank shell? Isn't it enough that we still must face the oppression of an Israeli occupation that has proven its ruthlessness time and again? Did we not raise our voices in rage when our children were pulled lifeless from their beds after Israeli tanks shells ripped them from their sleep?

Those who opened fire on the children have been called collaborators, mercenaries and traitors by various Palestinian personalities and factions, who are all scrambling to clear their own names of the unforgivable crime. It is a heavy load to have the blood of babies on your hands and each and every Palestinian faction involved in the current state of disunity knows that if they were found responsible for the children's deaths, they would suffer dearly among the people.

Still, whether factional loyalties are behind the killings, the assassin was guilty of mistaken identity or the culprits were indeed “collaborators” intent on driving even deeper wedges between our people, what rings poignantly true is that the current state of chaos and lawlessness in our society has provided a breeding ground for such crimes.

Our leaders are good at “talking the talk,” eloquently praising our people's steadfastness and their own commitment to national unity and forwarding our noble cause. But behind the scenes, our leaders are setting a poor and potentially disastrous example for the masses. While they have not lowered themselves to actually shooting at one another, the verbal sparring and the flying insults and accusations are creating an atmosphere of hatred and contempt between a people who cannot afford such discord.

The perpetrators must be brought to justice; that is indisputable. Then, after they are settled in their prison cells for what should be the rest of their lives and the babies are nestled into their final resting place, our leaders, our factions and our people must reflect on how we allowed ourselves to reach this point.

National unity must never be merely a slogan on a wall or flowing words from an otherwise cunning politician. We must live it, breathe it and embrace it if we are ever to survive and continue on the path from which we have long gone astray. It does not matter whether the prime minister is loyal to Fateh, to Hamas or to either for that matter. What matters is that we have a strong, responsible leadership comprised of competent, qualified people who love their country and are willing to show calculated flexibility in their own stances for the benefit of Palestine and the Palestinians.

If this society does not rescue itself from this treacherous abyss, our dream will be gone, drowned in the blood of our own children.



Palestine Embodies a Divided Middle East

January 6, 2007

Events in the Middle East have seldom been more closely interdependent and interrelated during our recent political history; a raging civil war in Iraq, escalation of factional infighting in the occupied Palestinian territories, and an increasingly polarized political landscape in Lebanon share one clear common denominator: dichotomy between modernity and conservatism. At the same time, the re-emergence of alliances between Iran, Syria, and hard-line political forces within various nation states in the Arab World on the one hand, and a strategic coalition of “moderate” Arab regimes with the West on the other, underlines the prevalent order of international society in the beginning of the 21st Century, namely religious nationalism vs. political realism, respectively.

Of course, this rigid analogy is unacceptable, in varying degrees, to political forces on either side of the equation. For conservatives, theirs is essentially a nationalist struggle against western domination, which has merely taken the form of religious (Islamic) loyalties, particularly following the political vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and consequently the disintegration of socialist movements across the battle grounds of the Cold War, including the Middle East. In other words, Islamic political forces in today’s Middle East are the natural alternative to the dwindling leftist movements who had constituted a major bulk of the opposition in the 60s, 70s, and most of the 80s.

For the moderates or mainstream regimes in the Middle East, their quest is based on a pragmatic interpretation of international relations, and a conscious effort to integrate their societies (political and economic structures) into a global order that is compatible with western strategic interests in the region. This camp draws its logic and vision on the basis of the inevitable balance of power, especially within the framework of the “war on terror” doctrine dictated by the US following the September 11, 2001, attacks.

However, despite any reservations on the categorization of these two camps, the fact remains that there are two competing wisdoms among social and political forces inside the Middle East, which are shaping the future of the region in unexpected, and often turbulent, ways.

Public opinion within the Middle East bears witness to the extent of polarization that has gradually taken shape in recent years. Opinion polls inside the Palestinian territories, for example, indicate that, should early legislative elections be held as announced by President Mahmoud Abbas last month, approximately 35% of the vote would go to Hamas, despite the detrimental impact of its victory in January 2006 on the socio-economic structure of Palestinian society. Another 35%, it is estimated, would go to Fateh, the mainstream national movement often associated with the Oslo peace process, and ultimately with mutual compromises with Israel on the issue of Palestine on the basis of the two-state solution.

The polarization of Palestinian politics, especially during 2006, has gone far beyond political rivalries and into an alarming trend of head-on collisions. The now-familiar pattern of armed clashes between Hamas and Fateh loyalists is threatening to shatter the fabric of Palestinian society. Palestinian civil war is no longer a distant nightmare, but rather a clear and present danger whose outbreak is only, for now, prevented by Israel’s ongoing colonization of the West Bank and imprisonment of the Gaza Strip, as well as its military onslaught of a common Palestinian

population. To think that a nation under military occupation can turn against itself is outrageous, yet this is clearly happening.

We are, therefore, left with sufficient reason to believe, or at least to explore the idea, that internal political struggles in the Middle East are not merely based on exclusively national considerations, but rather on a combination of ideological and religious aspirations rooted in centuries of wars, invasions, turmoil, and a historical evolution that has ultimately resulted in a deeply divided neighborhood. The answers to the Middle East's troubles may, after all, have to be pursued internally.



In Remembrance, We Salute You

February 2, 2007

When Palestinian President Yasser Arafat passed away in November 2004, much was said about the charismatic but often controversial leader. Still, one thing every Palestinian was in unison over was the fact that Abu Ammar died before his national dream, the one he had dedicated his life to, had never been realized.

On January 28, the Palestinians lost another leader, founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Dr. George Habash. Habash, in turn, passed from this world before his dream of an independent Palestine could be realized and his people, dispossessed for 60 years, could return home.

Like many of Palestine's leaders, it has been a long and hard journey for Habash, fondly known to his people as "Al Hakim" a dual reference to the fact that he was educated as a physician and as a "sage" of the revolution. While Habash himself always portrayed a demeanor of composure, a seemingly quiet but proud man, the leftist movement he led was often anything but. The PFLP, founded after the 1967 War espoused a Marxist-Leninist philosophy that left hardly any wiggle room. But if anything, the PFLP's stances commanded respect. Habash, along with his followers called for the liberation of all of Palestine - from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. Never did the movement renege, holding fast to an ideology and political position many viewed as rigid and unwilling to adapt to the times.

However, it was the Front's endorsement of armed struggle and their active execution of this tactic, especially in the seventies, which won this national movement a permanent spot on the West's "black list." Just a year after its inception, PFLP guerillas hijacked their first plane, an Israeli El Al jet flying from Rome to Tel Aviv. In the several years that ensued, PFLP operatives carried out several other operations against Israeli targets, taking up their main headquarters in Damascus and broadening their platform in the Palestinian territories.

Second largest only to Fateh in the Palestine Liberation Organization, the PFLP had its "glory years" throughout the seventies and early eighties, with the advocacy of armed struggle and the liberation of all of Palestine still a popular and passionate goal among the Palestinians. Furthermore, Habash's fervent determination to fight until Palestinian refugees returned to the homes they were forced to flee in 1948 was still fresh in the minds of those dispossessed and appealing to a zealous people, eager to join the revolution and liberate their land.

However, whether it was because of the complexity of the Front's ideology, the rigidness of their stances or because other Palestinian movements and factions began to surface in the Palestinian arena, the PFLP's popular platform began to wane. While the original diehards remained loyal to the end, the Front's platform hardly expanded - unlike that of Fateh or the Islamic groups - over the years.

Still, the values and principles upon which the Front was established are nothing less than admirable. Even though the Marxist-Leninist philosophy espoused by the PFLP's founders was not widely embraced by a more religiously-inclined peasant-based society as opposed to an urban working class, this does not negate the fact that George Habash was respected across the political board.

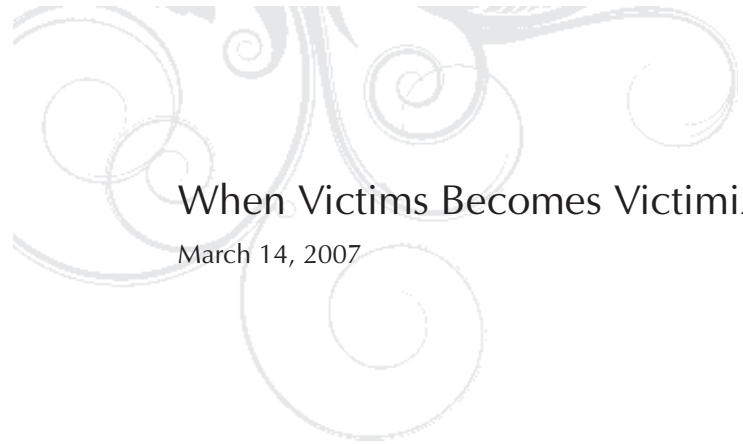
Born in Lydda in 1925, Habash became a de facto refugee in 1948 while studying in Beirut. His family all fled their homes during the fierce

fighting and subsequent exodus that would later become the Palestinians' most wide-scale tragedy: Al Nakba. Perhaps it was partly due to the plight of his own family or because of the reeling impact the catastrophe had on his people that Habash became a man with a mission and a dream that all those who were driven from their homes would return.

The rest of Habash's story remains similar to that of other great Palestinian revolutionaries. Never again to return to his hometown of Lydda, Habash led the Front through years of armed struggle, advocated socialism and social liberation and vowed that he would never compromise on what was rightfully theirs - the entire land of Palestine.

Undoubtedly, this no-nonsense stance was the source of criticism and ostracism from both the international community and some Palestinians themselves. The western world deemed the Front a radical organization that adamantly refused to recognize Israel's right to exist and continued to carry out armed operations against Israel, even if these operations were often small-scale and few and far between. Among some Palestinians, the Front lost face, particularly when peace agreements became the fashionable route of the leadership, peaking with the Oslo Accords in 1993. The PFLP vehemently rejected the agreement, deeming it a sellout and an insult to the cause. While the average Palestinian believed the Accords would ultimately bring them their freedom and liberation, getting caught up in the cosmetics of the agreement - the Palestinian police, the shiny new passports - the PFLP's rejectionist position was unwelcome and shunned by many.

While the Oslo Accords have indeed proven themselves to be a fatal mistake, another fatal mistake was that of the Palestinian left, which offered no feasible alternative. Just saying "no" was not good enough and the PFLP was seen by many as mere talking heads, with only a handful of loyal followers clutching tooth and nail to their ideals.



When Victims Becomes Victimizers

March 14, 2007

And as the political situation deteriorated, including that of the Front's own standing, so did the condition of its secretary general, in the midst of a long battle with cancer. In 2000, Habash delivered his last speech as the PFLP's secretary general before announcing his resignation. In the years that followed, Habash kept a low profile, turning over the reins of power to his second-hand man, Abu Ali Mustapha, who was later assassinated by Israel in 2001.

The PFLP suffered yet another blow when its subsequent Secretary-General Ahmad Saadat was arrested by Palestinian forces in 2002 and later abducted from his Jericho cell by Israeli troops in a military raid on the prison in 2006. Saadat was charged with masterminding the assassination of extreme right wing Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavaam Zeevi, who was shot and killed by PFLP operatives in Jerusalem in October, 2001.

The armed operations of the Front coupled with its adamancy never to compromise have often placed the PFLP under fire both internally and at the international level. Nevertheless, one of the most powerful binding forces that have kept this movement in tact has been its charismatic, intelligent and fiercely patriotic leader, a man who no one could ever accuse of not loving his country. And for that reason, it could only be with the utmost reverence that we bid him, Al Hakim, farewell.

It was a story full of horror. On an otherwise normal day in Jerusalem on March 11, a 35-year-old Palestinian man was arrested by Israeli police, beaten into unconsciousness and then declared dead. The details of the incident are horrendous. Wael Qarawi was apparently stopped by Israeli border guards and police while transporting passengers into Jerusalem. While versions of the story may vary slightly, the main plotline is the same, as is the horrific outcome.

When Israeli police realized that some of Qarawi's passengers were West Bank residents (according to Israeli "law" it is illegal for West Bankers to enter Jerusalem without a permit), they took Qarawi's Jerusalem ID and promptly told him he would have to come to the police station on east Jerusalem's Salah Eddin Street to reclaim it.

According to eyewitnesses and Qarawi's relatives who were barred from entering the station with their son, Israeli police began beating Qarawi inside, delivering blow after blow, focusing on his head. Qarawi eventually lost consciousness and was later declared dead.

While Palestinians everywhere condemned the attack and mourned Qarawi's death along with his family, his wife and his young daughter, accusing Israel of committing a "heinous crime", in other parts of the Palestinian territories, a similar mentality has begun to flourish, only this time at the hands of the Palestinians themselves.

On March 13, inter-factional violence took on a particular ugliness in the Gaza Strip, the perpetrators mirroring some of the same cruel lessons they have been taught for so long at the hands of their Israeli occupiers. Forty-one-year-old Ala' Haddad, commander of Hamas' Izzedin Al Qassam Brigades was shot and killed by masked men who intercepted his car in Gaza City before fleeing the scene. The assassination also resulted in the wounding of four other Hamas-affiliated executive committee members in the area.

Gaza City hospital sources also reported the injury of seven others in the subsequent exchanges of fire. Unsurprisingly, Hamas has accused the Fateh-run Preventative Security Apparatus for the assassination, claiming these "rogue groups" want to sabotage the ongoing efforts at forming a national unity government.

The preventative security has denied any involvement in the incident, insisting that all the parties involved are well aware that the incident was rooted in a family feud.

The Qassam Brigades were not buying, however and proceeded to send a band of executive committee members to the Khalifeh house in the Zeituna Quarter of Gaza City, who they held responsible for Haddad's death. What transpired after this was both outrageous and dangerously disturbing in its uncanny resemblance to Israeli occupation measures.

Five members of the Khalifeh family were kidnapped by executive committee forces (two other residents would also be kidnapped later in the day by unknown assailants) before the house was dynamited and demolished.

For years, ever since the inception of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Palestinians have been made to endure the worst kind of oppression. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have

been killed at the hands of their occupiers and thousands of homes have been turned to rubble in the matter of time it takes for a bulldozer to tear it down. Scores of Palestinians have been arrested by Israeli authorities over the years, their families made to live for days or weeks in the anguish of not knowing their whereabouts.

Too many Palestinians know the terrible ramifications of such measures—the gaping void that opens up by the sudden death of a loved one, the unbearable scars left behind when your life's work, the safe haven that has sheltered your family, is razed to the ground before your eyes and the agony of uncertainty as to where your children will lay their heads down to sleep that night or where your husband, father, brother or sister has been taken; if they are alive or dead.

More important than who is to blame for the recent flare of violence, those who cannot see further than the tips of their noses must at least see this: whether consciously or inadvertently, we have morphed into a crude version of our Israeli occupier. We kidnap, assassinate and demolish homes without reason and we blame our victim for bringing their woes onto themselves.

This is not an unusual pattern. Just like the Jews, and later the Israelis, who continue to portray themselves as the victims of Nazi (and other) persecution while concomitantly applying some of these same tactics to the Palestinians, we have done the same, justifying our unjustifiable actions with meaningless political mumbo-jumbo.

How unthinkable is it that the very actions which have caused so much suffering among us and which we have decried in international forums as the acts of a ruthless and unrelenting occupation have been adopted as an acceptable means of interaction between our own people? Can we not see that as bad as it is to have our home demolished by the Israelis or our sons killed at the hands of those who wish to annihilate our national cause, when these same actions are taken by people who

share the same language, national cause, customs and history, the damage is tenfold. While the scars from all the years of Israeli military oppression may run deep and need decades to heal, the wounds from such insane behavior by our own “patriots” will remain open and gashing, pierced with the sting of betrayal. In years to come, when the Israeli occupation is gone from our land and our declared enemies are no longer among us, how long will it take our people to forgive and forget that their brother, their father, their sister, was killed at the hands of a neighbor in the name of Palestine?

By adopting the actions of our occupier we automatically strip ourselves of the right to condemn these same actions to the world. We must hold up a mirror and look at who we have become. It cannot be in any of our interests to emulate those who continue to oppress us and try to beat us into annihilation. As we continue on our path to liberation and independence, we must be proud of what we have accomplished in spite of the obstacles on our way. Events such as those that transpired in Gaza yesterday will bring nothing but shame.



Embracing Our Right to Free Expression

May 2, 2007

May 3 marks World Press Freedom Day, originally created by the UN Commission of Human Rights in Resolution 1993/45 for the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. While this is a pressing issue in all parts of the world, including the so-called western democracies which boast about personal liberties, in Palestine the significance of World Press Day is manifold.

In Palestine, journalists, writers, reporters and photographers must consider two layers of obstructions to their own freedom of opinion and expression. For obvious reasons, the 40-year-old Israeli occupation must be considered the first and foremost obstacle to any personal, political or collective liberties of the Palestinians given its racist and oppressive nature.

For years, Palestinian journalists have suffered under this regime, which has not only impeded their ability to deliver quality work, but has constantly put them in danger. Palestinian journalists accredited by the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate are restricted to Palestinian Authority areas and cannot travel to Jerusalem or Israel without Israeli authorization. This means any story or “scoop” outside the jurisdictions of the PA must be reported on second-hand, either through Palestinian journalists allowed into these areas or via the foreign wire services. Ultimately, the quality of such reporting is seriously undermined, not because of any lack of competent journalists but because of geographic and political constraints.

Furthermore, Palestinian journalists have been imprisoned, shot at, wounded and killed while in the line of duty. In September 2002, Voice of Palestine journalist Issam Tilawi was shot in the back of the head and killed by an Israeli sniper in Ramallah while reporting on a demonstration there. Tilawi was the third journalist killed by Israeli fire in seven months. During that period, Italian journalist Raffaele Ciriello was also killed in Ramallah by Israeli troops and Imad Abu Zahra was killed in Jenin that July. According to the Palestine Monitor, 12 journalists were killed by Israeli fire while 295 were injured between 2000 and 2004.

According to Reporters Sans Frontiers' annual 2006 country report on Israel, "Israeli soldiers discriminated against Arab journalists and abuses against them, whether they worked for local media or pan-Arab TV stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. The Israeli army hounded, threatened, summoned and arrested them, sometimes without subsequent trial."

According to a press release issued by RSF, Palestinian journalist Awad Rajoub, a reporter for Al Jazeera Satellite Channel was arrested and imprisoned for six months by Israeli authorities before being released in May, 2006 for lack of sufficient evidence against him. He was accused of "threatening state security."

Needless to say, the ramifications of the Israeli occupation greatly hinder and oftentimes endanger the lives and work of Palestinian journalists, including being held up for hours at military checkpoints, denied entry into "closed military zones," and being subjected to arrest, beating and killing.

Still, Palestinians' freedom of opinion and expression are not only compromised by the Israeli occupation. Since the inception of the Palestinian Authority, and more precisely since incidents of anarchy and lawlessness have escalated in the Palestinian territories, the Gaza Strip in particular, Palestinian, Arab and foreign media outlets have

been firebombed and ransacked and media figures have been subjected to attacks and kidnappings by militant Palestinian groups.

According to Reporters Sans Frontiers six journalists, mostly foreigners, were abducted and subsequently released throughout 2006 in the Gaza Strip. Since then, BBC correspondent Alan Johnston was kidnapped by an unknown Palestinian group on March 12, 2007 and is yet to be released.

Last month, Palestinian Legislative Council members called off a PLC session in Gaza after 40 Palestinian journalists and others protested Johnston's abduction, demanding that the PA exert more efforts to find and release him. The protestors, who barred the legislators from entering the building, were attacked and beaten by Palestinian policemen and guards.

While the lawlessness and lack of respect for the rule of law that has reigned over the Palestinian territories in recent months no doubt plays a key role in the disrespect for journalists and the role of the media in general, it is not the only factor to be considered.

Arab and Palestinian culture and tradition are largely patriarchal and heavily rest on familial and factional affiliations. Consequently, complete freedom of expression and opinion are often perceived a threat to this structure. This is the case in many Arab regimes as well. Criticizing the ruling party, be it a monarchy, a "democracy," dictatorship or, in our case, the PA or even a particular political faction, is seen as a challenge to this traditional patriarchal structure rather than a means by which to improve ourselves through examining our shortcomings.

In tandem with our struggle for liberation from the Israeli occupation, the Palestinians also need to liberate themselves from the conservative constraints of a patriarchal and narrow-minded mentality, which often dictates that constructive criticism and diversity of opinion is tantamount to treason.

If we are to move forward with our own social liberation, we must embrace the intended purpose of occasions such as World Press Freedom Day, which are meant to better the lives of all people everywhere. This means journalists, Palestinian or otherwise, should be allowed to express their opinions freely within the normal boundaries of decency and respect, with impunity.

Even though we have limited control over Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, including journalists, we can ensure that elements of our own society do respect the universal right of freedom of expression and opinion. This will not only save those voices that dared to speak out, but it will lend to the process of mending our own warped mindset towards a healthier outlook on social plurality.



The Moral Responsibility We All Bear

November 14, 2007

When President Yasser Arafat declared an independent Palestinian state on November 15, 1988, it is fairly safe to say that the situation today is not what he envisioned. The bloodletting that took place in Gaza City on November 12 during which seven Palestinians were killed by fellow Palestinians is a disgrace by all standards - a disgrace that is so potentially self-destructive that, if it continues, will obliterate everything the Palestinians, Arafat and otherwise, have ever fought for.

On Monday, November 12, thousands of Fateh supporters took to the streets of Gaza City on the third anniversary of President Arafat's death. The anniversary, one day before, is a day no Palestinian can overlook, whether one agreed with Arafat's policies or not. The "father of the Palestinian revolution", Yasser Arafat was, and apparently still is, a force to be reckoned with. This was clear from the masses who flocked to the newly inaugurated mausoleum on November 11 at the Ramallah presidential headquarters and the Fateh supporters who demonstrated and rallied in his name.

However, Monday's rally took a tragic turn when members of the Executive Force (EF), a Hamas-affiliated security force, opened fire at the rally in central Gaza. The EF, which is the armed force under the deposed interior ministry, later claimed they were responding to hostile Fateh demonstrators who pelted them with rocks and fired at them with silenced weapons. According to Hamas officials, Fateh did not

hold up their end of the bargain in terms of maintaining law and order. Rather, they chanted incendiary and inflammatory slogans against Hamas and exhibited aggressive behavior towards the security forces.

Whether or not these are allegations based on fact, nothing can justify the killing of seven people, including a 12-year-old child and the injury of over 100 more. The very fact that the Executive Force gave itself the right to take the lives of other Palestinians out in the streets of Gaza to commemorate the most long-lasting Palestinian leader yet is unacceptable and certainly unjustifiable.

Today, the Gaza Strip is in mourning as families continue to bury their dead. The Palestinians are a people who know the face of death and tragedy all too well, having been uprooted from their homes and cast out of their own country as refugees in 1948 and 1967, while those who remained have lived under an extremely oppressive military occupation ever since. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian mothers and fathers have buried their sons and daughters, killed by Israeli forces because any expression of resistance against their occupation represents a threat to the foundations on which Israel was created.

Still, the events that transpired two days ago in Gaza represent a trend equally if not more sinister than an enemy occupation. The deaths and injuries inflicted on those protesters only further indicate to the depths of the schism that has torn Palestinian society apart.

Again, the irony cannot be lost here. Tomorrow, November 15, marks the 19th anniversary of Yasser Arafat's speech in Algiers to the Palestinian National Council when he declared a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem. The declaration came less than a year after the first Intifada had erupted in the Palestinian territories and Palestinians everywhere held high hopes for a final breakthrough. Arafat famously coined the expression of [realizing a Palestinian state] being in "the last quarter hour" and that it was just "a stone's throw away."

To the Palestinians, those false hopes have long diminished. Regardless of whether many Palestinians rallied around Arafat in his final days or held him responsible for the train wreck called the Oslo Accords, no one can deny that the mayhem and devastation today was not part of this leader's plan.

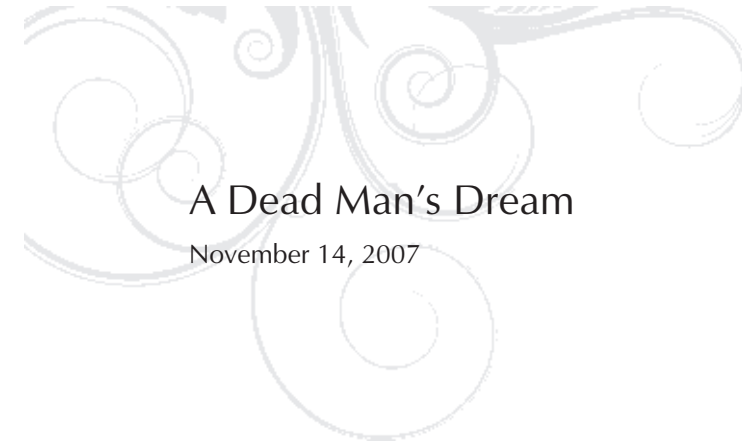
The question now, is how to stop the madness and somehow wipe away all the bad blood that has accumulated between Hamas and Fateh. For one, this situation where Gaza is, for all practical purposes, isolated from the West Bank, must end because the longer the separation lasts, the more the animosity will fester. Hamas' deposed government is already showing signs of mania, living in its own hallucinatory world of absolute control where anything and everything is justified if their purpose is to keep the reins of power in their hands.

Meanwhile, the West Bank government under President Abbas is living in its own fantasy world. Abbas and company cannot believe for a second that they will enjoy any ounce of success if Gaza continues to be a breeding ground for incitement and internal strife, which by the way is spilling over into the West Bank with each passing day. Before this government puts all its eggs in one basket (in Annapolis), it needs to put its own damaged house in order, no matter what it takes. That means, if deposed Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh calls for dialogue "among brothers", even if his controversial colleague Mahmoud Zahhar vows to "take over the West Bank", the government should not immediately brush aside the offer.

Nevertheless, the value of human life must and always has come first, which means Hamas has a moral responsibility to reassess its actions in the Gaza Strip. The lives that were taken cannot be restored, but measures must be taken that will ensure this sort of tragedy is not repeated. If Hamas insists it is capable of ruling Gaza with a strong but fair hand, it must prove itself. Opening fire into the rally - regardless of how provoking they may have been - does not display sound leadership,

but rather, a ruthless tyranny.

The people also have a responsibility to let their voices be heard. Once we start turning against each other, branding each other with names we previously reserved for our most bitter enemy, the path to national destruction will be well on its way. If our leaders are too blinded by their own agendas and greedy aspirations, we must not. The leaders of our revolution - Yasser Arafat, Abu Ali Mustapha, Khalil Al Wazir among dozens others- would never have condoned this battle between brothers. The real threat has always been before us. Israel has not ended its occupation, has not torn down the wall or dismantled settlements. Our men and women continue to be arrested, assassinated and pursued. One look at an aerial map of the West Bank, speckled with Jewish settlements and sliced through by a nine-meter wall should be proof enough that our work is far from over and that any digressions along the way will cost us dearly.



A Dead Man's Dream

November 14, 2007

Whilst celebrating the three year anniversary of Abu Ammar's [Yasser Arafat] death, the Palestinians have ensured that his day of remembrance will now stand in tandem with another event in the annals of Palestinian history. His message of "national unity" will now be constantly overshadowed with the anniversary of the seven deaths which occurred at his memorial rally in Gaza - quite possibly, the most apparent example of "national disunity" in the history of Palestine.

November 11, 2004 marks the date when Abu Ammar died in Paris. The cause of death is still a highly contentious issue but what is not doubted is the influence he had on the Palestinians he left behind. One must just hark back to the crowds of supporters and speeches of the past weekend which more than aptly attest to his overwhelming backing amongst his people.

What started off as peaceful worship in memory of a greatly revered national icon at the Muqata'a in Ramallah on Saturday, ended on Monday at Al-Katiba Square in Gaza where reverence to the "spiritual father of Fateh" called to mind and reverberated the current political situation which caused factional division, indifference and violence to ensue.

The way in which each celebration differed from the other with regard to purpose, message and level of emotion evidently reflected the political

mood at each respective event. The antithesis was astonishing. Although Abu Ammar would have been greatly moved by the support of his legacy both in Ramallah and Gaza City, he would have been undeniably terrified, shocked and disgusted with the events that followed the rally in Gaza where Palestinian turned on Palestinian.

Saturday's affair was extremely formal and particularly stale. President Mahmoud Abbas welcomed esteemed Palestinian guests to unveil the completion of Arafat's \$1.75 million mausoleum in the presidential compound where Arafat had spent so much of his time under siege and is now where he rests. As Abbas placed a Palestinian flag on Abu Ammar's grave, guests could cast their eyes on the 11 x 11 meter [which signifies the date of his death] mausoleum made of glass and beige Jerusalem stone. During the one minute silence in honor of Abu Ammar, guests could observe the mosque built and museum due to be opened next year. Finally, when Abbas spoke of fulfilling his predecessors dream "to be reburied in Jerusalem, which he loved ... Jerusalem, which he tried to make, and which all our people are trying to make, the capital of the Palestinian state", one could examine the mosque's minaret which houses a green light which acts as a beacon, shining forth to Jerusalem.

The opening of the compound to the public on Sunday was a more exciting and joyous occasion. Palestinians from all over the West Bank, children on school trips and local families from Ramallah flooded onto the streets to celebrate Abu Ammar. From the Muqata'a all the way to the Manara in the centre of town there was not a spot of road or pavement to be seen. Cars were covered with Palestinian flags, kuffiyehs and yellow Fateh flags with their idol on them, blurring out Fateh anthems and beeping their horns. Palestinians also draped themselves in flags and kuffiyehs, on their waist, over their shoulders, round their neck or even all three. They paraded in the streets shouting "Abu Ammar", waving proudly the Palestinian and Fateh flags. The atmosphere was hectic but friendly with everyone there to pay their respects to their hero.

Walking adjacent to the Muqata'a toward the entrance, one could see hundreds of posters of Arafat alongside the Dome of the Rock, occasionally accompanied also by his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, desperate to affiliate himself with Abu Ammar at a time when his competence is in question. It was also necessary to weave through the numerous bodies, which contained a huge percentage of young teenagers, most of whom would have been alive during the Al-Aqsa Intifada but surely too young to recollect Abu Ammar, let alone his policies, message or mode of governing. In all probability, these youths were sent by their parents to respect the icon of their generation - an emblem of everlasting hope, a beacon of trust and a dedicated individual who fought tirelessly for Palestinian rights and stood as "a reflection of the Palestinian people", as the head of the PLO negotiating department, Saeb Erekat commented.

In this way, the younger Palestinian generation was honoring a mysterious spirit more akin to the dominion of myth or legend - a semi deified leader. The older generations obviously recognize the importance of a strong figurehead on a developing psyche and therefore trust that Abu Ammar will stand in immortality as a role model of inspiration and encourage their children to persevere with the cause.

The final celebration in memory of Abu Ammar was due to be at Al-Katiba Square in Gaza City. Although Fateh's political nemesis Hamas had seized the Gaza Strip in June, any movement to prevent the rally from happening would have been political suicide. However, it was thought that Hamas would either quell any substantive rally or one would just not materialize with morale low as a result of the area being in such economic and humanitarian disarray.

It was therefore a surprise when news agencies estimated that there were 250,000 people present for the Abu Ammar memorial in Al-Katiba Square and a further 200,000 who were unable to reach the rally because of Hamas checkpoints at the north and south of Gaza City.

With Hamas' 365km² stronghold populated at 1.5 million, a reported third of the population had attended or attempted to attend the tribute to Fateh's co-founder.

There had been Hamas undertones at the other celebrations but this vast show of solidarity in Gaza boosted the speakers' credibility and gave them the opportunity to use Abu Ammar's memory as a propaganda tool in an intense vocal attack on Hamas. This was specifically relevant as the night before 10,000 Fateh supporters had clashed with Hamas police following their remembrance march in Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza. Therefore on Monday, Fateh leader, Ahmad Hillis addressed the crowd saying, "You affirm today that the Gaza Strip will remain Fateh's stronghold and will not be torched by the mutineers" Fateh Chief in Gaza Zakaria al-Agha also stated, "We say to Hamas and these armed militias, stop your crimes". The crowd also started shouting "Shiites" in reference to Hamas' reliance on Iran and its ally Syria for support.

Whether the blame lies with Hamas for their inexperience in administering and controlling rallies or with Fateh for firing first, matters not. What resulted was Hamas using live rounds to fire at the crowd which proved deadly for seven people, injuring over fifty. The ramifications? Former Fateh enforcer in Gaza, Mohammed Dahlan, promising that "victory over those killers will be very soon" and swore not to forget "the martyrs' blood"

One of the reasons Hamas had allowed the rally to go ahead was expressed by their spokesman Fawzi Barhoum who admitted that the Islamic Resistance Movement may not have always seen eye to eye with the Palestinian Authority president but nonetheless they still honored and respected him because "he refused to give up the rights of our people in this holy land".

This feeling of mutual appreciation is clear from Abu Ammar's words also. "Even if it's a military wing, one should not forget that the movement took an active part in the Intifada". In a speech on Palestine TV in 1997, Abu Ammar talked about the importance of unity amongst Palestinians.

"...great battles lie before us, and it will be now more difficult than in the past...let us each commit one to another and let us commit ourselves before Allah and the Palestinian people that we shall lead the coming battle as we have led previous battles. An oath is an oath and a promise is a promise. The whole world stands on us, while they are alone. They are afraid, but we are not. We cling to the oath and the promise. The Palestinian people are faithful to its oath, the one which we swore upon the first day when the initial shot was fired and the first of our martyrs fell. I must say these things so that you will know where, how, and in which direction our movement is heading. We are marching together to Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem."

Abu Ammar would be the first to oppose that his name be used in vain to incite frenzy and fighting between Palestinians. Internationally, Abu Ammar may be perceived as an endorser of terrorism, who blindly refused to accept the peace agreement offered by Ehud Barak at Camp David in 2000. In addition some may remember Abu Ammar siding with Saddam Hussein when the latter invaded Kuwait in 1991 and famously confirmed in a letter in 1993 "we will remain together until we reach Jerusalem, with God's help". Nevertheless, in Palestine, as his support suggests, he is the symbol of Palestinian unity against the common evil that plagues all Palestinians. What happened in Gaza was not a celebration of his message.

Unfortunately, the anniversary of his death and with it, his message of unity, will be documented in the archives as an occasion where Palestinians died fighting, not for independence against the occupation, but each other.

It is difficult to pass judgment on a man like Abu Ammar when modern history presents us with no other men who operated under such circumstances, namely illegal occupation and international inaction. It is therefore fitting to turn to the closest available comparison - South Africa.

Nelson Mandela, the pioneer of South Africa's abolishment of apartheid stated that "Yasser Arafat was one of the outstanding freedom fighters of this generation, one who gave his entire life to the cause of the Palestinian people. We honor his memory today."

Did the Palestinians really honor his memory in Gaza?

Will Donor Dollars Ensure a Future State?

December 18, 2007

On December 17, the highly anticipated day-long donor's conference commenced in Paris. The conference, brainchild of Middle East envoy Tony Blair and attended by 70 countries and 20 organizations, aimed at providing a monetary basis to reform and develop the dire economic situation in Palestine as well as to set the conditions for the creation of a secure, stable and sustainable Palestinian state.

In the weeks preceding the conference, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas declared that Palestine required \$5.6 billion until 2010 to remedy its current economic crisis and to lay the foundations for its future survival. The International Monetary Fund [IMF] concurred with this estimation and before the conference had even convened, Abbas had already been pledged substantial sums of money from the big donors. The bar was set by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who penciled in a \$555 million donation to Abbas just for 2008 [\$150m for the West Bank government; \$115m for humanitarian assistance and \$290m for development projects]. Although a grand gesture which may demonstrate the role the US plans to take in rejuvenating Palestine, Israel receives this sum of money from the US every two months; none of the funds above are to be allocated to Gaza; in addition, \$400 million of it must still be ratified by Congress.

The donations pledged [not guaranteed] in Paris far exceeded the expectations of President Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

Palestine, over the next three years, will ostensibly receive approximately \$7.4 billion from donor countries. In addition to the funds from the US for 2008, the European Union, according to External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, has signed up to \$650 million for next year [similar levels expected in the years following]. Britain has agreed, in theory, to \$500 million until 2010; Norway \$420 million; Spain \$360 million; France and Sweden \$300 million and Germany \$290 million. The Arab League has also promised \$1.3 billion over the next three years.

Tony Blair stated that “what we pledge today will be indispensable to the creation of that [Palestinian] state”, while French President Nicholas Sarkozy declared “what we must do now is work together before the end of 2008 for the creation of an independent, democratic, viable Palestinian state”.

While both statements are true, although the donations will be “indispensable”, the true vision of the funds and the commitments involved must not be overlooked.

Donating the money is not even half the battle. The international community must not just “work together” before the end of 2008 for a Palestinian state as Sarkozy said but must ensure they work together indefinitely until the goal is attained and then even for longer after that. The implementation and allocation of these funds through the right avenues is the real test, where hard work and undeterred commitment is paramount.

At Paris, the international community should not simply sign their check books and pass them on to Abbas, sporting their selfless smiles of generosity, only to return home feeling as if they have performed a great deed and are therefore obligated no further. They have collectively, in effect, signed a life-long contract. Like any investment, the investor should proceed about executing their proposal as vigorously, devotedly

and precisely as possible to obtain maximum profit - the profit in this case being an independent and sustainable Palestinian state.

As the World Bank report on “Investing in Palestinian Economic Reform and Development” has warned, the ramifications of international abandonment could prove even more damaging for an already deeply beleaguered economic situation in Palestine.

The World Bank has evaluated the state of Palestine’s economic health and concluded that it is too fragile a system to survive on its own.

Since the breakout of the Aqsa Intifada and the subsequent election of Hamas in 2006, which ceased all foreign donations to Palestine, the aspiring state has become almost completely dependent on aid with a lack of investment in public infrastructure and private enterprises. In 2006, Palestine’s per capita GDP was \$1,130, a 40% decrease from the same statistic prior to the Aqsa Intifada. Unemployment in Gaza stands at 33% whereas in the West Bank it is 19%.

This state of affairs has not been entirely self-inflicted but has been exacerbated greatly by Israeli occupation. Palestine is entrenched and utterly at the mercy of its occupier. There are 541 checkpoints, 149 settlements and 100 settlement outposts with a population of 450,000; 38% of the West Bank is closed off to Palestinians and 95% of Palestine’s trade is with Israel.

The World Bank recommends a quid pro quo approach and has pinpointed prerequisites for success. “Embedded within the PRDP [Palestinian Reform and Development Plan] are a set of assumptions on the growth of the economy, the revival of the private sector income and employment, and the PA’s ability to endure the current crisis by meeting its financial needs. The realism of these assumptions is directly related to progress on the movement and access agenda, and equally importantly, on the commitment of donors to meet the financing gap over the three-year horizon of the PRDP”.

Prime Minister Fayyad has compared the scenario with a three-legged table. Even with transparency, reform and development standing strong, they will invariably fall unless Israel provides the final supporting feature. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who was not a donor but present in Paris stated that Israel would “welcome the Palestinian reform plan as a serious effort to build the basis for a responsible Palestinian state that the Palestinian people so deserve and that peace so needs”. The question is whether the foreign minister’s rhetoric will be supported by advancements made on the ground. Essentially the success of the PRDP is in the hands of Israel and the willingness of the international community to apply pressure on it.

Then there is Gaza, which comprises 40% of the Palestinian population. Currently, the coastal strip is under the control of Hamas and subsequently closed off to the outside world, suffering from incursions as well as sanctions on food, fuel and movement applied brutally without adherence to international law by an Israeli government that wishes to cripple them into submission. 95% of Gaza’s industrial operations have been suspended, turning Gaza into an area driven only by public sector salaries and humanitarian assistance.

The fear is that the projected allocation of donor funds in this three-year framework does not ensure a resolution in Gaza and has therefore been distributed accordingly. Prime Minister Fayyad stipulated that 70% of funds would go towards balancing the budget deficit, aiming to lower it from 28% of GDP to 17%. A percentage of the 70% would also be for ensuring the wage bill, fixing net lending and improving social welfare. The 30% remaining would be used as capacity building for future development. While donor countries have included Gaza into this financial equation, an actual amount has not been set nor has a mechanism been chosen by which to allocate it. In addition, with the current Israeli blockade imposed on the Strip as a result of Hamas’ seizure, the donors have implied that immediate aid will be highly limited. Basically, this means the ball is back in Hamas’ court - relinquish

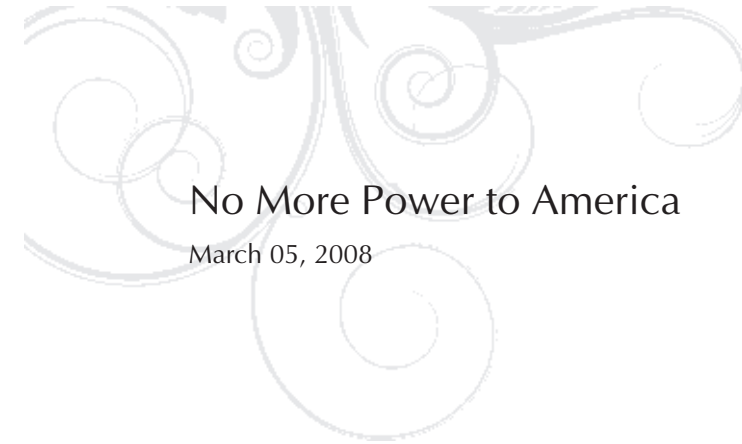
Gaza if any donor assistance is to reach its people.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon seems to have been the only member in Paris to have voiced concern by highlighting that “with few exceptions, all manner of legitimate trade with Gaza has come to a standstill, with devastating effects on the economy and on family livelihoods.” The Western donors have adopted a policy of extending a message to Hamas that the only thing standing in the way of them and equal treatment in this recovery process is their surrendering of Gaza. Hamas shows no sign of hesitation or regret, instead is comfortable in the assertion that they have the potential to hinder the smooth running of this Palestinian recuperation. The response from Gaza has been firm. Although they welcome any aid donation to the Palestinian people, Hamas spokesperson Sami Abu Zuhri denounced the Paris Conference, quoting their omission as a “declaration of war”. Meanwhile, the 1.4 million people in Gaza continue to be the sacrificial pawns in this deadlock.

There will be nothing for Hamas to disrupt if Israel doesn’t alleviate restrictions on movement. This point cannot be stressed enough. As the World Bank has advised, if the international community stays true to its pledges but fails in persuading Israel to lift movement and access restrictions, real growth will continue to be negative. However, if aid targets are not met, negative growth and poverty levels will increase dramatically. Palestinian fiscal and security reforms will not reverse economic decline on their own - the international community must act as the equalizer, must be prepared to fill in the gaps and must apply the pressure on Israel to comply. The private sector is especially critical as without it, “The PA will not be able to translate its reforms in the revenue collection mechanisms into additional funds, neither will it be able to cut spending without increasing poverty.”

Since 1993, the international community has provided the PA with nearly \$10 billion in aid. Not all of this money can be accounted for

with much of it caught up in bureaucracy and the corruption of Fateh officials because there was no coherent plan for deployment or execution. Some commentators prior to the conference emphasized “donor fatigue” in respect to Palestine. Why then was the international community so eager to pledge so much money? The answer lies in the man at the helm - Salam Fayyad. The prime minister and former IMF and World Bank employee is not only an excellent economist but a remarkably trusted individual amongst the international donors. Salam Fayyad has meticulously established a method of directing funds to the right areas, auditing their use and monitoring their implementation. However, to prevent these funds entering a “leaking bucket”, as Oxfam suggests, the international community must commit fully to the project. They must supply the funds they have promised; be prepared to go the distance required for success and most crucially, they must demand that Israel alleviates restrictions on movement and access in order to create an environment on the ground that enables these measures to be executed efficiently and effectively. Otherwise, this is yet another colossal waste of money.



No More Power to America

March 05, 2008

The article recently published in *Vanity Fair* entitled “The Gaza Bombshell” has gotten tongues wagging among the Palestinians in particular. The article, which basically accuses the United States of instigating a civil war in Gaza last June, more or less confirms what we have all suspected long ago. The Americans are up to no good.

The Palestinians have always been extremely critical of US policy in Palestine, for very good reason. They are even more critical of those Palestinians who cater to American desires in the region, considered by some as tantamount to treason.

The most recent bloodshed in the Gaza Strip, which claimed almost 120 Palestinian lives in the course of less than a week, is evidence that all is not well, neither in terms of the international community’s attitude towards the Palestinians nor between the Palestinians amongst themselves. The ordinary citizens, men, women, children and babies are, as always, those caught in the middle and the ones who pay the highest price.

The Israeli incursion, which began on February 27 and which tore up northern Gaza was the most brutal and indiscriminate Israeli military operation since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in June 2006. Israel claimed it was forced to enter Gaza in a bid to halt the rockets that have continued to rain down on Israeli territory, recently killing one Israeli man in Sderot. While it is true that Palestinian armed groups

have continued to fire rockets into Israel, even reaching as far as Asqalan, in politics there is always more than meets the eye.

For one, the rockets have not stopped. The day after Israel withdrew from northern Gaza on March 3, several rockets were fired into Israel in a show of what Hamas claimed was a "victory." Israel understands perfectly that in the marshland of Gaza where it has no standing other than its self-retained right to invade and blockade, it is virtually impossible to secure a complete halt to armed activity.

The Israelis are not stupid. But neither are the Americans, who insist that peace is their most coveted desire in the Middle East. Why then have these intentions resulted in one of the bloodiest chapters of Palestinian history? Because the hands thrust in the middle of this conflict are hardly clean.

According to the *Vanity Fair* article, the Americans orchestrated the "civil war" last June by pulling the puppet strings of Mohammed Dahlan, longtime Fateh veteran and a highly controversial figure in Fateh-Hamas relations. The grand plan was to basically ignite clashes between Hamas, not yet in control of the Strip, and Fateh in a bid to deliver one final blow to the Islamic movement and sweep it off the political map of Palestine for a good long time.

As we all know, things did not go exactly as planned. On the contrary, the whole manipulation backfired with Hamas ousting Fateh forces and taking control of the entire Strip. Since then, the United States has had one goal in their sights - getting Hamas out of the way. Perhaps for the same reasons, perhaps for others, President Mahmoud Abbas and his West Bank government are striving for the same goal.

Consequently, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is back in the region yet again, regurgitating the same old policy of negotiations being the only way to peace, briefly referring to the innocents slain in Gaza

as saying the United States is "concerned" over the loss of lives. Naturally, Rice doled out a hefty portion of accusations against Hamas, putting blame for the most recent bloodbath squarely on them. Never mind that the balance of military power is not even comparable, with Israel being the strongest army in the region and one that does not shy away from using its brute force against a mostly unarmed population. Yes, rockets are shot into Israel, a method one could argue may be completely counterproductive to the Palestinian cause at this point given the dynamics at play. However, these rockets, which have barely killed a handful of Israelis over the six years they have been in active operation, are nowhere comparable to Israel's mighty military machine.

So, it is not really about the rockets, is it? The United States, the self-proclaimed defender of freedom and democracy in the world, has brought nothing but havoc, destruction and internal strife not only to the Palestinians but to the region as a whole. One only has to look to Iraq, once a beacon of civilization and natural wealth, to see what American hands are capable of.

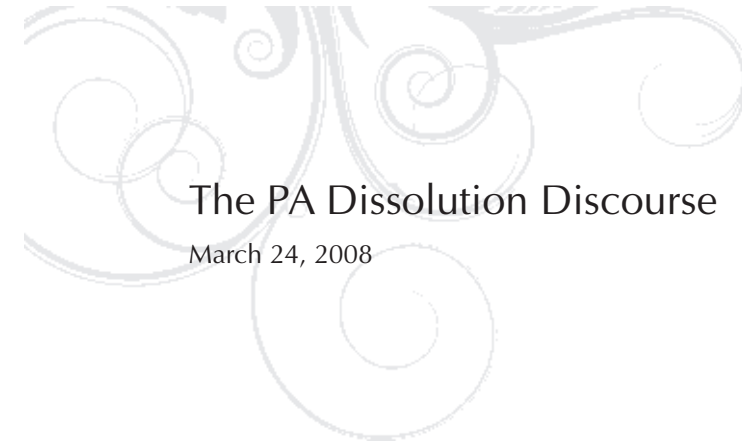
While it may be easy to cast blame for our current misery on the United States, especially after such an accusatory article as the one in *Vanity Fair*, we Palestinians must take the lion's share of responsibility for our fall from grace. Yes, the United States may have fanned the flames of factional dissent, but we fell for the bait head first. The United States' scheme would have never left the walls of the White House if it did not have Palestinian wings to aid its flight. And Hamas, so dead set against sharing power with their brethren, will stop at nothing to ward off any change in Gaza's status quo, even if that means the Strip's 1.5 million people must suffer under a crippling blockade and endure invasion after invasion and funeral after funeral.

The United States is clear in its unsaid policy in the Middle East, which is to install governments that suit its own interests, governments without the word "resistance" in their lexicons. The United States may say it

wants peace in the region - who is so twisted to declare they are anti-peace? But it is peace on their terms, a peace conditional on Israel's acceptance and one where Hamas is no longer in the equation.

It is difficult to envision a situation where the United States would no longer intervene in this conflict given its close alliance with Israel and its superior standing globally. However, it is not so difficult to fathom a Palestinian-Palestinian alliance where the United States is not given the opportunity to manipulate the situation or use any of us as pawns in their regional game of dominance.

The recent events in Gaza have proven to us all that in the current situation no one can claim any kind of victory, regardless of what certain delusional characters in Gaza may say. A united front that exudes a unified strategy towards our conflict with Israel will strengthen us internally and externally and strip the United States of at least some of its power over our own fate. With the way things stand, no one could possibly be proud.



The PA Dissolution Discourse

March 24, 2008

Emotions are running high and tempers are flaring amongst Palestinians—a populace becoming increasingly beset by exhaustion and frustration. The end of March marks four months since the Annapolis Summit took place and four months since President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, under the eyes of the international community, agreed to meet regularly, implement stage one of the roadmap and strive towards a peace agreement by January 2009.

Has any progress been made? It seems as if Palestinians gave up on the definition of “progress” and all its implications long before Annapolis. Some analysts and academics trace the problems of the present back to the Oslo Accords of 1993 and their subsequent failure. Why is the Palestinian Authority, an interim governing body established under the Oslo Accords that was to be bolstered by a state after five years, still representing the Palestinian people in the occupied territories? Is it truly representative? Does the term “PA” merely mask the reality that Israel, as the occupying power, essentially controls everything? Although possessing the “Authority” by name, it certainly isn't always treated or respected as one.

This confusion is accentuated by the lack of significant advances towards peace since the inception of the PA 15 years ago. The rapidly disintegrating humanitarian situation, movement and access restrictions, escalations in violence, internal Palestinian divisions and the ubiquitous

intrusiveness of the Israeli occupation have never been more visible or damaging. Simply speaking, never have the conditions on the ground placed the possibility of a two-state solution so near the realms of impossibility.

The actions by Israel following the Annapolis Summit are just a continuation of their general modus operandi towards the occupied Palestinian territories which has gradually been applied and implemented for years. Israel is consistently undermining the PA and, in turn, the peace process as a whole.

Under the stipulations of the roadmap, which was supposedly reactivated at Annapolis, Israel is obliged to cease settlement expansion. However, in the last four months Israel has expropriated thousands of dunums of Palestinian land and granted permission for over 1,500 housing units in the settlements of Pisgat Zeev, Givat Zeev and Har Homa, some 7,000 in Ein Yayul near Walaja and a proposed 3,500 between east Jerusalem and the Ma'aleh Adumim settlement. Although Israel claims that these settlements [illegal under international law] lie in the district of Jerusalem and therefore should not be included in their roadmap commitments, east Jerusalem is where Palestinians want to establish their capital. Furthermore, Israel persists on approving construction plans on settlement blocs in the West Bank and this does not include the outposts erected at the whim of Israeli settlers.

Meanwhile, the PA is charged by the roadmap with dismantling "terrorist" infrastructure in the West Bank. They have responded by establishing a security force, which is not able to function independently as Israeli forces are still active in the area. This presence is dangerous as it may convey the message to the locals that Israeli raids are deployed in conjunction with the PA. Just last week, Israeli soldiers drove into Bethlehem killing four Palestinian activists. One of the dead was Islamic Jihad commander, Muhammed Shehadeh, whom the Israelis have

wanted for eight years. As Palestinians questioned the advantages of such an operation amidst Egypt's discussions with Hamas over a ceasefire with Israel, Muhammed Shehadeh's son declared that Israel was simply making a "mockery of the PA", proving them to be powerless and incapable of maintaining control, therefore pushing the people into the arms of groups like Hamas and Hizbollah.

In the last few weeks the PA has been even further undermined. After a five day Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip, which killed approximately 130 Palestinians, President Abbas announced he would suspend peace talks with Israel in solidarity with the coastal strip. Apparently, under international pressure, namely from US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the presidency was forced to soften this statement a day later with Abbas saying that peace talks must continue. In addition, a further insult to the PA is the ruling by the Israeli foreign ministry endorsing calls by Israelis to sue the PA and seek compensation for damages caused by Palestinian suicide bombings. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Arye Mekeel stated that the motion could proceed because the PA is not protected by the immunity extended to states when prosecuted in the courts of another country. Why? Israel does not recognize the Palestinian Authority as governing state body.

According to former PA Minister of Planning Ghassan Khatib, Palestinians are in "limbo", "neither under a clear-cut situation of occupation against which they could be expected to resist and fight, nor is their interim authority leading them to an end of occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state". The Palestinians are in the midst of an uphill struggle for sovereignty, headed by a body unable to deliver or ensure their future because of the internal and external obstacles that surround them.

Under such circumstances, it was not surprising to hear rumors concerning President Abbas' termination of the peace process, as reported by Ma'an News agency. Although the Palestinian presidency has now

deemed this as speculation, there are those who have gone further, such as Dr. Ali Jarbawi, who advocate the PA being dismantled completely. This is not a new idea but one that has been pushed by academics and analysts since Yasser Arafat was held under siege by Israel in 2002, confined to the Muqata'a [the Presidential compound] during Al Aqsa Intifada. This event exposed the true nature of the Israeli/PA relationship in its purest form - the occupier laying siege to their occupied "peace partner".

If the two-state solution is ostensibly suffering by preserving the PA, what are the alternatives? Would it not be perceived as admitting defeat? Faced with these questions, advocates of dissolution believe that for a defeat to be incurred there has to be a battle preceding it and as Israel presides over everything, the belief that such a conflict exists is a naive misconception. Under this paradigm, the PA would officially present the "keys" of the West Bank to Israel and the UN, absolving them of responsibility and accepting their occupied status.

Israel would be forced to address their responsibilities as an occupying power under the international legal guidelines set by the Geneva Conventions without having the luxury of exploiting the PA as an "administrative contractor or security sub-agent" [a phrase used by this organization in a 2004 paper on this topic]. Israel could of course reject this claim and refuse to recognize its obligations in which case the matter would be passed over to the UN. The parties involved could not ignore or neglect this statement of purpose, as it would risk attracting greater condemnation across the Arab world.

The hope is that by approving a motion to dissolve the PA, the Palestinians may indirectly adopt the most effective method of opposing the Israeli occupation. By openly submitting themselves to the will of Israel and begrudgingly accepting occupation, Israel will be faced with the possibility of a one state solution [the ramifications of which, even Prime Minister Olmert has expressed are potentially dire for the state of Israel].

With Israel unable to prevent comparisons with apartheid South Africa on the international scene, the one state solution would compel Israel to decide whether to "take it or leave it" - either to accept occupation and incorporate the occupied territories into their state thus destroying the dream of a Jewish state as well as placing Jews at the risk of being a minority, or Israel would have to seriously adhere to a solution where an independent state can be established. This is the plan Dr. Jarbawi is staunchly promoting. Israel will not be interested in a two state solution unless their "Jewness is threatened" and dissolving the PA would act not as a means to an end but the required step "to achieve" an end.

Although seemingly rational in theory, there are certain variables and unpredictable by-products a bold maneuver like this could create. Who would fill the void left by the PA? Would the Israeli government not find another impressionable partner? One of the major obstacles to peace is the current division between Fateh and Hamas and their reluctance to resolve their issues. An agreement with Hamas would come at the expense of the Palestinian moderates whereas a peace with the moderates cannot be completed while Hamas continues to threaten Israel's security. Originally thought to be diminishing, Hamas' influence is apparently almost equal to that of Fateh. According to a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Hamas' de facto Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh would receive 47% of the presidential vote compared to 46% for Abbas. With this highlighted, there is a chance that complete chaos could ensue if the PA was dissolved either between Hamas and Fateh, between tribal families spread across the West Bank, or a third Intifada targeted against the Israelis. The one deterrent for an all and out Palestinian civil war is that without the PA, the groups would not be vying for a position of national authority, a point that has often been a source of contention. With regards to Israel finding another compliant partner, if the aim of the general cause was recognized and understood, one would hope that the likes of Hamas and Fateh would be united under occupation and use their influence to prevent the establishment of an Israeli "ally"

in the occupied territories.

Further still, there are the 200-250,000 people who are employed by the Palestinian Authority in various capacities from administration to security. Supporters of the dissolution draw parallels with the second Intifada where people demonstrated their willingness to sacrifice their jobs for the greater good. They attest that the same will be seen in the event of dissolution.

The same survey quoted above reports that 55% of Palestinians are dissatisfied with the PA government and believe it should be toppled. In 2006, this same debate over the PA was at its zenith. Hamas, who had just won the legislative elections, admitted that dismantling the PA might be the only way to combat Israel's treatment of the PA. Furthermore, PLO spokesman Ghassan Al Masri asked, "Why shouldn't Israel in its capacity as an occupation force, bear the expenses of our education, health and social welfare systems?" Even the current Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said at the time that the "PA has almost no role in the political process. The existence of the PA frees Israel from its responsibilities as an occupation force". These comments may have sprung out of opposition to Hamas' victory or fear that their positions were in jeopardy. However, now that a Fateh based PA has been reinstated in the West Bank, the same fear of their future is present and opinions seem to now center more on PA negotiator Saeb Erekat's assertions that the PA should concentrate on "discussing ways of reactivating our institutions"; restoring, preserving, reforming, redefining and emboldening them.

In 2006 there were feasible options available. Since then, democratic elections took place but the result wasn't respected by the international community; a unity government was tried and failed; infighting between Palestinian factions escalated to an alarming degree with neither showing signs of surrendering power; PA revitalization and reform has been restricted and there have been no tangible results from the

increased third party involvement or attempts to pressure Israel into a peace agreement. Israeli Knesset member Yossi Beilin states that Palestinians should wait until January 2009 [the projected deadline for a peace agreement] before doing anything - this goes without saying. All efforts should be made to exploit the need for US President George Bush and Prime Minister Olmert to salvage their reputations domestically. However, if nothing materializes out of this peace agreement, another avenue must be explored. At this juncture, the dissolution theory should be seriously contemplated as an alternative to a stagnant peace process.



Gaza's Only Growth Industry

September 29, 2008

After Hamas defeated Fateh in the "Battle for Gaza" in June 2007, the Hamas-led government became solely responsible for the Gaza Strip. Israel, the US and the rest of the international community refused to deal with them and embarked on a form of collective punishment, imposing an economic and political blockade on the Strip. These blockades have plummeted the people of Gaza into a humanitarian disaster of gigantic proportions. When people such as Lauren Booth (sister-in-law of former British PM Tony Blair) call Gaza the world's largest concentration camp, or the world's largest open-air prison, they are not exaggerating. More than 1.4 million Palestinians are surrounded by Israeli soldiers on one side, Egyptian soldiers on another, with the sea visibly taunting them with its apparent openness. Of course, it is not open. Israel's navy blockades Gaza from that side as well. Goods are not allowed across Gaza's borders in either direction. Even essential items such as medical equipment are prohibited, while only some humanitarian assistance is allowed in. Israel tends to summarily switch off water and power to thousands, as well as prevent fuel deliveries from entering Gaza. Hence, Gazans truly live at the mercy of Israel. Yet despite these tribulations which would normally destroy one's will to live, Gazans have found a way of venting the economic blockade imposed on them. Allow me to introduce you to Gaza's only growth industry: the tunnel trade.

Gaza's infamous tunnels are rumored to exist in the hundreds, up to 500 by some reports, passing under Israel's buffer zone with Egypt. Before Israel unilaterally withdrew to Gaza's borders, the Israeli army cleared a 300 meter wide buffer zone along the border with Egypt by demolishing more than 2,500 Palestinian houses, mostly in Rafah, a densely populated refugee camp. This 10-mile long border with Egypt, also known as "Tunnel Town", is home to these hand-dug tunnels which supply everything from medical supplies to food to weapons. They also supply luxury goods such as clothing, laptops, and cigarettes. There is no doubt, these tunnels have saved lives. As a result, the Hamas-led government cannot prohibit or prevent them from being dug. Such an unpopular decision would probably spell political suicide for them, and their support is already weakening as the siege on Gaza continues. But while these tunnels may save lives, they also cost lives.

The tunnels are extremely dangerous at the best of times, with their walls propped up only by makeshift wooden planks. Sometimes, though not always, they can be equipped with ventilation pumps to allow the diggers to breathe something other than dust and sand. The diggers, ranging from young children to men in their 50s and 60s, are all desperate for work to feed their families. Most of them have no choice in the matter if they want to work at all. In 2007, unemployment in Gaza reached a staggeringly high 45% of the work force.

Since the beginning of 2008, 45 Palestinians have died in these tunnels. Some died while digging them; others died after Egyptian or Israeli efforts to destroy them. Until a ceasefire was reached between Israel and Hamas, Israel used to routinely bomb "Tunnel Town" from the air. Egyptian authorities, on the other hand, mostly turned a blind eye towards the tunnels. However, due to increasing Israeli and American pressure, Egypt has recently adopted a new stance towards the tunnels, opting to destroy them upon discovery, especially as the tunnels are also used to smuggle weapons into the Strip. Explosives are the most successful method of destroying tunnels irrevocably, but according to

reports and interviews, Egypt has also been known to flush water, sewage, and poison gas down the tunnels. The saddest part of all this is that neither the Israelis nor the Egyptians check to make sure that the tunnels are empty before they begin their operations.

Unfortunately, as history has shown over and over again there are always those individuals who profit from other people's suffering and misfortune. While it is clear that these tunnels are like a breath of fresh air for Gazans, this air comes at a heavy monetary price. According to interviews with tunnel workers, gangs including both Gazan and Egyptian individuals are earning tens of thousands of dollars a week, charging premiums of up to 150% on their cargos. As this trade becomes more profitable, smuggled goods become even more expensive, leaving fewer people able to afford even the most essential of goods. However, as long as the economic blockade is maintained, this tunnel trade will continue to flourish. After all, beggars cannot be choosers.

What is more important than this story of tunnel digging, smuggled goods, and profits is the reason these tunnels came about in the first place. I have already mentioned that unemployment is at 45%. This is an official World Bank estimate. Unofficial reports suggest that unemployment is much higher, nearer to 80%. More than 80% of Gazans live under the poverty line, with 35% of them living in what is considered extreme poverty. The blockade on Gaza has also led to the suspension of 95% of Gaza's industrial operations. With no job prospects, no investment, and no trading, Gaza will drown in its own poverty. The only thing stopping it from going under completely is the intermittent arrival of humanitarian assistance and Hamas government wages. Unless the blockade is ended, this humanitarian crisis will worsen, tunnel trading will grow, and more and more people will turn to desperate measures to survive. While Israel and the world are hoping that this economic siege will force Gazans to overthrow Hamas, they must know that Palestinians will not submit to this type of blackmail. If Hamas is ever removed from power, it will be because the Palestinians

democratically made that choice.

As long as Gazans are subjected to this inhumane siege placed upon them by an international community which claims it does not condone collective punishment, the tunnel building will continue despite the dangers. As Mahmoud Darwish said on behalf of all Palestinians, "I hate nobody. And I don't steal. But if I'm made to starve, I'll eat the flesh of my oppressor. Beware of my hunger and anger!"



Abbas Goes Double Duty

November 26, 2008

On Sunday, November 23, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Central Council elected Mahmoud Abbas the President of Palestine. The last president the Palestinians had was Yasser Arafat, or Abu Ammar, who died four years ago. Now, Abbas, who is already president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and head of Fateh, is wearing the new cap of head of state.

The fact of the matter is that since the election, the average Palestinian is scrambling to make sense of who is in what position, how or why this position even exists, and what this actually means in practical terms. This is especially true given our current state of affairs. The West Bank and Gaza are both geographically and politically isolated from one another, with Hamas and Fateh alternately scratching out eyes and stabbing backs in their respective bids for power.

Putting together the puzzle of Palestinian politics and its quagmire of systems is not always easy. Before the advent of the Palestinian Authority, the (PLO) was the sole legitimate representative authority for the Palestinians. Traditionally established with the goal of liberating all of Palestine by means of, but not exclusively through, armed struggle and resistance, the 1987 Intifada changed the political paradigms for the leadership. The result of this shift was the PLO acceptance of a deal with the international community to relinquish armed struggle and enter into negotiations with Israel on the basis of UN Resolution 242, which

called for an Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 and a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

While Yasser Arafat, then leader of the PLO's Executive Committee and head of Fateh, agreed to this, he also wanted guarantees - i.e., along with entering into the world of negotiations, the Palestinians would declare their state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Al Quds Al Shareef (east Jerusalem). Naturally, Arafat was then elected the president of this "State", which the leadership believed would eventually come into being as a result of the negotiations they had agreed to enter.

Needless to say, the position of President of Palestine was and remains symbolic, created at the time to garner international support for the Palestinian quest for statehood by means of peaceful negotiations. Much of the international community appreciated the significance as well, with 120 countries recognizing this virtual state of Palestine when it was declared on November 15, 1988.

After the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, the Palestinian Authority was created as an interim authority and was assumedly meant to guide its people on the road to this statehood. Arafat, ever the astute politician, ensured that he would also be elected as head of the PA, thus avoiding any contradiction between the two positions of symbolic leader of Palestine and the pragmatic leader of the PA.

It obviously worked, straight up to his death in November 2004. However, since then, the elusive position of President of Palestine has remained vacant and probably would still be so if it were not for the current state of affairs in the Palestinian Territories. While Mahmoud Abbas was democratically elected to the PA presidency in 2005, he has since then found himself at the center of a battle of wills and guns with Hamas, a party now casting doubt over the legitimacy of his term, which they say effectively ends in January 2009.

Hence, one can only wonder why this recent election of Mahmoud Abbas as the President of Palestine took place at this particular moment in time. It can only be explained as being part of an overall move to further strengthen Abbas' claim to legitimacy in the eyes of his people. It goes without saying that Abbas is under extreme pressure, both from within his own society and political party, to step up to the plate and end the damaging rift between Hamas and Fateh. Palestinian society is also pressuring Hamas to meet Abbas halfway. The international community, on the other hand, wants to see Hamas pushed out of power and Abbas and his government in its stead.

Mahmoud Abbas is now President of Palestine, but does that really mean anything on the ground? If there were an actual state to be governed, then yes - this might mean something. Back in 1988, the decision to declare a state with a president had far-reaching political and diplomatic significance, which at least, in part, was fulfilled. Today, however, the election will most likely have little effect on swaying the Palestinians either way with regards to Abbas' legitimacy. Nor does it have legal influence on any future elections within the Palestinian Authority.

If anything, declaring Abbas the president of Palestine is just another step in the dance between the Palestinians and the international community. It is a reminder to them - and to the United States in particular - that the Palestinians still have their eyes set on the original goal declared in 1988, which is establishing an independent Palestine on Palestinian land occupied in 1967. If the Palestinians achieved one thing from the declaration of their state, it was an international recognition of the right for that state to exist. What most of the world did not even consider at one point in time has now become the premise on which all negotiations are based, that of a Palestinian state.

At present, the President of our Authority and of Palestine has a lot on his plate. Unlike his predecessor, Abu Ammar, Abbas has found it difficult

to maintain a hold over his people under the umbrella of national unity. The fierce in-fighting and political splits that have plagued the Palestinians for the past few years have weakened Abbas and his ability to rule over all Palestinians.

In his inaugural speech, Abbas said he would call for simultaneous legislative and presidential elections at the beginning of next year, should unity talks with Hamas fail. Hamas has rejected the offer, maintaining that Abbas cannot call for such elections without the consent of the PLC, in whose hands the majority of seats exist. Whether this most recent appointment will actually further the intended goal of strengthening Abbas remains to be seen. However, Abbas has guaranteed one thing. If he loses the PA presidential elections to Hamas or to anyone else, he will at least go down in the annals of history as Palestine's second head of state.

An Economic Snapshot of the Palestine and the PRDP

Basic Information:

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Defined as the total market value of all final goods and services produced within the country in a given period of time (usually a calendar year)

- Real GDP in 2007: \$3901 million
- GDP per capita in 2007: \$1130
- GDP real growth rates have dropped by 8.38% since the peak of 1999.

Annual Population Growth Rate

- The annual population growth rate is 4%, one of the highest in the world.

Unemployment

- In 2007, just over 45% of Gaza's work force was unemployed while in the West Bank, unemployment stood at 25.5% of the workforce.

Poverty

The official and deep poverty lines for a six-person household (two adults and four children) in the West Bank and Gaza at \$572 and \$457 in monthly expenditures respectively for 2007.

- Palestinians living in official poverty in the West Bank: 19.1% in 2007.
- Palestinians living in official poverty in Gaza: 51.8% in 2007.
- Palestinians living in the West Bank in deep poverty: 9.7% in 2007
- Palestinians living in Gaza in deep poverty: 35% in 2007

Private Sector Investment (West Bank and Gaza combined)

- Private investment in 2006 stood at about \$665 million.
- There is no data to suggest private sector investment rose in 2007.
- This is 11.3% below the 2005 level, and less than half of the 1999 level.

Public Sector Investment (Government capital expenditures)

- In 2007, public investment was USD 306 million, all of it financed by donors, and much lower than rates in the late 1990's.

Consumer Price Index

The overall Consumer Price Index (CPI) for the Palestinian Territory with its 2004 base year (2004=100) reached 124.19 in September 2008, and increased by 10.91% compared to September 2007. In the first nine months of 2008, the average increase of prices was 10.52% compared to the corresponding period of year 2007. The percent change in the CPI is a measure of inflation.

Miscellaneous

- Manufacturing equipment is on average 12 years old.
- Restrictions on Gaza have led to the suspension of 95% of Gaza's industrial operations.

The Paris Donor Conference

On December 17, 2007, ninety countries and organizations met at a conference in Paris to help raise and pledge funds to support the ailing Palestinian Authority over the next three years. Advised and supported by the World Bank and DFID, amongst others, Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad presented a plan of reform, the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP), which the government is using to guide the Palestinian economy from 2008 till 2010.

Approximately 90 delegations attended the Conference, including key political players in the peace process Arab and Middle Eastern countries,

the G8, the 27 EU Member States, major emerging countries (India, China, etc.), the European Commission, international and regional financial institutions (IMF, World Bank, OPEC Fund, Arab Monetary Fund, Islamic Development Bank, etc.), and United Nations members all attended. Speaking at the Conference, President Abbas said he hoped to collect US\$ 5.9 billion. These funds would be used to establish and run development projects in Palestinian controlled areas over the coming three years, and in essence, to finance the PRDP. By the conclusion of the Conference, donor countries had generously pledged \$7.7 billion in funds to support Palestinian institution-building and economic recovery. Of this amount, \$3.4 billion was pledged for 2008. This amount included humanitarian assistance to help with the essentials of the daily lives of the Palestinian population, especially in Gaza. The tables below explain who gave how much.

Distribution of pledges for each donor group

Group	Amount*	% of total
Europe Countries (Including EU)	4093	53.10%
North America	839	10.90%
Arab Countries	1524	19.80%
Other Countries	411	5.30%
Int'l Organizations	843	10.90%
Total Pledges	7710	100%

*in Millions US

Individual Known Pledges

Donor	Amount**
UK	490**
European Union	650*
US	555*
France	300*
Germany	290*
Japan	150
South Korea	13*
Saudi Arabia	500
UAE	300
Norway	140*

*Over 3 years: 2008-2010, ** Millions US\$

What is the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan 2008-2010 (PRDP)

The PRDP was developed to help reverse the injurious cycle the Palestinian economy finds itself in today. Further details of how we came to be in this cycle are included below. The PRDP aims to reduce and control Palestinian National Authority (PA) government expenditure in order to redirect funds to infrastructure and development projects, with a view to bolstering private sector growth and investment. The PA government does not want the economy to continue to depend on the government for support. Hence, the PRDP contains difficult but arguably necessary steps to turn our economic situation around. Unfortunately some of those steps will hurt in the short term.

Since the tragic events of 2000 and the beginning of the Second Intifada, the Palestinian economy has descended into a severe downward cycle. Israel imposed curfews and closures on Palestinian towns and villages, rendering the movement of goods and people very difficult if not impossible. As instability and violence in the Territories increased, private sector growth came to a standstill and began to shrink, forcing a rapidly growing labor force to look to the public sector for employment. The public sector, i.e. the Palestinian government, began directing funds towards the hiring of employees, as well as increasing government subsidies, which at the time was necessary to prevent an economic catastrophe from occurring. As such, many families came to rely on the Palestinian government for their livelihood. Consequently, there was little money remaining to invest in much needed public infrastructure and development projects. In fact, most such projects ceased. This situation continued unabated, and so we find ourselves in the condition we are in today: not enough private investment, very little investment in infrastructure, negative economic growth rates, high unemployment figures, and a people who are heavily reliant on the government for survival (an average of 5.3 people were dependent on a government employee in 2007). The Palestinian government in turn is now almost completely reliant on donor funding to survive, using those funds to pay salaries and cover daily operating costs.

Where does PA government expenditure go?

Wages for civil servants and security personnel alone make up almost half of total government expenditure. This number has increased by 57% since 2004. Civil service employees account for 53% of the wage bill while security services account for 47%. Within the civil service, education accounts for 47 %, followed by the health sector at 15 %. Net lending (government subsidies) is another large expense funded by the government. In 2007, net lending comprised the following: 76% was electricity bills paid on behalf of Palestinian municipalities, 11% was water bills, 11% was PA Ministry of Health bills owed to Israeli hospitals, while 2% was payments for sewage and PA Ministry of Agriculture bills owed to Israel for services provided. In plain English, either because of inability to pay on behalf of the consumer or inability to collect on behalf of the municipality, the PA stepped in with the finances to guarantee that Palestinians would continue to receive basic services such as electricity and running water. In short, the PA started to pay the bills to meet the shortfall. It should be noted that Israel has ultimate control over the provision of utilities such as electricity, water, and telephone access. Israel supplies these utilities to Palestinian intermediaries; hence in essence, most of this net lending indirectly goes to the controlling source, Israel.

Pensions also comprise a large portion of government expenditure. In fact, the government pays about 75% of pensions out of its own budget for about 17,000 former employees at the current time. For example, a government worker can collect a pension (about 3/4 of his original salary) after 15 years of work at the age of 55. This will cost the government \$165 million by the end of this year alone.

What steps will the PRDP take?

The first goal of the PRDP is to reduce and control its heftiest expenses: the wage bill, net lending, and pension reform.

The Wage Bill: The government is planning to freeze real wage increases and limit the number of employees to those currently employed

(150,000), with up to 3,000 new employees hired annually for the more crucial services. This may not seem too difficult, unless understood in the context of past hiring practices. Acting as an employer of last resort, Palestinian government employment increased from 114,940 to 150,290 between 2000 and 2007. As such, reforms are necessary to control the wage bill, with the PA hoping that these policies will reduce the bill from 27% of GDP in 2007 to 22% of GDP by 2010. They are also hoping to raise productivity and efficiency of those employees. Within the health and education sectors as well, growth in government spending have been fuelled by staffing increases. Hence, the government is looking to control staffing increases, while diverting funds to finance the purchasing of medical supplies, learning and teachings materials, research supplies etc.

Security Services: In order to formulate any policy affecting the security services, accurate information is needed about them. As a result, this year the government is undertaking a sweeping survey of the security services, gathering up to date information on numbers, ages, performances, disciplinary actions taken, duties etc. The government is also hoping to reduce the number of security service members by removing non-compliant officers and offering early retirement to those nearing the age of retirement.

Pension Reform: The government is currently reviewing its current pension schemes, looking into other methods of funding them as opposed to financing them from its own budget as it has done in the past. It will also review pension laws which provide some of the most generous public sector pensions in the world.

Net Lending: As previously mentioned, net lending represents more than 10% of GDP. Much of this is through subsidizing power utilities. A World Bank study found that many municipalities are not paying for utilities due to a lack of enforcement mechanisms and inability to collect payments from residents within the individual municipalities. As such, the government is initiating steps to counter these problems. It will

reduce the net transfers caused by electricity arrears, which comprises most of the net lending. It will decrease the salaries of public sector staff. It is requiring that all individuals provide proof they have paid their utility bills before being able to request a municipal service. For those unable to pay due to economic hardship, the government is looking into a progressive charge rate based on income and consumption levels to protect low-income households. It will also consider giving cash payments directly to the poorest families to ensure basic utility services, instead of paying on behalf of the municipality. Installing prepaid and automatic meter reading/payment systems are also being considered. The government is working towards the formation of the Northern Electric Distribution Company in an effort to transfer electricity supply away from the municipalities. Currently, Israel is the main supplier of utilities; hence the government is aiming to negotiate deals with neighboring Egypt and Jordan to supply utilities.

What has been achieved so far?

Almost \$1.4 billion in donor funding was transferred to the PA at the beginning of this year. Unfortunately, PM Fayyad said in a recent press conference that it is not enough to support the government in the last quarter of 2008. He also took the opportunity to criticize the Israeli government for not easing its restrictions on Gaza and the West Bank as it had pledged to do. Israeli settlements and their extended jurisdiction over Palestinian territory have resulted in confiscation of over 38% of West Bank land and most Palestinians are excluded from important agricultural areas in the Jordan Valley and other regions due to these practices. An increase in house demolitions continues in east Jerusalem and other parts of the West Bank, which rendered almost 400 Palestinians homeless in December 2007 - February 2008 period alone. Despite promises that checkpoints and barriers would be reduced, their numbers have actually increased. The Palestinian government, as well as the World Bank, IMF, and other organizations have stressed that no amount of aid and reform will help the Palestinian economy as long as the occupation continues. Economic reform and development should go hand in hand with political change on the ground.

Despite these worsening circumstances in the Palestinian Territories, some changes have been achieved so far this year. A reduction of over 40,000 civil and security personnel was carried out by the end of March 2008 through the cancellation of illegal and unfulfilled contracts, along with a general freeze on salary increases. The PNA has requested greater municipal/local government accountability and responsibility and is supporting the establishment of additional electricity distribution companies which will collect fees for services. Municipalities are to adopt a Unified Chart of Accounts and register fixed assets. These actions have resulted in the increase of payment of utilities, which will decrease overall net lending arrears.

An emphasis has been placed on ensuring transparency, accountability, and rule of law. Improvements on public finance management systems that comply with international standards of integrity and transparency are continuing; the Basic Finance Law was amended and an Office of the General Accountant was established in the Ministry of Finance. This office is supported by a new electronic database, linking PNA expenditures to budgetary appropriations. All funding received has been earmarked for certain budgets, and cannot be diverted elsewhere. All expenditures must be accounted for to guarantee the utmost transparency possible. The PA hopes this will insulate expenditures and financial management from political interference. Naturally, progress updates will be provided to the donors.

In addition, the Cabinet adopted new legislation/policies in the fields of procurement, income taxes, pensions, and money laundering. President Abbas signed a new simplified income tax law, with a maximum marginal rate of 15% for individuals and companies in March 2008. The Customs and Excise Department and the Palestinian Ministry of Finance also launched a major campaign against the undervaluation of imports by traders. A large number of revaluations have been effected which will result in higher tax collection.

An emphasis has also been placed on security. The government has imposed a ban on armed militias in the West Bank. It has also addressed the issue of Palestinian fugitives by securing an Israeli commitment not to target or arrest them, although this is certainly not a blanket commitment for all activists, i.e., it is exclusively for Fateh members, and has not stopped Israel from arresting/killing those who supposedly have immunity. An initiative is underway to enforce law and order by deploying forces in major urban areas. The government has already deployed security forces in Nablus, Jenin, parts of Hebron and other major West Bank towns. Reconstruction of security headquarters is also underway. With these actions, the PNA is hoping to send the message that it is rebuilding, upgrading and reasserting its authority.

With the help and advice of US Security Coordinator Lieutenant General Keith Dayton and EUCOPPS (EU Police Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support), the security services are in the process of professionalizing, reforming and equipping themselves in order to carry out their functions in a reliable and effective manner. However, Israel has imposed limitations on how and where security forces can or cannot act which limits the PNA's ability to bring security to the people and to fulfill its security commitments under the Road Map. Furthermore, recurrent Israeli military incursions severely erode the credibility of the security forces and the government's efforts to restore rule of law and protection of civilians.

Criticisms of the PRDP

There are many individuals within the Palestinian and international community who have criticized the PRDP and its methods. Many criticize the World Bank and IMF's involvement in the plan, claiming that these institutions prescribe the same medicine to every country in economic difficulty (no matter how different the circumstances): fiscal discipline and private sector growth. Both do generally encourage striving for a government budget surplus and minimizing government expenditures, while the IMF often makes the issuing of financial and

technical assistance contingent on fiscal prudence. Unfortunately, many governments have been known to do this by cutting government budgets for important social projects and services. This is not to suggest that the PA will employ this method. However, by not taking into account the individual circumstances of a country, requiring a cut in government expenditure will have a harsh, immediate effect on the local population. It should be noted that cutting government expenditures will be even more difficult to do if inflation continues to rise, fed by global problems such as the food security crisis. The following areas are a main cause for alarm: public sector workforce cuts, wage freezes, certificate of payments, and industrial zones.

Mass layoffs are never viewed as a good thing in the short run. Thousands of Palestinians depend on public sector employment. As indicated earlier in this paper, an average of 5.3 people depends on the income of a government employee. The wage freezes that have already taken place have also caused concern, as inflation is hovering around 10%, meaning that real wages (nominal wages minus inflation) will decrease by as much. Another cause for concern is the requirement of certificates of payment, or proof that Palestinian citizens have paid their utility bills before being able to request services such as ID cards, car licenses, building permits etc. This will place those who are having trouble paying such bills in an even harder situation. In addition, the subsidization of electricity and water bills (i.e. allowing these services to continue despite the non-payment of bills) is a central means of survival for thousands of Palestinians living in rapidly worsening poverty. Therefore a reduction in subsidization is not going to be looked on favorably. PM Fayyad's government has pledged to do what it can to ease the effects of its reforms, but that is not enough for some critics. Basically, this situation is likely to get worse before it gets better.

The industrial zones are another area of skepticism. PM Fayyad has said that these zones will promote trade with regional partners, including Israel. Not much information is available about how they will be run,

but according to some, including the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions National Committee, the industrial zones are just another way of guaranteeing cheap goods for export produced by an underpaid Palestinian workforce. Located on the periphery of Palestinian towns, these industrial zones will be funded by local and foreign capital, with Israel effectively controlling who goes in and out. These cheap goods will then be exported to Israel, the Gulf States, and the US. There are also claims that the main trade union body in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), has not yet been given the right to represent workers in the industrial zones. Without a union to represent their rights, it will be difficult to guarantee good treatment, sufficient pay, representation in the event of unfair dismissal, and other rights that should be afforded to workers.

The criticisms continue, but suffice it to say, the main point here is that this pursuit of economic recovery and reform is largely pointless unless Israel ends the occupation in its entirety. All these reforms, conferences and projects all have serious political implications to consider. Many are proposing joint Israeli Palestinian cooperation. While this is a step in the right direction, "The proposed projects take as their starting point Israeli participation in decision-making and Israeli control over their legal status... [they] are designed to meet the economic demands of the Israeli administration, not those of the Palestinian people." (The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions National Committee)

Conclusion

Nobody, including international donors and the World Bank, are naïve enough to believe that the PRDP will succeed if there is not parallel movement on the political front, especially in Gaza. The World Bank has repeatedly stated that any tangible success will require the easing of movement and removal of restrictions. If any growth does occur, it will most likely come from the West Bank, widening the economic and political gap that already exists between Gazans and their fellow West

Bankers, and increasing the anguish of Gazans. In addition, on the political front, any progress in PRDP measures and other development projects will not contribute to ending the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. While Israel may look on a degree of economic stability in the West Bank and Gaza as a positive development (assuming it is achieved despite their impediments), only they can decide to end this occupation.

In a best case scenario, the Palestinian government envisages a situation in which the PRDP is fully implemented, all pledged donor funds are secured, and private sector growth and trade is revived. This requires a recovery in Gaza as a result of a peaceful resolution to the Hamas-Fateh rivalry. It also requires the removal of internal movement restrictions, a system of open crossing points with Israel, and Israeli accommodation of imports and exports into the West Bank and Gaza. However, even with all this progress, economic growth will still take time to reach positive numbers, just as unemployment levels will take time to stabilize and eventually fall.

On the other hand, the worst case scenario is a continuation of our current situation, with the added burden of a lack of donor funds, leading to the eventual collapse of the Palestinian government. There are few who would wish to witness the economic and political effects of such a scene.

Of course, in all scenarios, nobody anticipated the effects of the global financial crisis that is still ongoing. This crisis may affect our own economy, although indirectly, as we rely on funds from donor states that have been directly affected by the crisis. As Palestinian Planning Minister Samir Abdullah said in a press conference recently, "The global financial crisis will have a direct impact on the financial support from states affected by the financial crisis. This will lead to an imbalance in the government budget."

Other analysts have written about the impact of the financial crisis on a possible peace deal between the Palestinians and Israel, as funding will be needed to finance different aspects of the negotiations. Even peace has a price, and that price is likely to lie at the feet of the international community. For example, most people acknowledge that a resolution of the issue of the right of return for Palestinian refugees will involve some sort of financial compensation which the Israeli government is unlikely to fund with or without assistance. Also, Israel might demand that an early-warning system be set up should it withdraw from the West Bank and the Golan Heights (in the event of a peace deal with Syria). Even if a peace deal is reached, the Palestinian Authority will still need financial support initially to continue building security services and the infrastructure necessary for a successful Palestinian state. Of course, before jumping the gun, Palestine and Israel need to reach the stage where a peace deal is possible first.

* Please note that the issues discussed in this paper do not represent the full and comprehensive spread of issues the PA hopes to tackle with the PRDP. This paper merely highlights the main steps, problems and criticism of the PRDP.

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THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION



The Politics of Madness

February 20, 2006

Apart from the undisguised policies of double standards and contradictions following last month's Palestinian legislative elections, in which Israel, the US, and even some of our European partners are practically punishing the Palestinian people for democratically electing the "unelectable" Hamas, a new era of destructive politics has been unleashed by Israel. A discourse of threats, ultimatums, and absolutism is replacing (the desperately needed) constructive political dialogue and pragmatism, hence, paving the way to even more conflict and bloodshed.

Have we not learnt the lessons of our tragic history, not only as Palestinians and Israelis, but as members of the human (or inhuman) family, which vehemently continues to pursue the path of self interest, power, and the negation of the "other" at the expense of peace, justice, and coexistence? Of course, an oversimplification of reality, particularly within the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, is misleading and equally dangerous; it is not, as a distant observer may legitimately dismiss, "a matter of resolving our differences and getting along." The root causes of the conflict must be comprehensively addressed and reversed.

However, what currently governs the policies of Israel's unilateralist right wing government is the logic of isolationism and, subsequently, a vigorous reinforcement of national extremism, the outcome of which

will be catastrophic to both Israelis and Palestinians.

Early indicators of Israel's "enlightened" new policies towards the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA) have already come in the form of tactical decisions. On Sunday, the Israeli cabinet formally branded the PA as the "enemy" and enforced economic sanctions against it, leaving an already impoverished Palestinian society with a real threat of humanitarian disaster. The measures included withholding monthly tax payments to the PA, increased security checks at crossings between Israel and the Gaza Strip, a ban on the transfer of equipment to Palestinian security forces, tightening restrictions on the movement of Hamas officials, and asking foreign donors to stop all payments to the PA.

Ultimately, for Israel, Hamas' election victory is a fortunate turn of events. Hamas' leadership of the PA provides the Israeli political establishment with the perfect opportunity to accelerate the implementation of its agenda under the pretext of security: sustaining the occupation of the Palestinian territories it captured in the June 1967 War by completing its Apartheid Wall and annexing 46% of the West Bank to "Israel proper"; sustaining and expanding its illegal settlements in the West Bank; isolating Palestinian east Jerusalem from the rest of the Palestinian territories; and unilaterally redrawing the boundaries of the (now-expanded) state of Israel, leaving the Palestinians with territorially fragmented Bantustans to fulfill George W. Bush's vision of "...an independent Palestinian state, side by side with Israel."



Palestine's "Other" War

June 20, 2006

Sometimes, the less evident is the more sinister. While the world continues to focus its attention on the more obvious and classic features of this conflict - the armed confrontations, the wall, the siege and the economic embargo - there is an even slower death simmering beneath the surface, that of Palestinian demography.

We Palestinians have always said that unlike other conflicts around the world, the conflict between Palestinians and Israel is an existential one. It is not about economic domination or controlling natural resources. It is not like the missionary colonization of Africa meant to shine the light of Christianity on the lives of pagans. This conflict is about existence - who has or does not have the right to live on this land and which side is the "fittest" and able to vanquish its opponent.

And this is why the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is so plagued with so many complex layers. An outsider may look in and see the obvious - a military conflict that will inevitably be solved by military means. At least that is how Israel would like to portray it. Although it has successfully convinced the world that the conflict can only be solved through sheer military might, behind the scenes, Israel is waging a much more effective battle, which it must be said, is winning.

The question Israel has always asked itself and has continued to find ways of answering is how to seize control of the maximum amount of

land with the minimum number of Palestinians on it. In 1948, mass expulsion and massacres were the solution. Over 800,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes, never to return while thousands of others were killed at the hands of Jewish gangs and the Israeli army. In the 1967 War, another displacement took place and tens of thousands more fled their homes, some for the second time around.

Today, that is no longer a viable option for Israel given its international status and the fact that the Palestinian cause has been permanently put on the political map. So, besides the assassinations, the gun battles that take out handfuls of Palestinians at a time and the occasional murder of families on beaches, Israel is working at killing a nation through deportation.

Over the past year in particular, hundreds, maybe even thousands of people - mostly Palestinians with foreign passports - have been turned back at Israel's borders and told they are "persona non grata" in Israel. Most are not given any specific reason, just that Israel's security services deem their presence in the country as a potential security threat and will therefore not be allowed entry.

The number of just how many people have been denied entry into Israel is still unclear, however information by word of mouth has indicated that an increasing number of "foreigners" have been turned away.

Although this policy hits a wide spectrum of people who come to Palestine including volunteers, those working with Palestinian organizations, tourists and Palestinians in the Diaspora visiting relatives in the "old country", it is most detrimental to those Palestinians who have made their permanent homes in the Palestinian territories. These individuals do not hold Palestinian citizenship and are forced to leave the country every three months to obtain a "visitors" visa upon entry into Israel.

Just how many of these Palestinians have made their homes in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem is hard to determine, but estimates from various Palestinian and international sources have put the number in the tens of thousands.

For years, scores of Palestinians have lived, worked and even built homes in Palestine and travel in and out of the country every three months to maintain “legal” status. And although there has always been the random deportation of singled-out Palestinians or foreigners by Israel, this has only become a systematic policy in the past few years.

The horror stories at Ben Gurion Airport and Allenby Bridge are endless. People being locked up in holding rooms for hours on end before being promptly told they were to “return from whence they came” or others who had their foreign passports stamped with a five-year ban on reentering the country.

People, who have made their lives here for years have been unable to return to their homes, their families and their workplaces. Some have been separated from their children and spouses and have been forced to rebuild their lives elsewhere.

At this point, it goes without saying that this has nothing to do with Israel’s security. Banning Palestinians with foreign passports from reentering the country and denying them the right to apply for Palestinian residency is all part and parcel of their grand plan to empty this land of as many Palestinians as possible. Couple this with Israel’s other measures such as the economic siege aimed at starving people out, Israel is well on its way of realizing its century-long myth of Palestine being “a land without a people.”

Most definitely, Palestinians should continue to shed light on Israel’s oppressive military measures against them, if for nothing else than to expose the flagrant injustice done to them. However, the less

conspicuous schemes should also be exposed because, unlike but no less atrocious than a bombing, which wipes out families and neighborhoods at a time, this racist policy of turning back Palestinians at the border will have serious future ramifications on the demographic balance between the two sides.

Everyone knows about “people power” and no one knows better than Israel that this is the Palestinians’ strongest card. Eventually, if enough people are squeezed out, barred entry or physically eliminated, those remaining will never be able to constitute a force strong enough to put up a real fight.



The Oslo “Death Trap”

July 07, 2006

As Israel’s “Operation Summer Rain” rages on in the Gaza Strip for the second week in a row with over 20 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire on July 6 alone, the Palestinians find themselves once again in the quagmire where politics and the struggle for liberation overlap.

Since the signing of the Oslo Accords back in 1994, the Palestinians have been faced with predicament after predicament. True, prior to these peace accords, Palestinians were made to endure extremely harsh conditions living under Israel’s military occupation, which began in 1967. Even before that, the biggest blow was delivered to the Palestinian people and national cause in 1948 when the state of Israel was established at the expense of Palestine’s original inhabitants, over 800,000 of whom were forced from their homes and into a life of refuge. Ironically however, being under occupation did not present the political dilemmas it does today. On the contrary, for the national cause, the goals and methods for which to reach them were clear cut. Fighting Israel and creating a platform for resistance was a source of pride for the Palestinians and an undisputed means for which to realize the ultimate goal of eliminating the occupation and realizing the dream of a Palestinian state.

Oslo was the single most significant event that dramatically changed the dynamics of the Palestinian cause. Suddenly, the Palestinians were no longer on “occupied” territory but “disputed” territory. Virtually

overnight, a Palestinian police force was created, ministries were set up, security apparatuses roamed the streets of “liberated” cities and Palestinians were duly issued ID cards and passports with the words “Palestinian Authority” boldly embossed on them.

The people, burdened by decades of oppressive military rule and who bore the scars of burying so many of their loved ones killed over the years of the struggle, were more than eager to accept the scraps thrown to them by their trusted leadership, who perhaps may have believed in their heart of hearts that the agreements would eventually lead to an independent state. Did they not receive their leader, the symbol of their revolution, late President Yasser Arafat, with tears of joy and olive branches?

What followed, however, were not just physical changes on the ground. As Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza grew accustomed to terminology such as Areas A, B and C, saluted the “presidential guards,” the “preventive security”, and the police in their streets, they were concomitantly weaned off the mentality of liberation and fed the language of conciliation by their new leadership, the Palestinian Authority.

While prior to the Oslo agreement, the odd peace “groupies” could be found throughout society, this mentality became all-pervasive - barring of course the opposition groups - once the Fateh-led PA was in charge. Yet, the euphoria of this “near” statehood was short-lived. Palestinians soon realized the Oslo Accords were nothing but a death-trap for the cause and that Israel had no intention of honoring its commitments and allowing a Palestinian state ever to come into existence.

What was left were pockets of Palestinian controlled areas and a faint waft of autonomy in that the people were deceived into believing they had control over their own lives. They could go to ministries headed by their own people who spoke their language and possibly offered

them a cup of coffee while they waited to be served. What they did not realize was that not one scrap of paper, not one passport or ID card or major decision was made without the consent of the “big boss”, the Israeli government which now had a convenient sidekick to do the mundane work they were more than happy to be relieved of.

The Israelis even got someone to do their dirty work as part of the Oslo package deal. Palestinian security forces began rounding up “militants”, Palestinian groups who dared oppose the deficient peace deal and resist the occupation, upon demand by the Israeli security services. Who would have believed that what Palestinians used to unanimously consider freedom fighters just a few years earlier were now being locked up in Palestinian prisons, handcuffed by men who, just maybe, shared a cell with them in an Israeli jail during the pre-Oslo years.

The real predicament didn't arise, however until things did not go as expected. By the end of 1999, the Palestinians were no closer to their state than they had been before signing the accords. The only difference was that they had signed an agreement that bound them hand and foot. When the Intifada broke out in September 2000 after Israel had sliced up the West Bank and cordoned off the Gaza Strip without a promise of anything else, the Palestinians rose up against the injustice.

This time around, the Palestinians found themselves being pulled in different directions. While even the leadership realized they had not gotten what they bargained for, the world, which was witness to the grandiose signing of the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn, were holding them to their end of the deal. Resistance tactics were duly categorized into “acceptable” means and “unacceptable” ones.

This would prove to be the Palestinian leadership's tragic flaw - falling somewhere in between a government (without a state) and a liberation movement. Bound by international agreements that promised to “combat terrorism” and coupled with the events of September 11 where

the world was dichotomized as “good and evil”, Palestinians were caught between a rock and a hard place and the resistance was branded as “militancy” and “terrorism.”

Today, the Palestinians continue to suffer from this. Still very much under occupation, the overwhelming majority of Palestinians agree that resistance remains a legitimate option.

The best example of this quagmire is the events of the Gaza Strip. As Palestinian residents of Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya endure days and nights of Israeli missile attacks, tank shells and gun battles, carrying off scores of their dead and injured, the world barely blinks an eye. With the exception of a few tepid European and Arab condemnations, Israel continues its aggression undeterred. Those groups who carried out the attack on an Israeli army post and captured an Israeli soldier are “terrorists” while invading Israeli troops that bomb Gaza's electricity network, plunging the Strip into darkness, and take out both resistance fighters and innocent bystanders are portrayed as “defenders of Israel's security.”

While the international community, namely the United States and its allies, can certainly be considered one culprit in perpetuating this ridiculous balance of power, which equates resistance with terrorism, the Palestinians cannot be exempt from responsibility. Once the PLO put its John Hancock on that Declaration of Principles 12 years ago, it forever changed the premises of the Palestinian national cause and bound all future leaderships and political parties to obligations that do not always serve their best interests.



In the Middle East, 9/11 Is Still Alive

September 11, 2006

Seldom do events have such an impact that they are able to create new and dangerous stereotypes and reformulate foreign policies in a way that they are no longer up for negotiation. As the United States remembers the fifth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, the people of the world - especially in this little corner of it - are reflecting on how this single event has so dramatically changed their lives.

Although several thousand miles away, the events of that day five years ago, which saw New York's twin towers crumble to the ground, have caused not a mere ripple effect across the Atlantic but more accurately, a destructive tidal wave. Who would have guessed that President George W. Bush's words in the early days after the attacks, in which nearly 3,000 Americans died, would have such catastrophic repercussions? "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror," he said in November of that same year.

It is not so much the words he uttered but how misconceptions were then shaped around them that have caused so much damage. From that point on, the September 11 attacks have given carte blanche to the United States and its allies to unleash an unprecedented and unbridled fury on all those Bush so carelessly categorized as those "against them" in this new war.

The very phrase "the war on terror" is a misnomer in the least. Terrorism is a concept, not a place or person, and it is an idea that Bush has allowed himself to disproportionately exploit and tag with gross misconceptions and racist stereotypes. Thanks to the US President, terrorism now has a face, a culture and a religion. Terrorism is dark-skinned, with a thick Arabic accent and a Quran in one hand. Terrorism lives in caves in the Afghanistan outback, in the Saddam Hussein loyalist hideouts in Baghdad, in Hizbullah strongholds in South Lebanon, and in the nooks and crannies of the Gaza Strip's refugee camps.

And while the Arabs and Muslims have paid the heaviest price for Bush's cowboy approach, the Americans have not gone without consequences. What is so surprising is that the voices of anger and opposition have not risen loud enough in the White House and on Capitol Hill to put a halt to this madness.

Clearly, the loss of 3,000 civilians on US soil is no minor event. Roughly the same numbers of US soldiers have died in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq since then. However, the ongoing debate among many Americans in the public and within the corridors of power is whether the US administration's war policies have contributed to quelling hatred towards America or only further fanned the flames and fury.

If the answer is that Americans have increasingly become more aware that their government misled them after September 11, this is yet to be seen here in the Middle East. A US Senate report released on September 8 refuted what Vice President Dick Cheney so vehemently argued in 2004 when he said "there's overwhelming evidence there was a connection between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi government." The report concluded that Saddam's government "did not have a relationship, harbor or turn a blind eye toward al-Qaida operative Abu Musab al-Zarqawi or his associates."

Still, there is no sign US troops are packing up and pulling out of Iraq. Instead, the battered country is at the dangerous brink of a civil war

while an invading foreign army continues to abuse Iraqi prisoners and civilians alike, allowed a free hand in occupying and oppressing a people it claims to have liberated from a tyrant's rule.

Moving on to Lebanon, the recent events there are evidence that Bush's maxim of "with us or against us" is as strong as ever. Israel pummeled the south of Lebanon and its capital for over a month, justifying to the world their unrelenting war on "Hizbullah terrorists." Never mind that a grotesque number of innocent civilians were sacrificed in the mix. The important thing is that Israel, backed by its number one ally, has conveniently been provided with the comfortable cushion of the west's "war on terror" to fall back on whenever deemed necessary.

Israel's, and by proxy, the United States' policies in Palestine are no different. While Israel has always reigned over Palestinian territories under its occupation with brutality, the post-September 11 era has provided it with much of the world's sympathy in doing so.

Don't forget that Israel has marketed itself as the Middle East's European representative since its creation. Israel holds up the image of its light-eyed, blonde-haired scantily dressed European immigrants as the civilized inhabitants of the former "land without a people" or at least a people that does not count. In Bush's post-9/11 world, the Palestinians fit the perfect "terrorist" profile - predominantly Muslim, Arab and fervent lovers of their country and cause. In the lexicon of another time and age, the Palestinians would have been praised as patriots, freedom fighters, and peace seekers.

Clearly, the Palestinians, the Iraqis, and the Lebanese cannot put their wagers on the consciences of the world's governments. Despite overwhelming evidence that they deceived their own people, the brazen abuse of Iraqi prisoners and civilians, and the obvious justness of causes such as the Palestinians', governments continue to be driven not by morality but by interests.

Therefore, just as the Americans have a responsibility to question their own government and see beyond the hollow rhetoric about "saving America," the Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims must also take it upon themselves to show the world how it has been misled. Why has the phrase "state terrorism" been slashed from common discourse, especially when it comes from Israel or the United States? Is not the bombing of whole villages where hundreds of men, women, and children are killed even worse than the capturing of an occupying soldier, whose presence is for the sole purpose of oppressing another people?

The world is a long way from realizing these truths, but like anything else worth fighting for, real progress is made one step at a time. Unfortunately for the meantime, because of the deaths of less than 3,000 Americans five years ago, an entire region must pay the price.



The Failures of Zionism, and Why Israel Is Bad for Jews

September 20, 2006

The circular logic that pervades pro-Israeli rhetoric today is in fact undermining the security of the Jewish State, and feeding the fire of anti-Jewish sentiment worldwide. This logic can be traced to some of the earliest Zionist thinkers, including Leo Pinsker and Theodore Herzl, who theorized that humanism would not prevail against hatred and that it was time for Jews to form a nation-state of their own. For Herzl, the Jewish people already constituted a nation-living in Diaspora-so the formation of a Jewish State was the logical next step. Nationalism was of course the fashion of the day, and Zionism emerged as a secular-political nationalist platform intended to solve the problem of anti-Semitism in Europe by carving out a national home for Jews somewhere else. The religious components emerged later, after Palestine became the focus of the Zionist project, and political Zionists adopted the religious narrative of Zionism (exodus and return) in order to facilitate their settler-colonial project in Palestine.

Israel is nearly 60 years old, and political Zionism has been extant almost twice as long. With each passing year, the failure of political Zionism-and its implementation, in the form of the Israeli State-becomes clearer and clearer. Of course, it would be easy to see Zionism as a resounding success. Israel does, after all, exist as a Jewish State; it participates in the globalized economy, it has very close ties to the world's only superpower, and, perhaps most noticeably, it has the fourth-largest military apparatus in the world, with which it conducts wars on a fairly regular basis. By most standards, and indeed by Israeli standards,

these accomplishments are the modern day manifestation of Zionism's success. Is this, however, the type of Jewish State envisioned by early Zionist thinkers like Pinsker and Herzl? Of course not—Zionist thinking was heavily influenced by socialist values and utopian visions of a peaceful Jewish state. As the Zionist project progressed, however, nationalist fervor seems to have clouded the minds of monumental Zionist leaders like Ben-Gurion, who failed to understand the hypocrisy, and foolishness, of trying to establish an exclusively Jewish state in a land already populated by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike.

Ben-Gurion's famous Zionist slogan, "A land without people for a people without land" fully exemplifies the nationalist roots of political Zionism as it emerged at the end of the 19th century and began to blossom in the early years of the 20th. The reality is that Palestine was already densely populated and heavily cultivated before the arrival of any Zionists, with British Census records indicating a Palestinian population of 600,000 in 1920. More than just a clever slogan, Ben Gurion's statement is instead an indicator of Zionism's nationalist-inspired interpretation of citizenship and nationhood. In 1937, Ben Gurion argued that "We must expel the Arabs and take their places," acknowledging the presence of Arabs on the land, but also denying the presence of Palestinians.

His statement regarding a "land without people" is justified, therefore, on the grounds that Palestinians are not in fact Palestinian, but Arab. As Arabs, they have no particular claim or connection to the land which they occupy-after all, how can there be a Palestine without Palestinians? According to this logic, those who lack a nation-state of their own and so do not qualify as citizens of any particular country, are in fact not "people" at all, so their human rights, such as the right to exist, can be freely trampled upon by phrases like "A land without people for a people without land".

The bankrupt values of nationalism, which privilege nation-states and their citizens above all else, including other peoples and even other

nations, have been used to justify colonial endeavors (especially in the Middle East) and countless wars and violence. In this regard, Zionism cannot bear all the blame for the failures of nationalism-it is just one of many doomed nationalist projects, not just for its moral and ethical misgivings, but because of its misdirected implementation in the form of the Jewish state of Israel.

In 1969, then Prime Minister Golda Meir reiterated Ben Gurion's racist-nationalist philosophy in a famous statement to *The Sunday Times* in 1969, saying "There is no such things as a Palestinian people...It is not as if we came and threw them out and took their country. They didn't exist." And in the same year, revisionist Zionist leader Menachem Begin explained to Kibbutz members the importance of denying presence to Palestinians and Palestine by refuting their very existence: "My friend, take care. When you recognize the concept of "Palestine", you demolish your right to live in [Kibbutz] Ein Hahoresh. If this is Palestine and not the land of Israel, then you are conquerors and not tillers of the land. You are invaders. If this is Palestine, then it belongs to a people who lived here before you came."

Thus, Zionism was transformed from a utopian ideal to a colonial movement that sought to rid Palestine of its Palestinian inhabitants in order to facilitate close settlement of the land by Jews, for Jews. Since its formal creation in 1948, the fundamental principle of the Jewish State has been exclusion, not acceptance. Even Palestinians who are Israeli citizens (about 20% of Israel's population) do not enjoy the same privileges and benefits bestowed upon their Jewish neighbors-they are in effect second class citizens.

Many countries in the world have a history of exclusionary and discriminatory policies-Israel is not alone on this front. One of the most problematic aspects of Israel's policies, and those hardliners who support them, is the issue of religion. The Jewish character of Israel has falsely been used as an excuse for The Jewish State to act in the name of Judaism, as a faith, and therefore in the name of Jews worldwide - even

thought the population of world Jewry outside Israel is nearly twice the Jewish population of the Jewish state. The question then becomes, how, exactly, do pro-Israeli pundits use Israel's Jewish character as a means of defending Israeli government policies, therefore damaging the reputation of Jews worldwide?

Perhaps the clearest example of this practice is the way in which any anti-Zionist discourse is immediately labeled anti-Semitic by the Zionist/pro-Israel community. This presents two problems. First of all, it indicates a degree of stupidity, given that anti-Semitism indicates any prejudicial or hateful thoughts or actions toward any Semitic person, Jew or Arab. Simply because anti-Semitism is equated with anti-Jewish sentiments, it does not mean the two terms are interchangeable. Of course, the charge of anti-Semitism is a powerful one, and carries an especially potent moral and ethical charge considering the clear association with the holocaust.

As Norman Finkelstein articulates very well in his book *Beyond Chutzpah*, Israeli apologists are quick to sound the alarm of "anti-Semitism" whenever Israel's actions illicit opposition, condemnation, or accusations. When scholars Mersheimer and Walt dared to state the obvious in their 2006 paper regarding the power of the Israel lobby in America, they were condemned as "bigots," "Nazis", and of course, "anti-Semites". The smear campaign launched against these respected professors indicates the dismal state of Israel and the Israel-firsters who die-heartedly support its every action without even paying attention to the facts. After investigating Israel's recent whole-sale assault on Lebanon, America's largest human rights organization, Human Rights Watch, criticized Israel for its indiscriminate killing of civilians, and various other war crimes. HRW executive director Kevin Roth, who is Jewish and who's father fled Nazi Germany, was quickly labeled by a variety of pro-Israel pundits as a terrorist sympathizer, and an anti-Semite. The conservative pro-Zionist New York Sun accused Roth of having an "anti-Israel bias" and also said that he was involved in the "de-legitimization of Judaism, the basis of much anti-Semitism". This odd

marriage, between neoconservatives and Zionists, and their joint effort to hijack Judaism, and in turn, the threat of anti-Semitism, as a way of defending Israel's criminal actions in the world community, is going to damage Israel's ability to survive in the long run.

The truth is that American Jews, and most Americans, passively accept Israel's actions because the strength of the Jewish Lobby in America prevents any other voices from being heard. Now, more than ever, Jews worldwide, especially those in America, must realize the atrocities that Israel is committing and defending not only in the name of Judaism but in the name of Jews worldwide. The injustice is clear for anyone who is able to visit and see the facts on the ground, but this too is becoming increasingly difficult as the Israeli government seeks to limit the international presence in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories as it continues its process of separation, exclusion and expulsions-in other words, apartheid and ethnic cleansing.

The political Zionism that inspired early thinkers like Herzl has of course taken on much stronger religious tones over the years, transforming Zionism from an exclusionary movement in part of Palestine into an aggressively hateful movement in all of historic Palestine. This is of course embodied by Israel's ongoing occupation and increased settlement buildup in the occupied Palestinian territories. Regardless of the countless violations of international law, many pro-Israel zealots have turned to religious law and intangible notions like "God's promise" as a way to justify old-fashioned colonialism. In 1971, then Prime Minister Golda Meir told *Le Monde* that "This country exists as the fulfillment of a promise made by God Himself. It would be ridiculous to ask it to account for its legitimacy". If Zionism already stood on shaky ground with a nationalist foundation, then the religious narrative does not exactly place it on higher moral ground.

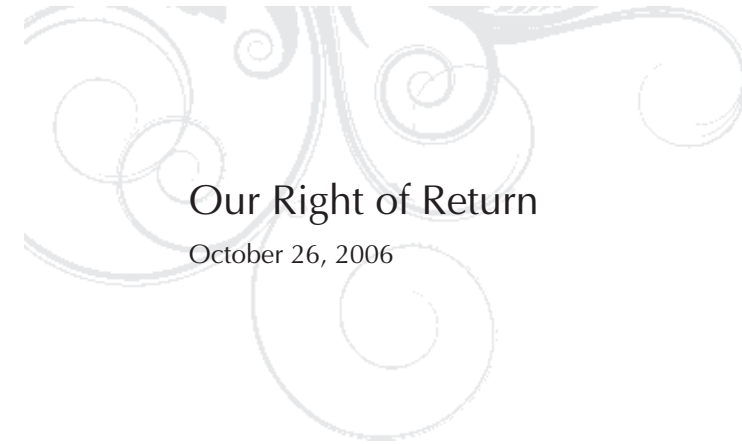
The ultimate failure of Israel, however, lies in its failure to secure peace. Israel, in fact, does not want peace. Even a large portion of the peace camp in Israel only seems to want peace when it is convenient and on

their terms. For example, during the assault on Lebanon, more than 80% of Israel supported the war, and even the most dovish of Israelis still maintained that Hezbollah had provoked the Israeli army. In fact, Hezbollah and Israel had been involved in low intensity skirmishes since the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, and there is substantial evidence that Israel had carefully planned a detailed assault plan/invasion of Lebanon prior to the July 12 raid in which two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped. Recent reports also show that Military Intelligence had clear knowledge of impending plots to capture Israeli soldiers and failed to act on them. Of course, the cross-border raid and subsequent rocket attacks gave Israel much needed excuse (and international legitimacy) to conduct their large-scale assault; a preemptive strike of such scale would hardly have been acceptable. With the world's permission, Israel unleashed a military assault of such obvious disproportion that even many of Israel's allies had to question its actions. What had happened? Israeli generals had seen an opportunity to flex militarily, something they had been aching to after several years of low-intensity conflict in the occupied territories involving little more than small scale raids and the occasional missile or bomb. The result, massive civilian losses in Lebanon, an already war-torn country reduced to rubble, and yet the kidnapped Israel soldiers remain in captivity and Hezbollah (already having claimed victory) is more powerful than ever, not just in Lebanon and Syria and among Palestinians, but in Jordan and Egypt as well.

And somehow, ongoing conflict with Israel's neighbors is going to help secure the future of a Jewish State? Israel and her neo-con friends in Washington have grown very accustomed to using apparent "threats to the Jewish State" as justification for aggression and violence in the name of "defending" Israel. This policy of course has reached unprecedented levels in the post-9/11 world, as Israel declared itself an ally of the US in the "War on Terror". For example, Israel and her supporters, most importantly the US, have drawn such a misleading picture of the Iranian nuclear issue one might think that Israel destruction by a nuclear missile...or perhaps even Iranian soldiers marching on Jerusalem...is imminent. Not even imminent, perhaps it is happening as we speak!

The level of awareness among the American public is so low that they will swallow-whole any “information” that is provided to them, no matter how incorrect or biased.

Israel has made strong connections with the United States, particularly with the neoconservative movement, and has made little to no connections with its Arab neighbors. This is particularly problematic, given that the United States will not enjoy its hegemony of the region forever. Given the present imbroglios in Iraq and Afghanistan, America’s “moment” appears to be on the verge of expiring. Ultimately, Israel has done almost everything wrong to secure its own future. Furthermore, if Jews who have no connection to Israel realize what crimes are being committed in their name, they too will distance themselves from the so-called “Jewish State”. Zionism may have been a noble idea in its earliest stages-to protect European Jews from the threat of European anti-Semitism-but the creation of an illegitimate state in Palestine completely failed in this regard. Today, Zionist hardliners (especially in the form of settlers) espouse the same brand of hatred against their Arab neighbors today that originally prompted the development of the Zionist movement. Anyone who visits Hebron today can see graffiti messages, written by (American) Israeli settlers, declaring the need to “GAS ALL THE ARABS” a horrific statement, the irony of which is enough to make anyone sick and scared. Israel has misused accusations of anti-Semitism, and the legacy of the holocaust, to justify its criminal acts. Somehow, Israel has managed to place itself above the law, untouchable by international conventions, UN resolutions, or basic ethical and moral standards. Perhaps then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon articulated the hypocrisy of the Jewish State best in 2001, when he expressed that “Israel may have the right to put others on trial, but certainly no one has the right to put the Jewish people and the State of Israel on trial.”



Our Right of Return

October 26, 2006

For the vast majority of Palestinians, accepting a two-state solution comes at a very dear price; essentially it underlines abandoning our legitimate claim to what is now “Israel Proper,” or historical Palestine. Without having to dwell on the issue, particularly as we have been well absorbed into Oslo’s model of defeatism and unrewarded compromise, a word for the history books must be clearly echoed: the state of Israel was created in 1948 at the very expense of the indigenous Palestinian population. It would never have come into existence without the terrorization, massacre, uprooting, dispossession, and displacement of more than 800,000 Palestinians from their homes, whose total population today has already exceeded 4.5 million refugees; hence Al-Nakba.

The issue of the refugees is commonly identified by Palestinians, at least the so-called “pragmatists” among them, as the major stumbling block in reaching a final solution to the Palestinian-Zionist conflict. It is also embraced by those of us (short-sightedly) labeled as “rejectionists” and “nationalists” as the nucleus of the Palestinian liberation movement altogether. However, to all Israelis, without exception, the Palestinian refugees’ right of return is immediately and absolutely dismissed as a romantic aspiration, the mere mention of which constitutes a perceived rejection to the existence of Israel itself, and may even ignite the over-consumed, yet common, accusations of anti-Semitism against those who dare to defend it.

Ultimately, contemplating the return of 4.5 million refugees to their original homes in Haifa, Nazareth, Jaffa, among other Palestinian cities, towns, and villages stolen by Jewish terrorists in 1948 is a no-starter for Israelis and their supporters in any future negotiations with the PLO; its realization automatically contradicts the foundations of political Zionism, and consequently undermines the embodiment of *Der Judenstaat* (Theodor Herzl's "The Jewish State"), the essence of which advocates the emergence of an exclusively-Jewish sovereign entity among nations.

To pioneers of political Zionism like Herzl and, at a later stage, Chaim Weizmann, the underlying message to the Palestinians is still echoed by prominent leaders and scholars in modern day Israel, namely that we (Palestinians) are part of the greater Arab world, and can, therefore, conveniently be absorbed into any neighboring country of this "disputed" narrow strip of land west of the River Jordan, while the roaming Jewish nation has finally settled in "God's Promised Land;" the ONLY land on which the self-proclaimed "chosen people" may unite after centuries of persecution.

This position, despite its blatant negation of the Palestinian narrative and identity, and victimization of an entire native population at the twilight of a fading colonial era, is clearly asserted and defended by the state of Israel to the bitter end, unlike the contradicting stances traditionally adopted by both the Palestinian leadership and society concerning the issue.

It is hardly a secret that the refugee issue is almost taboo to most Palestinians, albeit for different reasons and in different contexts. For staunch advocates of the right of return, any attempt, or even insinuation, to adopt a more flexible stance in the interpretation of UN Resolution 194 is immediately undermined as compromising of legitimate Palestinian legal, political, and ethical rights, destructive to Palestinian national interests, and even (by radical standards) indirectly conducive

to Zionist aspirations.

On the other hand, the passionately consistent discourse adopted by the pro-return movement constitutes a disturbing reality to the cynics and calculating pragmatists of modern Palestinian society, whose realist outlook on history dictates their inability to even contemplate the return of one refugee to his/her rightful home, let alone the flow of millions back into a "non-existent" Palestine. By broad definition, the governing dynamics of this logic are arguably founded on decades of oppression under a brutal Israeli military occupation, whose impact on ordinary Palestinians inside the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has had its toll; whose overwhelming destruction of life calls for the desperate preservation of what is left. Ironically, this sense of submission is ultimately the outcome of which Israel's occupation regime has essentially sought.

While this ongoing debate between the return of the Palestinian refugees to Palestine and their integration/absorption into their respective host countries continues, there is an unmistakably disturbing sense of self-delusion and even self-deception: after almost 60 years in Diaspora, a wider Palestinian consensus on the right of return is long overdue. Essentially, should we opt for the full adoption of 194, hasn't the time come for a unified Palestinian stance concerning the means to implement it? Equally important, should the Palestinian leadership finally decide, even unwillingly, that the reality far exceeds the dream, and ultimately the refugees would have to be absorbed, wouldn't the PLO have to begin the painful process of adapting our refugees to this unthinkable reality? This is not to advocate any particular position, but rather to provoke a more mature debate on a cause that, at worst, deserves to be addressed with integrity and transparency, and away from shallow rhetoric and misleading nationalistic bravado.

Meanwhile, millions of our Palestinian brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, continue to live in limbo in the impoverished camps of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria, among others,

with the increasingly remote hope that one day they may realize the return to their own promised land.



Double Standards, Hypocrisy, and “God’s Chosen People”

October 23, 2006

The most obvious is usually the easiest to defend, refute or criticize because there is less to uncover and less manipulations to wade through before getting to the stark truth. This has always been the case with the United States’ relationship with the Palestinians in particular, and the Arabs and Muslims in general vis-à-vis Israel.

There is nothing more solid than hard facts. This year, the US House of Representatives approved US\$ 2.46 billion in assistance to Israel alone for 2007, which is the largest sum received by any country. US\$ 2.34 billion of this package has been earmarked for military aid in addition to the US\$ 120 million in standard economic aid. This is incomparable to what the Palestinians receive. According to the website www.ifamericansknew.org, Israel received US\$ 15,139,178 a day from the US in 1997 while Palestinian NGO’s received US\$ 232,290 a day. There is nothing opaque about the US’ bias towards Israel here. It is common knowledge that Israel is the largest recipient of US financial assistance even though its gross domestic product per capita (US\$ 17,500 in 1997) makes it one of the wealthier countries in the world. Palestinians, though far more in need of financial aid from international donors, receive mere scraps from the United States in comparison to Israel.

Unfortunately, however, the bias runs much deeper than the copious greenbacks offered to America’s puppy. Let us probe the issue of

America's own citizens - people born on US soil or legally naturalized citizens and who carry the navy blue passport with the bald eagle embossed on its cover. Hundreds of thousands of American (and other foreign) citizens of Palestinian origin have made their homes in Palestine, many of them decades ago. They have raised their children here, built businesses, taught in schools and universities and have come to consider Palestine their permanent home. For years, these Palestinians, many of who applied and were denied permanent residency in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip by Israeli authorities, have been forced to leave and re-enter the Palestinian territories, via Israel, on a three-month visitor's visa.

While cumbersome and costly, this was the only way these US-citizens could remain with their families. However, following the outbreak of the Aqsa Intifada and escalating to alarming numbers last year, hundreds of these US passport holders have been turned back at Israel's borders, told to return from whence they came and promptly informed that they were now "persona non grata" in Israel.

At first, the belief was that these were isolated, albeit preposterous, incidents. However, when the number of Palestinians with foreign passports denied entry sharply rose, so did the panic among this sector of society. Complaints were lodged repeatedly with the US Consulate, which at best, asked that the incidents be "documented." One American, who was kept in a holding cell at Ben Gurion Airport for seven hours being told she would be put back on the next plane to the States, was told by a dry voice at Tel Aviv's American Embassy that Israel has full sovereignty over its borders and that, basically, they were not willing to intervene in Israel's "security."

After months of incessant badgering and complaints, a grassroots organization called the Campaign for the Right of Entry/Re-Entry to the oPt finally received an official response saying that the US State Department had lodged a formal complaint with the Israeli embassy in

Washington regarding restriction of access to Americans wanting to enter the Palestinian territories.

It still remains to be seen how this will impact the approximately 120,000 people affected by Israel's policy of denying Palestinians entry.

The real question is what would the United States have done if the policy was directed against American Jews systematically denied entry, let's say, to an Arab country? Would the President himself not be up in arms? Would there not be accusations of "anti-Semitism" flying like sparks? If this were the case, would not the United States have threatened this "other" country with sanctions if they did not reverse their policy? This is all hypothetical of course, because in this day and age, such discrimination against Israelis or Jews for that matter would not be tolerated. Take the much more innocuous incident involving Hollywood mega-star Mel Gibson a few months ago. In a drunken tirade, Gibson sounded off to a Los Angeles police officer who pulled him over for his inebriated state, and uttered the unutterable. Gibson was said to have told the officer that, "Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world."

The rest is history. Not nearly as berated for the fact that he was drinking and driving at 02:00 in the morning, Gibson was grilled to the bone for his "anti-Semitic" attack. The sobered-up actor immediately apologized to the Jewish community for offending them and offered to speak at synagogues to explain his "true" feelings. Gibson made headlines for days and prompted several email exchanges on message boards. One emailer named "Jim" sent this message to a BBC message board on the subject: "The whole affair is another glaringly blatant example of an enormous double standard. If Robert Redford had said to a policeman, while being arrested for drunk driving, 'the Muslims are responsible for all the wars in this world', absolutely no notice of his words would have been taken by the media."

This is painfully true. A month later, the world was lent evidence to this ugly double-standard. When Pope Benedict XVI quoted a fourteenth century Roman emperor who called Islam “evil” in order to corroborate his statements on jihad, not much more than a whimper was heard throughout the non-Muslim world. While riots broke out throughout Arab and Islamic countries over the Pope’s statements, the Vatican coolly stated that it was “not the intentions of the Holy Father to offend the sensibilities of Muslim faithful.” This was hardly an apology, which by the way, was never officially uttered by the pontiff.

So, it seems fair to say that the intoxicated slurs of a Hollywood celebrity are far more worthy of media attention and profuse apologies than the calculated remarks of the spiritual leader of more than one billion Catholics.

The Palestinians and Muslims alike have become poignantly aware that when it comes to the United States and the western world in general, they are fighting an upstream battle in combating stereotypes and double-standards. The common maxim “What goes for the geese goes for the gander” is certainly not true in regards to Palestinians and Israel, and globally, when it comes to Muslims and Jews. If Mel Gibson learned one thing from his DUI arrest, it is not only that he should not drink and drive but that he should keep his mouth shut when it comes to “God’s chosen people”.



Settlements Should Always be a Priority

November 20, 2006

One of the most dangerous and most insidious powers of time is that it can slowly neutralize issues that once evoked strong sentiments. Of course, this has a positive side to it, represented in the common maxim “Time heals all.” In the case of illegal Jewish settlements on occupied Palestinian land, however, time has not been on our side at all.

In strict legal terms, the status of these settlements, numbered somewhere close to 200 in the West Bank, could not be clearer. The Fourth Geneva Convention, to which Israel is a signatory, prohibits Israel from establishing colonies, while the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 452 in 1979, which carried the same message: *“...calls upon the Government and People of Israel to cease the establishment, construction and planning of settlements in the Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem.”*

Still, Israel has continued to build, expand and multiply these illegal settlements unabated. While the first Jewish settlement was established in the West Bank just months after the 1967 War, by the end of 1968, there were 30 others speckled throughout the newly occupied territories. Today, there are approximately half a million settlers living in West Bank settlements, according to ARIJ, the Applied Research Institute. Approximately 200,000 settlers live in settlements around Jerusalem, which has always been the primary target for Israel as a way to squeeze out as much of the Arab Palestinian population from the city as possible and flood it with Jewish residents.

Settlements have always been a major source of contention between the Palestinian leadership and Israel. However, while Israel has still not succeeded in convincing the entire world that these settlements are part of "Israel" and not illegal, it has succeeded in whittling down the razor sharp criticism surrounding settlements, especially in Jerusalem. Shockingly, this has even spilled over into certain sectors of Palestinian society.

For years, Israel has insisted on calling Jerusalem-area settlements "neighborhoods" or "communities" of Jerusalem rather than by their real name. The fact is, Israel has created two rings around Jerusalem - one inner and one outer ring, to create what it unilaterally calls "Greater Jerusalem." These "communities" are all part of this grand plan. However, what happens when even relatively intelligent and educated Palestinians buy into this propaganda and believe the east Jerusalem settlement of Gilo is just a neighborhood in the city?

Here is where the real danger lies. Gilo, established in 1971 on lands confiscated from the Palestinian villages of Beit Jala, Beit Safafa and Sharafat, is part of the inner ring of settlements around Jerusalem. Not only are the settlements illegal under international law given that they are built on occupied land, but they are based on discriminatory housing criteria. Residents of these three Palestinian villages cannot live in Gilo on the very land that was previously usurped from them.

So, where have we as Palestinians gone wrong in portraying the accurate portrait of these cancerous growths? It is one thing for the United States to dance around Israel's illegalities in the name of their brotherly alliance, but it is totally unacceptable for our own people to be sucked into the same labyrinth of semantic deceit. Our leadership cannot afford to be anything but vigilant in forwarding the battle against illegal settlements, not only to the outside world, but to our own people as well. Nothing short of a complete boycott of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem will suffice if the Palestinians are ever to have a chance

at curbing this quickly accelerating Israeli policy, which if we are not careful, will eventually devour what is left of the small portion of Palestine still up for negotiation.

Israel understands this play for time more than anyone. With the realization that a final settlement with the Palestinians will inevitably be reached, Israel is scrambling to create as many facts on the ground as possible. Hence, the discriminatory Separation Wall, which has devoured large chunks of West Bank territory and of course, settlement growth. According to the PLO's Negotiations Affairs Department, Israel approved tenders for 690 new settlement units in two major east Jerusalem settlements: Ma'aleh Adumim and Beit Illit less than two months ago. Once the housing units are up and running, they could accommodate up to 2,800 new Jewish settlers.

This is all happening under the noses of the international community and even the Palestinians themselves. While Israel purposely allows the spotlight to be shone on its military aggression in the Gaza Strip in particular, it is working stealthily behind the scenes to secure its future in the West Bank. Once real people are living in real homes and have real lives, Israel's leaders know it will be much more difficult "from a humanitarian" viewpoint to uproot them in order to make way for the "less deserving" Palestinians.

What will remain, sadly, are a few isolated cantons, pathetic pockets of Palestinian rule, carved out of a larger canvas of major settlement blocs and bypass roads connecting Jewish-Israelis everywhere. Right now, the Palestinians have to choose their battles carefully. While it is extremely important to make the world see the injustice of Israel's ongoing assault on the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank and force it to halt its bloody onslaught, it is equally as important to look further than the tip of our noses. Because if we don't, we will wake up one day with the little land we thought we could surely claim as our own, pulled out from beneath us.



For Palestinians, the World is a Dangerous Place

January 31, 2007

When people say the world is a different place after September 11, 2001, they are absolutely right. Of course, there have been changes at several levels, which have run deep beneath the subcutaneous layers of politics, mentalities and behaviors. However, one acutely tangible ramification of the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon is the manner in which non-whites, especially Arab and Muslim peoples are perceived and subsequently treated in the United States and in other western parts of the world.

No one knows this better than Palestinians at the receiving end of this newly heightened racist mentality. Earlier this month, three Palestinian students were brutally beaten by a group of football jockeys at Guilford College, a small Quaker institution in the southern US state of North Carolina. The three young men, Fares Khader, Osama Sabbah and Omar Awartani, suffered several injuries varying from bruises and abrasions to concussions. While the perpetrators were charged with assault and "ethnic intimidation" charges, the FBI investigation is still pending over whether the attack was a "hate crime."

According to eyewitness testimonies, there is not a shadow of a doubt that the football players were motivated by anything else. The three Palestinians were called "terrorists" and "sand niggers" and beaten with metal knuckles. The question however, is not whether or not this was a racially-motivated attack - obviously it was - but how the United States

has been transformed into a country where such heinous acts of discrimination are reprimanded with as little as a slap on the wrist - the culprits have been released on \$2,000 bail.

Not that the United States was ever a safe haven for minorities. On the contrary, the country itself was established through the persecution and marginalization of an entire nation, the Native Americans, or the "Red Indians" as Christopher Columbus so naively called them "He erroneously believed he had found the path to India when he stumbled on the New World..."

This was followed by the slave trade of Africans from 1565 to 1807, their descendents who later became today's African-Americans. This ethnic group has historically suffered the most and for the longest from racism than any other ethnic group.

Finally, there are those who help compile what the US has become famous for - a huge "melting pot" of ethnicities, including Asian-American, Arab-American, Mexican, Italian and so forth. All of these groups, without exception, have been the butt of racial slurs, hate crimes and discrimination in the work place and in educational institutions at one time or another and all of them still find themselves on a lower rung of the "food chain" than the average Caucasian American.

Hence, it goes without saying that Arab-Americans have had their share of racist stings. Young American citizens of Arab descent have been taunted by fellow classmates as being "camel-jockeys" and wearing "fig leaves." They were bullied, sprung with racial slurs and suffered the occasional beating, solely because of the color of their skin, their religion and foreign-sounding names.

But it was not until after September 11th that the situation for this minority group - some who have made their homes in the United States for generations - took a nasty turn for the worse. The FBI was now making

surprise raids on their homes and businesses, scrutinizing their bank accounts, their way of living and their way of worshipping. Women who wore the Muslim headscarf and men who made their way to the local mosque five times a day for prayer were immediately under suspicion. Arabs and Muslims were pulled aside at airport security for additional checking, held back for hours and arrested without charge. A recent study presented on an American talk show revealed that while African-Americans have suffered from racism the longest in American history, it is the Arabs and Muslims who are feeling the sting of discrimination the most today.


The incident at Guilford only epitomizes this new and dangerous trend. What is most bizarre about this whole situation is that even according to the simple minds of average Americans, the Palestinians cannot possibly be held responsible for the events of September 11. Not one of the hijackers was Palestinian, nor were the masterminds behind the attack. On the contrary, late Palestinian president Yasser Arafat immediately condemned the attack and even added some audio-visual effects to his words - hours after the news that the Twin Towers had collapsed into a heap of rubble and dust, Arafat was filmed in a local hospital, sleeve rolled up and IV in place, donating blood to the American people.

This was obviously not enough to assuage the fears of the American people that all Arabs and all Muslims were terrorists. Their fears were only compounded by the American media, which portrayed Palestinians as suicide bombing lunatics thirsty for the blood of innocent Israelis, and by the American government. The average American took the bait thrown at them by their president. "You are either with us or against us" George W. Bush told his people on the eve of the US invasion of Afghanistan.

The repercussions of this gung-ho mentality have sent lethal tremors, not only across continents but throughout the collective mind of

America. So, while the attack on the three Palestinian university students is abhorrent, it is not only the six jockeys that should be put on trial. It is an entire mindset, created and nurtured by the condescending mentality of a neo-conservative administration that inherently believes it has the right to bomb whole countries, execute leaders and cause the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in the name of their country's security.

For this, the Arabs, Muslims and so many other people of the world are suffering. It is time for those voices beginning to rise within American society against this blind hatred to turn their cries into a roar. US presidential elections are drawing near. The responsibility lies with those enlightened Americans who see the injustices perpetrated by their own government and people to educate the ignorant majority, because this kind of hatred will only further fester, rise up and spill over, infecting more and more minds and bringing harm to more and more innocent people.



For Palestine's Children, Independence Is the Only Answer

June 6, 2007

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the June, 1967 War, which began the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, east Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan Heights. As the Palestinians look back at four decades of military rule, which has impacted all Palestinians, big and small, it seems only right to focus on the most vulnerable sector of society - our children.

As in any conflict, the most marginalized sectors of society are also the most affected. Among the Palestinians, children have had to endure an amalgam of hardships, both directly and indirectly resulting from the ongoing Israeli occupation. Typical of any developing nation, children comprise a large part of Palestinian society. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, an estimated 2.1 million children, or 52 percent of the population, live in the occupied territories.

That is a big chunk of society, and one which has been hit particularly hard throughout these 40 years and even before. In the 1948 War, harrowing images of Palestinians fleeing their homes in terror showed small children tightly clutching their parents' hands or being toted on adult hips to expedite their speedy escape from the horrors of the Israeli atrocities that had transpired. Again, in the exodus of 1967, children followed their parents, fleeing their homes in search of safety.

According to Save the Children, almost half of all UNRWA registered refugees in the camps of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are children under 18 years of age.

Being a refugee is not merely a statistic, obviously. With this title comes poverty, lack of proper education, health care and job opportunities. While UNRWA has provided its services to Palestinian refugees since the problem was created after the 1948 War, the agency was founded on a temporary basis and has faced difficulties keeping up with the growing refugee population vis-à-vis providing adequate services given that it has been forced to operate for over 60 years with no end in sight. Still, while refugees constitute a major sector of Palestinian society, children from all sectors and geographical locations have suffered under the burden of Israel's military occupation. For one, these children have known nothing else - even many of their parents were born after the inception of the occupation, so for them, this has been their reality from day one.

This reality includes unemployment, poverty [according to World Bank estimates, approximately two-thirds of the Palestinian population live under the poverty line of \$2/day], insufficient medical and educational services and the constant threat of Israeli military aggression.

Obviously, the right to life is the most basic and essential universal human right and one which Palestinians, including children, can never take for granted. According to Save the Children, since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September, 2000, 864 Palestinian children have been killed as a result of Israeli military or settler violence.

Children in the occupied Palestinian territories are constantly at risk of Israeli military operations in which they could lose their lives or their loved ones. Many children have witnessed the demolition of their homes, the violent death or arrest of a family member or even their own arrest. Defense for Children International reported that 398

Palestinian children below the age of 18 are currently being held in Israeli detention facilities.

Another urgent concern among Palestinian children is lack of proper nutrition. The international economic embargo being imposed on the Palestinian territories has had far-reaching ramifications among all sectors of society. Direct financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority has been halted since the new government under Hamas was formed last year, and Israel's increasingly tightened "security" measures in the West Bank and Gaza including the separation wall, have resulted in lack of access to farmland, medical services and jobs. Additionally, the intermittent civil servant strike in protest of delayed salaries has paralyzed large swathes of society, plunging scores of families into poverty.

Thus, children, along with their parents, suffer from a lack of income, which inevitably leads to a lack of proper nutrition. Save the Children has reported that chronic malnutrition among Palestinian children currently stands at 10 percent, a staggering 13.9 percent in Gaza alone. The list is practically endless - children living in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem must endure sporadic Israeli-imposed closures which prevent them from reaching their schools or medical facilities. They are constantly harassed by Israeli soldiers manning the 540-some military checkpoints peppered throughout the territories, sometimes having to pull up their shirts or pull down their pants as part of Israel's perpetually bizarre world of "state security."

Furthermore, because they are constantly being reminded that they were not born free and independent, children often take on the adult tasks of emancipation. As Palestinians, we must be equally concerned with the rate at which our children become involved in Palestinian political factions, some barely in their teen years. Coupled with the oppressive atmosphere of the Israeli occupation, this sense of duty to join the ranks of the resistance has also stripped our children of a healthy

childhood.

Having said all of this, there is one fundamental point which must be driven home. While it is extremely tempting to package the hardship and suffering of our children in the ready-made wrapping paper of an "urgent humanitarian cause", this is where we must make a clear-cut distinction between the Palestinian situation and that of impoverished children in Southeast Asia or Africa for example.

Yes, our children lack some very basic humanitarian needs such as proper education, nutrition and protection from harm. Still, while these are important components of the problem, which should by no means be disregarded, it is the political quagmire that trumps all other issues. This is to say that once the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian land in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem is eradicated and an independent, viable and competent Palestinian state is established, the proper channels would have been set up for these issues to be properly addressed and resolved. This is a point that the international community, no matter how well-intended it may seem - must take to heart and actively work towards achieving.

Perhaps this is beginning to happen. In its press release on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the 1967 War, Save the Children stated, "All parties should contribute proactively to peace negotiations in order to provide a comprehensive and final settlement to the conflict and a safe future for the children living in the Middle East region."



Excuse Me, What Nationality Did You Say You Were?

August 1, 2007

My older brother recently informed me that his three children were eligible for US passports, given that he, like myself and my other siblings, were all born in the United States. But my nephew and niece were hardly without citizenship even before this most recent discovery. Married to a Palestinian/German woman with both German [or EU] and Israeli citizenship, my brother's children also have European Union passports while the baby, born in Palestine is also the bearer of an Israeli passport.

Not bad, for one family. It is safe to say that my brother, his wife and their three beautiful children are secure for life, never having to worry about finding themselves nation-less or without citizenship.

This is hardly the case for most Palestinians living in the eastern sector of Jerusalem. Following Israel's capture of East Jerusalem in the 1967 War, those residents who happened to be present in the city at the time of the national census were granted "permanent residency status" in the city. Less than citizenship, this status placed these residents in a somewhat stable but constantly precarious situation.

It is not that the newly installed Israeli authority did not offer Palestinians Israeli citizenship. However, there were heavy strings attached, including an allegiance to the state, learning Hebrew and ultimately relinquishing their unique status of Palestinians in Jerusalem, the self-proclaimed

capital of the Jewish state. Given that the wounds of the recent and previous war [of 1948] were still raw, this was not deemed an honorable option. Accepting Israeli citizenship was perceived as a ploy to neutralize the Palestinian presence and tip the demographic scales in favor of the rising Jewish majority. Hence, most Palestinian Jerusalemites opted for the residency status, thus upholding what they viewed as their national struggle against Israel.

With this system securely in place, Israel retained the right, at any time, to withdraw or suspend the status of any Jerusalemite under suspicion of acts of Palestinian national resistance. While this remained mostly a threat on paper, over the past decade or so, Israel has begun to put this self-granted power into practice, creating a myriad of reasons why this status could be revoked.

In 1995, Israel enforced the so-called "Center of Life" policy, which entails that Palestinian residents of east Jerusalem must prove that their center of life is within the unilaterally proclaimed municipality borders of Jerusalem. This means, Jerusalemites must produce proof that they live, work, go to school and pay taxes inside Jerusalem. Anything short of this puts them at risk of ID confiscation, all of their municipal rights revoked.

This new law touched thousands of families, especially those who married spouses holding West Bank IDs and who decided to make their homes outside of Jerusalem. Such decisions were usually made after the failure to obtain family reunification in Jerusalem. This process (whereby a non-Jerusalem resident is granted residency status on grounds of marriage to a Jerusalemite) is an extremely cumbersome, lengthy and oftentimes fruitless process. It has left tens of thousands of families in limbo, living either "illegally" within Jerusalem's borders - at risk at all times of deportation outside the city - or living outside of Jerusalem and therefore at risk of losing their Jerusalem IDs.

According to the Jerusalem Center for Social and Economic Rights, the Israeli Interior Ministry recorded a 500 percent increase in Palestinians who lost their residency rights compared to previous years, estimated at 1,363 people last year alone.

There are a number of other “justifications” given for revoking Jerusalem ID’s including residing outside the country for a number of years. Some residents have even reported that they were informed of this risk after a period of six months. Jerusalemites outside the country always run the risk of not being allowed back into the country on grounds that their ID’s have been revoked. Furthermore, Israeli “law” in east Jerusalem prohibits holders of permanent Jerusalem residency to also have residency of any other country. This is also grounds for ID confiscation. This “center of life” policy has further exasperated the situation of Palestinian Jerusalemites after the construction of the separation wall, which has cut into former Jerusalem suburbs and put its residents on the West Bank side of the barrier. It is predicted that these areas will eventually be pushed out of Jerusalem and included in Palestinian Authority areas. Tens of thousands of Jerusalemites would then have automatically lost their rights to the city.

While this is a contravention of basic human rights for which Israel should not be allowed a free hand, it is less detrimental to those who hold multiple citizenships and who can build their lives somewhere else. For Palestinian Jerusalemites, this is a gross and devastating violation of their basic right to life. In practical terms, if a Jerusalem resident - who has no other citizenship - has their ID revoked, they are basically stateless, with no rights to any country. This means no medical or national insurance, no means of traveling, no rights to land or property or to marry and register children.

This looming threat has left Palestinians in Jerusalem constantly scurrying for validation. For any simple government-required task such as marriage and birth certificates, Jerusalemites are demanded to produce paper

upon paper, proving that their center of life is within the municipality borders. School and medical records are carefully preserved and electricity, water and telephone bills are stashed away in safe places for future reference.

Still, it is this silent battle being waged by the Israeli government aimed at ridding its “eternal capital” of any Palestinian presence that is going on virtually unnoticed. Israel openly admits that it keeps the Arab Palestinian population in Jerusalem at less than 30 percent. With these recent and even more discriminatory measures, it seems it is bringing the bar down considerably. While the world focuses on bogus promises of peace and pitting one Palestinian group against another, Israel continues to deprive Jerusalem’s Palestinians of their most basic rights, undeterred.

So, if for some reason, my brother’s children do not get their US passports or the other two children are not granted Israeli citizenship like their mother and youngest sister, they have at least one other passport to fall back on. Unfortunately, most Jerusalemites cannot claim this same luxury. If for example, my Jerusalemite relatives lose their ID cards, they have no other country to call their own.



Israel's Missed Opportunities

September 19, 2007

Everyone is always accusing the Palestinians of missing out on opportunities for peace. The worst Palestinian-bashing came after the Camp David summit in 2000, when President Yasser Arafat supposedly sabotaged his people's best chance at a Palestinian state and international recognition. Seven years later, the Palestinians are still feeling the backlash of that horrendous fallacy.

These accusations go back much farther than that, even. There are still many voices berating the Palestinians and Arabs for not accepting the United Nations partition plan in 1947. If they did, these critics argue, the Palestinians would have had their state and the conflict would have stopped right there.

But never, not once, have we heard that Israel - the aggressor and the occupier - has missed out on an opportunity. It is always the fault of the Palestinians, Israel portraying itself as constantly outstretching its hand in peace only to be slapped back down by its belligerent neighbors. This is yet one gross misrepresentation of the dynamics of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Israel has repeatedly failed to grasp opportunities for peace, at least its own peace, over the years. At present, it is fair to say that it just might be too late to recapture opportunities gone by, but it is still clear that at least some players in this conflict understand the wheels that set these opportunities in motion.

Perhaps the British said it best. A government report entitled "Economic aspects of peace in the Middle East", stressed that peace and security for Israel would never be achieved if the Palestinians' economic conditions do not improve. On that note, Britain has called on Israel, the international community and the Arab world to assist the Palestinians economically so that peace efforts could move forward.

Plain and simple, this is where the Israelis went wrong. Economic prosperity for the Palestinians has always been the key to Israel's peace of mind. True, the Palestinians' national goal of establishing their own independent and sovereign state is always before them. However, when they are economically prospering, they are in a better place to negotiate and reach an amicable agreement.

The best case in point is the period following the Oslo Accords. Here, it is imperative that we set aside the negative political ramifications these accords had on the Palestinians in terms of reaching their national goal of independence. For the purpose of shining a light on Israel's true intentions and utter lack of desire to ever allow the Palestinians to prosper, the role of devil's advocate is in order. From an Israeli viewpoint, the Oslo Accords were the answer to their prayers. Not only did the accords ensure that a viable Palestinian state would take years, if ever, to materialize, but it gave Israel the upper hand in crucial matters such as borders, water, refugees and even Jerusalem.

From a Palestinian perspective, the Oslo Accords were no more than a death trap, creating an illusion of liberation and independence without fully realizing that Israel was not forced to relinquish any true power over substantial issues.

Still, the Palestinians weakened to the temptations offered by this masquerade, swallowing the poison whole. For the near decade that followed, Palestinians were made to believe their cities had been "liberated", scenes of ecstatic West Bankers throwing candy at

Palestinian forces returning from exile.

In tandem with this ill-placed euphoria came money, and lots of it. Not only was the international community - the United States, Europe, the Arab countries and even Israel - finally satisfied with the Palestinians' performance, but Palestinians abroad also felt comforted by the new arrangements created by the agreements. As a result, funds began flowing - the PA was pumped up with money from outside donors, international projects began popping up at every turn and wealthy Palestinians living luxurious lives abroad either returned to their motherland to invest here or established businesses from afar, resuscitating the Palestinian economy like never before.

This is where Israel showed its true colors. In the years that ensued, quiet prevailed. Political negotiations were ongoing and the Palestinians were reveling in their newfound economic prosperity, all the while looking forward to the eventual establishment of their state, which according to the accords, was to be declared after a five-year interim period.

Instead, Israel continued to renege on the agreements, shunning its commitment to freeze settlement construction and failing to offer any reasonable solutions to final status issues. Gradually, the Palestinians realized that they were treading water, at best. Regardless of how many meetings were held, summits attended and promises made, they were no closer to their own state than they had been before signing the accords. On the contrary, they were worse off. Now, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip had been completely isolated, settlements were growing at an exponential rate and Israeli army forces continued to raid Palestinian cities at whim.

Hence, the eruption of the Aqsa Intifada in September, 2000. The rest is history. Today, only a ghost of those post-Oslo years remains. Beleaguered Palestinian policemen guard a partly demolished and

pathetic presidential headquarters for a president that is caught between the rock of internal strife and hard place of an omnipresent Israeli occupation. Gaza is completely isolated by the Israelis from the outside and by Hamas from within, its people looking down the barrel of even worse poverty and unemployment than they have seen in recent years. Meanwhile, the forces of Palestinian resistance that lay dormant during the Oslo years have reawakened in the face of these dire conditions. Nothing can get the adrenaline of resistance and defiance flowing better than poverty, deprivation and no political solution breaking on the horizon.

The more Israel and the international community try to drain these voices of resistance dry, the stronger they will become. There was a time when economic contentment muffled most calls for defiance, but that time has passed. Israel has let that opportunity slip by.

The only lesson to be learnt here is not that the Oslo Accords were such a great opportunity for the Palestinians, because they were not. However, what they did do was expose Israel's true intentions. The post-Oslo years saw a hiatus in Palestinian attacks on Israelis, economic prosperity and the promise of some form of Palestinian independence. If Israel truly wanted peace, it would have taken advantage of the accords. Instead, Israel sabotaged even that, plunging the entire region into an even more vicious cycle of violence, from which it may take years to recover.



Fighting Fire with Fire

October 11, 2007

“Boycott” seems to have been adopted as the word de jour in the press this week. There have been calls recently by deposed Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, for Arab states to “boycott” the November Peace Summit in Maryland; there have been calls by Palestinian activists to “boycott” the One Voice Movement on suspicion that it is an Israeli funded initiative, spreading the wrong message, misleading the public and not taking major Palestinian grievances into consideration; and lastly, there have been multiple references to the long attempted academic “boycott” of Israelis which this week was served a massive blow. Instead of Israeli academics and institutions being boycotted, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, which had planned to visit the UK, liaise with their peers at British universities and speak on the Israeli boycott were told by their patron, the University and College Union [UCU], that their tour had been cancelled after various recommendations from legal consultations.

At the UCU May Conference in Bournemouth, the educational institution, by a vote of 158-99, decided to put Motion 30 into operation which called upon the institution to circulate the boycott requested by Palestinian trade unions to all branches and rally lecturers to “consider the moral implications of the existing and proposed links with Israeli academic institutions”. By this act, the UCU hoped to unite behind the Palestinian cause as well as instigate and exert some international pressure on Israel regarding their inhumane treatment of Palestinians

in the Occupied Territories. However, just a few months after this somewhat concrete show of solidarity, UCU Secretary General, Sally Hunt, announced that the academic boycott was not a priority and none of the 120,000 members of their organization would back it.

What ensued was a backlash which increased sympathy and support for Israel and their academic institutions. Individuals from all areas of academics and politics denounced the boycott calling it a curb on academic freedom, highly ineffective and ethically unjustified, some even deeming it anti-Semitic. The opposition was so fierce and influential that now the situation has exacerbated and created an air of uncertainty. As a result, Palestinian academics have been forbidden from coming and speaking in the UK.

There has been much speculation over the reason for the most recent stifling of and greatly criticized academic boycott. One thought maintains that the power of the Israeli lobby in the US and UK is such that the boycott was expected to fail. The other theory is that the UCU, like its predecessors, took the wrong angle of resisting occupation by prohibiting a party their right to freedom of speech and expression of thought. Both these explanations offer a credible enough insight.

The Israeli lobby has a substantial support base of influential groups and individuals. One must only glance at Mearsheimer and Walt and their new in-depth book on “The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy” to understand how prominent and powerful the supporters of Israel are in America. In addition, it is true that the ramifications of the Bournemouth Conference focused on Israel threatening their own boycott on the UK, which could be construed as being the decisive force behind the retraction of the boycott. Once plans for the boycott had been released, eminent lawyer, Chair at Harvard University and renowned Israel supporter, Alan Dershowitz, teamed up with equally respected British lawyer, Antony Julius, to oppose these “pitiful arguments”. Between the two of them, they rallied one hundred lawyers

on each side of the Atlantic and warned that they would “devastate and bankrupt” the British academic institutions. Despite British Prime Minister at the time, Tony Blair, personally ringing his counterpart Ehud Olmert in Israel, there were still reports that Israel would reply to this “boycott” by banning imports from Britain.

Amjad Barham from the Palestinian Federation of Unions of University Professors and Employees declared that Israel operates under a modern form of McCarthyism. I completely agree. The bullying, censorship and intimidation of the Palestinians attests to this. Barham also figures that Israel resorts to this behavior since they have lost confidence in their ability to rationally refute their case. I also agree. However, in this instance, the opposition mainly stemmed from the direction taken by the UCU rather than Israel’s specific role.

By threatening to boycott Israeli academic institutions, the international community suddenly used the prevention of freedom of speech, the expression of liberal thought, the right to assembly and discussion as going against all cornerstones of democracy practiced and supported fully by British educational institutions. By halting funding to Israeli institutions, visits, conferences and joint publishing deals, the UCU, according to those against the boycott, had violated the very principles they purport to represent and protect.

This moral argument of using academics to combat political situations has been abundantly clear since the inception of academic boycotts against Israel in 2002 when Steven and Hilary Rose proposed that an academic boycott of Israel could lead to more active international intervention.

In 2005 the Association of University Teachers [AUT] chose to boycott the Universities of Haifa and Bar-Ilan. However, opponents to this motion claimed that universities enjoy political independence and boycotts actually act as a deterrent in the peace process. A month later

the AUT cancelled the action.

In 2006 the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education [NATFHE] voted to boycott those Israelis who did not speak out against their government. The same argument developed centering on compromising the autonomy of academic institutions and the boycott was ceased.

This latest boycott proposal was met with similar disapproval. In September, the Liberal Democrat Conference condemned UCU as passing a “perverse decision” and moved to reject the proposal as it defied the principle of freedom of speech. Once the boycott had been cancelled as it proved to be “infringing discrimination legislation”, David Newman, professor of geopolitics at Ben Gurion University said that he was glad that they had “seen sense” and that universities were a haven for open dialogue, freedom of speech and liberal thought. Labor Chair of friends with Israel, MP Andrew Gwynne, declared that it wasn’t only illegal but undermined the academic freedom and integrity of Britain as well as contributing nothing to peace. Lastly, Tzipi Livni, Israeli Foreign Minister declared that “limiting freedom of speech is inherently wrong”. In addition to these, there were many other like minded responses from high ranking individuals.

All this talk of barriers and obstacles to freedom of speech, unfairness and ineffectiveness in achieving a peaceful solution raises another issue, a double standard if you will, which receives very little exposure.

In an article written by John Pilger on the academic boycott of Israel, he quoted John Chalcraft from the London School of Economics who confirmed that “the Israeli academy has long provided intellectual, linguistic, logistical, technical, scientific and human support for an occupation in direct violation of international law”. Despite all the opportunity for free speech available, Chalcraft continues that none of them have taken a stand.

And what happens when academics do speak out against Israel and express their freedom of speech? Edward Said's offices in Columbia University were burned down; Pilger received death threats after his film "Palestine is still the issue"; Mearsheimer and Walt were cast into academic ostracism for their article on the Israel Lobby in the London Review of Books; Norman Finkelstein was unexpectedly denied tenure at DePaul University for his "unprofessional personal attacks"; Uri Avnery, German / Israeli journalist and former member of the Knesset received death threats on account of his belief for non-Orthodox interference in religious and political life; and Ilan Pappé, a reputed Israeli historian, was asked to resign from Haifa University after expressing his support for the Israeli boycott.

One must not forget the treatment of the up and coming minds of the future. On Monday it was revealed that Saed Hasan, a Palestinian accepted on the Kellogg-Recanati International Executive MBA program, had been refused a permit by the Israeli military to enter Israel. Hasan is now in danger of losing his place, a scenario that none of the 92% of foreigners and Israelis on the joint Northwestern-Tel Aviv University program have to go through.

While examining actions by Israeli academic institutions, it is also important to note the following. Part of the land on which the University of Tel Aviv is built belongs to Sheikh Muwannis and used to be part of a Palestinian village whose inhabitants were expelled by Jewish militias in 1948. The Hebrew University is built on 800 acres of land illegally seized from Palestinian private owners in the West Bank after 1967. Finally, Bar-Ilan University has a branch on an illegal Israeli settlement in the West Bank.

Whether it is a moral problem of using academic institutions to influence a complex political situation promoting exclusion or forbidding freedom of speech as leverage is one issue not to be confused with whether academic boycotts, or any type of boycotts, actually work. Uri Avnery

believes that the problem with Israel is internal and no amount of external pressure will change how Israel operates. Is this the case? Many comparisons have been made between the Israeli / Palestinian issue and the apartheid in South Africa, so it would be fitting to investigate whether boycotts worked in that instance. Opinions, as one would expect, vary, mainly due to the difficulty in evaluating the use of boycotts, since they don't exist in a vacuum - they are normally implemented while other political measures are in place.

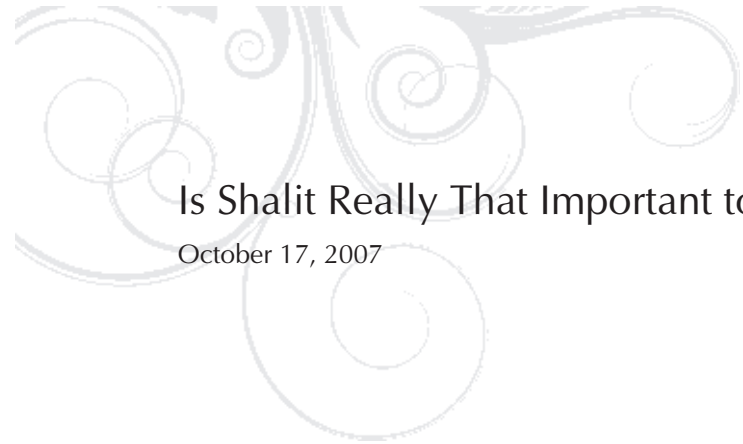
As in the example of South Africa, it is generally believed that the economic sanctions implemented by President Reagan in 1986 followed by the election of de Klerk in 1989, who abolished the Separate Amenities Act and released Nelson Mandela, were the catalysts for change in South Africa.

However, it is impossible to conclude that boycotts initiated by the African National Congress in the 60s, namely the academic, cultural, consumer and economic ones were utterly counterproductive. This is especially the case in sports. South Africa was and is a very proud sporting nation so its omission from the Olympics in 1962, its expulsion from various international sporting bodies and its generally tainted sporting reputation around the world must have greatly distressed the country.

Debates concerning the legitimacy and value of all boycotts, not just academic ones, will always exist. Are academic boycotts unjustified, irrational even racist attacks which curb freedom of speech and prove just to be an ineffective weapon in a political conflict arsenal; or, are they a crucial element in the tapestry of measures used to apply additional international pressure on the oppressive party?

In South Africa it was difficult to decipher with any true accuracy. However, in an area which Mandela deems the "greatest moral issue" in the world and what Bishop Desmond Tutu describes as 10 times

worse than the apartheid in South Africa, there are seriously limited options available to Palestinians. Hence, I am compelled to take the opinion that an academic boycott, along with other boycotts, such as the 1.4 million member UNISON group of UK Public Servants, can create in time, an environment of intense pressure which may encourage change and induce people to take notice. Academics are to Israel what sport is to South Africa - the area where they take the most pride. When all recent political activities spin into a web of inactivity with no future solution in sight and with atrocities still inflicted on Palestinians, all possible avenues must be considered to work towards progress in alleviating this political and humanitarian disaster.



Is Shalit Really That Important to Israel?

October 17, 2007

Ever since the kidnapping of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit in June 2006, the young soldier's name has ebbed and flowed in the media and in Israeli and Palestinian political discourse. At times, Shalit's name was splashed across front pages for days, while at other times, months went by without the mere mention of him.

The sheer inconsistency of Israel's so-called insistence on Shalit's safety, brings into question his government's real priorities regarding its captured soldiers. Recently, high ranking Israeli officials have expressed their concern over the hanging fate of Shalit. One unnamed official reportedly stated to the Hebrew daily Maariv that he was now concerned that Shalit would eventually share the fate of Ron Arad, an Israeli pilot who was captured in Lebanon in 1986. Attempts to release him though negotiations with Lebanese resistance groups have repeatedly failed and while there has been much speculation over the years about Arad's death, there is still no proof.

In July 2006, two other Israeli soldiers were taken hostage by Hizbullah on the Lebanese-Israeli border. The two soldiers - Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser - are yet to be located.

The more time goes by, the more Shalit's fate seems to be heading in this same direction. After his capture, the Israeli army carried out wide-scale military operations into the Gaza Strip in an attempt to locate and

rescue Shalit, but to no avail. The armed groups, Hamas included, which claimed responsibility for the soldier's capture, had hid him well and were in no hurry to disclose his whereabouts.

Israel must have realized this soon on in the game. After the initial devastating invasion, which resulted in scores of dead Palestinians, damage to several homes and infrastructure facilities including the major power plant, Israel seemingly decided on another tactic to try and secure Shalit's release.

Rumors then ensued about possible prisoner swaps. The Palestinians have all experienced the highs of anticipating the homecoming of their long awaited loved ones finally free from Israeli prisons in exchange for this lone soldier. But time and again, deals would falter at the last moment, the hopes of those behind bars and outside of them crashing down.

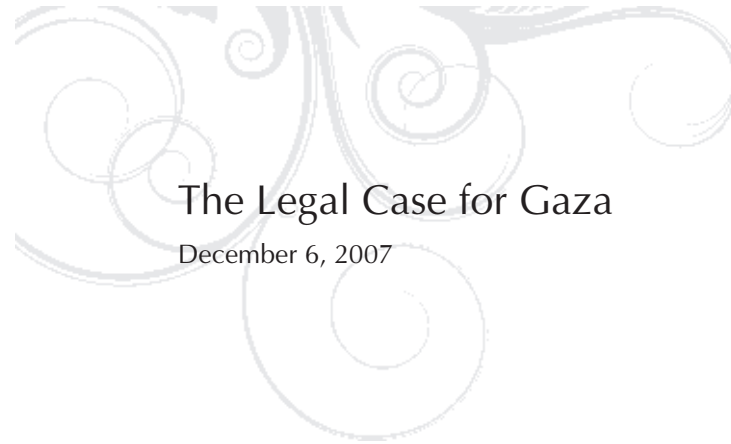
Upon first glance, any onlooker might accept the Israeli rationale behind rejecting this or that prisoner swap with the Palestinians - the Palestinians were asking for the release of too many prisoners, Israel could never accept to release prisoners with "Jewish blood on their hands", etc. However, after the first, then the second prisoner swap went bust, no sane person would believe that Israel - contrary to its declared intentions - was really hell-bent on bringing Shalit home.

It has been one year and four months since Shalit was captured after his tank was bombed just outside the Gaza border with Israel. The Israeli government has had ample opportunity to secure his release, especially in the early stages when Hamas was more receptive to outside mediation, namely from Egypt. At one point, Egyptian mediators hammered out a proposed deal where 600 Palestinian prisoners would be released in exchange for Shalit. Again, Israel would not have it. Israeli government officials said a prisoner swap would only "encourage more kidnappings."

Today, Shalit is barely mentioned, except in passing. The only logical explanation for Israel's stalling on the matter would be that the kidnapped soldier is just not very high up on their priority list. There is sufficient evidence that Shalit is still alive and well - Hamas has vowed to that - so Israel most likely wants to hold back on making any deals until it can release Shalit "for free" and not be seen as kowtowing to any Hamas demands, however reasonable.

In a roundabout way, Israel is banking on the new Palestinian government to solve certain issues it failed to accomplish. One is that of Shalit. If the Abbas-headed government eventually succeeds in pushing Hamas out of Gaza, which seems the most likely scenario given the deposed government's beleaguered status quo, Israel will find itself with a much more malleable Palestinian leadership to deal with. Once the more moderate Fateh government is securely in place in the Strip and Hamas has been cut down at the knees, Israel is betting Shalit will be as good as in the pocket. As far back as March, 2007 just before the national unity government was formed, Abbas made it clear that he would do everything in his power to secure the release of Shalit, even though he denied any connection between the formation of the government and the soldier's safety.

For now, Shalit's future remains in obscurity. While Israel would surely prefer that Shalit is returned home to his family, alive and well, if events were to take an unexpected turn and the young soldier makes his last trip home in a body bag, his family will only have their government to blame. Israel has proven it is more important that Hamas is completely shunned and vilified not only in Israel but in the international community at large, then to secure the safe release of one of its own. For Israel, the political sympathy summoned by the images of a lone Israeli soldier in the hands of militant Islamic terrorists is worth much more than his release, even if that release would only mean the freedom of a few hundred Palestinian prisoners.



The Legal Case for Gaza

December 6, 2007

For Israel, it is about this one soldier - and the few being held in Lebanon if they are to be added to the equation. For the Palestinians, thousands are forced to experience the anguish of not knowing the whereabouts of their son, husband, daughter or brother. The rationale behind the Palestinian groups holding Shalit is completely understandable if it means there is even a glimmer of hope his capture would secure the release of so many others. But for Shalit's family, his continued captivity should have created an outrage, for having been lied to and placated into believing that their son's safety would be secured by any means.

If Israel gets its way and works through the new dynamics being created in the Palestinian arena to secure Shalit's freedom, nothing would have been gained for the Palestinians. However, if Shalit is sacrificed because Israel refuses to make concessions for its own soldiers, then perhaps it would have learned a valuable lesson in the process - losing your people's faith can never be taken for political gain.

As one can see from the recent Annapolis summit, the subject of Gaza has recently become relegated to private discussion rooms. Its mildest utterance in the political sphere is often met with indifference and expressionless faces, as if acknowledging these Palestinians in the 360km² enclosed prison is taboo. Gaza has plunged into the abyss of silence - an unspoken evil whose neglect is almost demanded and expected.

Last Monday, in one of these private discussion rooms at al-Quds University in Abu Dis, a panel of legal experts gathered to speak about International Humanitarian Law [IHL] and how it is being implemented / overlooked regarding the current situation in Gaza.

The audience was welcomed with an introduction given by the Dean of the Legal department at al-Quds University but the most apt precursor to the presentations came not from a speech but from the absence of one. In what was an ironic example of movement restrictions imposed on Gaza, forum chair and Diakonia representative, Grietje Baars informed the audience that Iyad Nasr, the communications advisor and trainer at the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] in Gaza set to speak that day, could not attend as he was refused a permit out of Gaza by the Israeli authorities.

Of the three panelists remaining on this joint AIDA - Diakonia forum, Sari Bashi and Fatmeh al-Ajou, representatives from the legal centers Gisha and Adalah, addressed the humanitarian situation in Gaza with

respect to the difference between Israeli obligations to Gaza as stated in IHL and the Israeli perspective on what their role is in Gaza. In addition they evaluated the effect the illegal, seriously destructive and crippling Israeli sanctions will have on the innocent, beleaguered Palestinian people in the future.

In what was an extremely eloquent and professionally executed talk, Sari Bashi began with the proclamation of Gaza as “hostile territory”. This appellation, which was adopted by the Israeli government in September of this year, was endorsed and accepted by the Israeli High Court. This signaled, according to Ms. Bashi, an end to IHL as a tool for discussion. Instead, Israel has continued on its path to seek credence and legitimacy in absolving themselves of responsibility following their withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Israel has therefore replaced obedience to IHL with an unacceptable and inadequate degree of moral standard. Ms. Bashi adamantly asserted that the monopoly Israel enjoys on the ground greatly contradicts and demands more than their laissez faire stance of extending responsibility just as far as moral and selfless human interest. The executive director of Gisha emphasized that Israel still plays a mammoth role in Gaza and therefore has an obligation under International Law to ensure that the occupied people are not oppressed. She referred to three specific aspects of Israeli control: borders, population registry and tax.

Israel controls the sea, the airspace and the all the crossings in and out of Gaza. Following Hamas’ seizure of Gaza, Israel closed all the border crossings into Gaza and cut off supplies from reaching the coastal strip. As a result, 85% of factories have closed down and those which are running are operating at 20% of their capacity; 90% of construction has been halted due to a lack of cement; there is 75% unemployment and rising inflation. Although Rafah crossing, between Gaza and Egypt, is administered by the PA and EU monitors on the Gaza side, the Israelis control the transportation of the monitors to and from the crossing and have a veto over its closing. Not surprisingly then, after Hamas took over, Israel shut the Rafah crossing isolating thousands of people on

both sides and leaving them to live in dreadful conditions.

In terms of the population registry, Israel also decides who is a resident of Gaza and whether a new born child is issued an ID or not. Of course Hamas and Fateh can issue the family with an ID but this is pointless as Israel is the border authority.

After the Oslo Accords, Israel was allocated control of gathering Palestinian tax and customs payments. However, from Hamas winning the elections in March 2006 until July 2007, Israel kept these payments which when amalgamated amount to half of the Palestinian Authority’s annual budget. Israel also erased the customs code used to clear goods for Gaza which means that Palestinians in Gaza can only use whatever is already available or what is donated to them by humanitarian organizations.

How can Israel claim to have no responsibility in Gaza when they essentially have their hands choking the entry/exit points of Gaza? Ms. Bashi continued that identifying Gaza as “hostile” has further acted as a catalyst for crises with major banks, such as Hapoalim, shutting down due to the “unpredictable” and “dangerous” nature of the territory. Even if Israel no longer played a role in the administration of Gaza, after 40 years of occupation, economic turmoil and restrained movement, the occupier would have an obligation to face the implications of their occupation and aid the area in recuperating itself and preventing it from plunging into further disaster.

In the opinion of Sari Bashi and Fatmeh al-Ajou, the Israelis citing security reasons for their harsh treatment and blatant abandonment of their duties to adhere IHL are highly dubious and tenuous. There was a petition issued to the High Court concerning the need for 26 people to leave Gaza for medical reasons. Prior to the hearing, a one and a half year old had been refused entry to Israel for chemotherapy and subsequently become too ill to travel to the point where her parents wished her to spend her last days at home. The High Court rejected the

petition, void of legal reasoning. They responded that it was not their obligation but as a purely humanitarian gesture they would allow medical attention to those with “life threatening” cases. Those who suffer from ailments not terminal and are therefore categorized as “quality of life” patients, meaning they would still be able to live but whose illness would only affect their quality of life, would be prohibited from entering. The court recognized the difficulty in defining and categorizing individual’s injuries/illnesses on a priority scale of importance but supported their decision by contesting that they are not “standing at Erez exposed to terrorism” and must only expose the Israeli soldiers to those dangers which are deemed essential.

In closing, the representatives from the two legal centers concluded that Israel does not operate within the framework of international law. Their very neglect of international law, maintaining the very minimal humanitarian standard is in fact a tool used to collectively punish the Palestinians in Gaza in order to force a regime change. There is no legal explanation for these violations of human rights, which most recently include Israel forbidding sufficient fuel and electricity supplies into Gaza.

Gareth Gleed, a legal researcher for the human rights organization al-Haq, firstly reiterated points expressed by his colleagues concerning collective punishment and regime change. Mr. Gleed reinforced the notion of collective punishment quoting Article 33 of the 1949 IV Geneva Convention which states that “no protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited”. Additionally, in reference to Israel attempting to influence regime change, Mr. Gleed referred to Article 31 of the same accord which stipulates that “no physical or moral coercion shall be exercised against protected persons”

Although supporting the comments made previously, this coherent and concise presentation focused on international involvement in the human rights situation as well as mentioning the West Bank perspective which

questions the presupposed perception that while Gaza is isolated, the West Bank is experiencing a period of increased prosperity.

Mr. Gleed declared that just as in Gaza, Israel is striving to create pockets of legal regions where nothing applies to Palestine as a whole. The UN Charter states that a people have a right to access their natural resources and have a choice in their political and economic progression. Under Israel, this right is being revoked as the occupier disseminates the very structure that hopes to exercise human rights. The al-Haq researcher noted that while there are separate entities in Gaza and the West Bank, there are also secluded areas which operate under different rules and are treated differently by Israel. These are areas such as the Jordan Valley and east Jerusalem which are considered regions in Area C, the fully Israeli controlled section of the West Bank [approximately 70% of the land] allocated to them under the Oslo Accords.

Even though the West Bank is divided in such a way where Palestinians are unable to access 38% of the land with the existence of illegal settlements, checkpoints, roadblocks and roads which are only open to Israeli settlers, the international community is nevertheless dedicated to establishing three commercial zones in Jenin, Jericho and Hebron. Mr. Gleed highlighted that the proposed locations for these commercial centers, which will reportedly improve the economic climate in the West Bank, are in fact locations in Area C. In the opinion of Mr. Gleed, these ventures essentially insinuate that the international community is providing its stamp of approval to entrench the occupation. By sponsoring “projects for peace” they are in fact providing a further “tool for occupation” as the areas in which these centers will reside are under Israeli jurisdiction.

Mr. Gleed recommended that if the international community were in fact serious about ushering in peace and security, they should address the “fundamental violations inherent in [the Israeli] occupation” - the violations are a legal point, not a political one and contrary to popular belief the two are mutually exclusive.



Settlements Have to Go

December 26, 2007

If the international community actively partake in these projects, in a third party capacity, to increase Palestinian prosperity in the hope of establishing a viable state, they will be accepting the existence of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and thus be supporting an Israeli imposition which is in direct violation of International Law, a document the international community have signed and sworn to uphold, a law that governs their own independent states and their own legal systems.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is extremely dire. The coastal area is marking its sixth month anniversary under Hamas rule amidst economic depression and social catastrophe. The people are being denied vital supplies such as fuel and food, prices are rising to extortionate levels, hospitals are becoming dysfunctional, the people are not able to leave and they have been abandoned by the very international law that was created to protect them from these conditions. Gaza has also been discarded by its president and its occupiers. The latter bomb Gaza almost daily and are even contemplating an invasion in a move that further proves that Israel is insistent on wiping their hands of the area and absolving themselves from their obligations as an occupying power. The only crime the people of Gaza committed is that they reside in an area which was seized and is now subsequently governed by an Islamic resistance group which is considered by the bulk of the international community as a "terrorist" organization.

Not only is this the appalling truth but as Mr. Gleed implied, Gaza is not a completely unique instance. With the gradual sectioning of the West Bank into different areas, directed by the path of the wall and Israeli settlements, the commercial centers and the influx of millions of dollars to the West Bank may have more of an adverse effect than expected. Instead of ushering in a thriving economy and advances toward a viable Palestinian state, the commercial centers erected in Israeli authorized areas may further isolate Palestinians from each other, leave them entirely dependent on Israel and place them in a position where Israel will be able to greatly influence their functioning and survival.

Unsurprisingly, the newly resumed peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians stalled yet again, this time over the highly-charged issue of Israeli settlements, which despite past commitments, Israel has continued to expand. On December 24, the two sides met for the second time since the Annapolis peace conference in November, but came out of the meeting empty handed, Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat describing the meeting as "very difficult."

No kidding. Even if we put a pin in all the other issues that have constituted major bones of contention between the Palestinians and Israelis such as the refugee problem, Jerusalem and borders, Jewish settlements alone are explosive enough to blow any negotiations to smithereens.

However, in order to fully understand why both sides are so adamant in their positions when it comes to West Bank settlements (and that, by the way includes those illegally built in east Jerusalem), it is imperative to understand their significance, to both Israel and the Palestinians. Following the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Israel almost immediately adopted what was known as the Alon Plan, which advocated the establishment of Jewish settlements in areas with so-called "security importance". While these initial settlements were built in areas where Palestinian populations were sparse, such as the Jordan Valley and areas outside Jerusalem, this quickly changed in the

late 70s under the more aggressive Likud government, which accelerated settlement expansion into areas near Palestinian populated regions in the heart of the West Bank, not only for so-called “security considerations” now, but also for ideological reasons. These were based on the premise that the West Bank and Gaza Strip (or what Israel calls Judea and Samaria) are part of the Zionist dream of Greater Israel, ostensibly the biblical right of the Jews.

Thus, the Yesha Council of Settlers was established in the 1970s to oversee the return of Jews to what they claim to be their biblical homeland. Since then, all Israeli governments have either openly encouraged settlement expansion, encouraged it under the table or at best, turned a blind eye. Even in the so-called “peace years” during which the Oslo Accords were signed and late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin famously shook hands with President Arafat, settlement expansion never ceased. According to the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, between 1993 and 2000, the number of settlers in the West Bank increased by 100 percent.

Not all Israelis in Jewish settlements are there for ideological purposes - one Yesha Council estimation puts only half the number of secular Jews who moved to West Bank settlements for ideological purposes, while the rest made the move for economic reasons. Religious Jews, who constitute around 35 percent of the settler population, according to the same source, almost all move to the settlements because of their “Jewishness”.

The result of this monstrous movement is that it has created a population that cannot easily be swayed by economic enticements to move out of their West Bank homes. The majority of settlers are there because they believe this is their birthright, that the land of “Judea and Samaria” was granted to them by God. No compensation package can ever match that.

Furthermore, the settlers hardly stand alone in their views. If it were not for ongoing government endorsement, the settlement project would have gone under years ago. This week’s failed Palestinian-Israeli negotiations were focused on the east Jerusalem settlement of Har Homa (or Jabal Abu Gneim), which Israel has so insolently announced it would expand. According to Israeli Peace Now leader Yariv Oppenheimer, Israel will allocate \$25 million from its 2008 budget for the expansion of Har Homa and Maaleh Adumim settlements in east Jerusalem alone. Besides, the more Israel expands and builds in the already illegal West Bank settlements, the more de facto they become. Once these red-topped invasive constructions are built and people moved into them, they become a reality much harder to reverse. In the final analysis, Israel is vying for as much West Bank land as possible - through settlement expansion mostly - before any final settlement is reached with the Palestinians.

For the Palestinians, however, settlements mean something entirely different. Invasive, encroaching and offending, Jewish settlements are like cancerous growths in the midst of what Palestinians hope to be their future state.

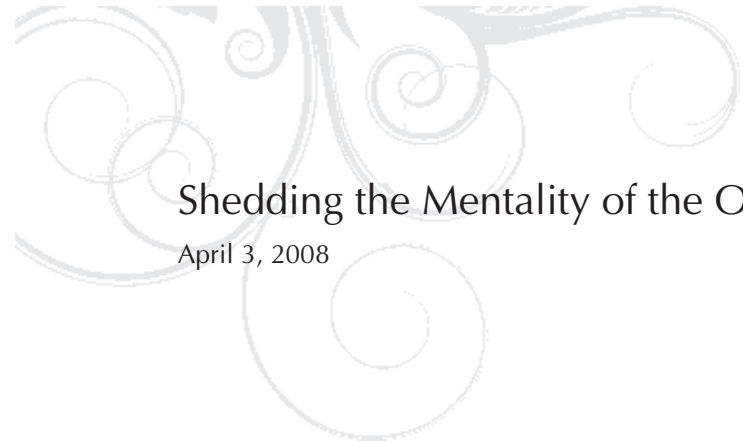
International law agrees with the Palestinians. International humanitarian law prohibits the occupying power to transfer citizens from its own territory to the occupied territory (Fourth Geneva Convention, article 49), while The Hague Regulations prohibit the occupying power to undertake permanent changes in the occupied area or confiscate private property in occupied territory. UN Security Council Resolution 465 (1980), which was unanimously adopted, made it clear that “Israel’s policy and practices of settling parts of its population and new immigrants” in the Occupied Territories constitutes “a serious obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East”. The Security Council called upon Israel to “dismantle the existing settlements and in particular to cease, on an urgent basis, the establishment, construction or planning of settlements in the Arab

territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem.”

International law aside, Palestinians rightfully view the settlement movement as Israel’s plan to grab as much Palestinian land as possible, not to mention the hostile nature of many armed settlers towards the Palestinians. While the actual settlements take up approximately three percent of West Bank land, because of the extensive network of settler-only bypass roads, fences and other restrictions imposed on Palestinians, the settlements dominate 40 percent of the area of the West Bank. Furthermore, the separation wall, which cuts through a major portion of the West Bank has been designed to include and annex 56 settlements to Israel.

This leaves the Palestinians with a severed, discontinuous and settlement-pockmarked geographical entity, hardly raw material for a viable Palestinian state. Palestinians continue to demand that Israel dismantle all settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, which they have claimed as their future capital. According to the US-brokered roadmap, Israel is to halt all settlement expansion and dismantle any settlement outposts, both obligations which they have failed to meet.

This is why negotiations, no matter how “serious”, will never bear fruit as long as Jewish settlements plague the Palestinian territories. Not only does their presence deny many Palestinians access to their own land, to water resources and to other Palestinian areas, they are built in a way that severs any contiguity between Palestinian territories, making any geographically viable future Palestinian entity virtually impossible. If negotiations are ever to lead to lasting and substantial results, settlements cannot be part of the equation. It is as simple as that.



Shedding the Mentality of the Occupied

April 3, 2008

Why is it that when a Palestinian motorist approaches a checkpoint, he or she instinctively slows down, rolls down the window and reaches into their pocket to pull out their ID card even before the Israeli soldier hails for the car to stop? And why do Palestinians know to immediately open their suitcases at the airport the moment an Israeli security official approaches them for questioning even before the actual request is made? This does not happen with non-Palestinians or even Palestinians abroad. This mentality only plagues those unfortunate enough to have spent the majority of their lives under the Israeli occupation and have, at some level, accepted the stigma of the occupied. And naturally, being the occupied rather than the occupier entails being delegated to the category of second and even third class citizen.

This is not to say that the Palestinians are not acutely aware of their occupied status. The decades’ old Palestinian resistance movement is proof of their understanding that being an occupied people is less than an enviable position. However, a distinction should be made here between the political awareness of a national status and the state of being of the people who have grown accustomed to turning - albeit begrudgingly - to a hostile power in order that their everyday lives to proceed as smoothly as possible.

While some can argue that this mentality of simply resigning to the reality is a form of self-preservation and a means of sustainability, there

is a perilous side effect to it. Once a person - or people in this case - accept their plight, they inadvertently lower their own standards and expectations. In the case of the Palestinians, there are precious few of us who question why we automatically offer our ID cards or willingly lift our shirts at a checkpoint at a mere gesture from an Israeli soldier.

To be fair, it is not all the fault of the people. Having lived for over 40 years under Israeli occupation means two generations of Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem know nothing else. Our children expect us to pull out our ID cards or slow down at a checkpoint. We, as parents and as adults have conditioned them to this, which is extremely unfortunate. Even as I write these words, I am guilty of this very thing. My children play a "Palestinianized" version of "cops and robbers" which they call "the checkpoint" stopping each other and handing out imaginary ID cards.

No doubt, this is also not completely a flaw on our part. Checkpoints are an undisputable reality in our lives, which we are forced to deal with one way or the other. This is not to mention that defying an army soldier manning a checkpoint could mean being shot to death, imprisoned or if nothing else, humiliated and harassed.

However, it remains our duty as leaders, parents and educators to teach our children to at least question this plight we have found ourselves in and to never accept it blindly, because once we do, it will be that much harder to break out of it.

Mahatma Gandhi hit the nail right on the head. He refused to accept the rank of second class citizen even if this meant that scores of his people met their deaths in defiance of the British colonial authority. Gandhi taught the world that even defiance in the form of a grain of salt symbolized a cause and a threat to those who wished to dominate. While civil disobedience may not be the ideal or only avenue for the Palestinians in their push towards liberation, some of its attributes should

certainly be adopted if we are to free ourselves of this imprisoning mentality. Unfortunately, we have fallen so far into the swamp of the occupied/occupier relationship, it is seemingly unfathomable to imagine any other interaction.

However, imagine 200 or 300 people at any given checkpoint - take your pick from among the over 500 of them peppered throughout the West Bank - refusing to hand over their IDs. The Israeli soldiers will panic, perhaps arrest a handful, close the checkpoint for hours and at worst, open fire on the people. Regardless of the consequences, the next day the people come back to the checkpoint and refuse to comply with the soldiers' orders. The third day is the same, and so on and so forth until the Israelis understand that perhaps a reassessment of this particular checkpoint is in order.

Another example would be the actual proclamation of late President Yasser Arafat in 2001 when he vowed that despite Israel's blockade, he would travel to Bethlehem to attend Christmas Mass. Of course he didn't go through with it. But what if he had rallied thousands of eager citizens around him and marched across the checkpoint regardless of the barbed wire, heavily armed Israeli military and offending iron turnstiles. Perhaps, such a bold move from the leader of this people would have emboldened the masses to carry out further acts of civil disobedience and gradually changed the mentality from an occupied nation to defiant people power.

There have been instances of civil disobedience in the past, so it is not as if the concept were completely foreign to the Palestinians. It was dabbled with during the first Intifada in 1989 years before the Palestinian Authority was created. The residents of the Bethlehem-area town of Beit Sahour took it upon themselves to refuse to pay Israeli taxes. "We will not finance the bullets that kill our children the growing number of prisons the expenses of the occupying army We want no more than what you have freedom..." read part of the town's statement. Israel

eventually declared the town a “closed military zone”, cut off telephone lines and confiscated goods from homes. However, international support flooded into Beit Sahour and the tax resistance continued until the inception of the PA in 1994.

This brings us to the last and perhaps most important point of all. Courageous moves require courageous leaders. The power of the mind should never be underestimated. If a people aspire towards liberation, they must also think as a liberated people. As ambitious as this may sound, it is within reach. No one said it better than the great Mahatma Gandhi himself. “We must become the change we want to see.”



Behind Israel's Independence, a Great Injustice

April 30, 2008

Every year, Israel's independence celebrations are a sore reminder to the Palestinians of the price they were made to pay for this state to be created. This year, on the 60th occasion of Israel's independence, nothing has been remedied or rectified for those Palestinians who lost their homes over half a century ago.

The Palestinians hardly spend this time of year, May 15 to be exact, in celebration. While Israeli flags flutter over buildings and cars and Israelis take the day to picnic and barbeque, Palestinians are remembering Al Nakba, the Catastrophe which emerged as a result of the creation of the State of Israel. By the time the 1948 War was over, 800,000 Palestinians from all walks of life had been made refugees, virtually overnight. In days of horror, Palestinians from northern Palestine and along the coastal line fled the fierce fighting and the fear of massacres with the understanding that they would return to their homes once the fighting had subsided. That was never to happen and 60 years later, these refugees have multiplied many times over, with an estimated five million Palestinian refugees in camps in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, neighboring Arab countries and abroad.

By now, an ample number of people have a vague idea of what transpired in 1948. The Palestinians have done a satisfactory job of getting this out, constantly pushing the refugee issue back up the ladder to the top of the priority list even when other more immediate issues

push it down. However, the efforts put into portraying the real picture of what went down 60 years ago are not nearly enough. The majority of the world still believes Israel was created out of a desperate need for a Jewish homeland - which of course, was validated by the 1917 Balfour Declaration - and the Israelis proceeded to "make the desert bloom." Still, Israel is taking nothing for granted, continuously spewing out falsities about its history, camouflaging the fact that, similar to its best friend, the United States, it was created at the expense of an entire people, unapologetic of the bloody trail it left behind. This year, several events are taking place throughout the United States in particular for all to join in Israel's celebration. New York, California and Washington will all host Israeli events to mark the 60th anniversary. "Authentic" food will be served, and no doubt falafel and hummous floats will parade through the streets, concerts, and cultural activities held. For example, on May 8, New York's Washington Square - usually booked for major events such as a September 11 memorial or more recently, a Barak Obama campaign rally - will be flooded with American and Israeli youths, rocking and rolling to music played by an Israeli DJ on the biggest dance floor ever. The event, organized by the Israeli consulate in New York, is part of the elaborate 60th anniversary.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Events in Israel are also abundant, including the Jerusalem Writers Conference next month. The conference will host 15 Israeli and around 40 foreign writers all traveling to Israel in honor of its Independence Day. Controversy has swirled around one of the attendees, prominent South African writer Nadine Gordimer. The 84-year old author, known for her outspokenness against Apartheid, has been criticized by the Palestinians for agreeing to join Israel in its celebrations. Still, she is coming, defending her decision by saying that, "her comrades should have no doubts about her solidarity with the struggle against apartheid."

Gordimer, unfortunately, represents the overwhelming majority of the world's masses. Boycotting Israel has become a dangerous pit, which

many try to avoid at all costs, even those who advocate noble causes elsewhere. The fact that Israel is implementing a system even beyond the perimeters of Apartheid South Africa has conveniently gone right over Gordimer's head. The fact that the very independence she is honoring is the same occasion marking the disastrous plight of another people is dismissed by this so-called woman of conscience.

Hence, it goes without saying that Israel is being kept on this bizarre pedestal where it is not held accountable for violations and transgressions that would otherwise be penalized if any other country were the perpetrator. That is why the Palestinians now have to take their struggle up a notch in an attempt to better showcase the great injustice done to them 60 years ago. Sterile statistics and impersonal numbers will not suffice. Real people are behind these numbers - horror stories of exile, starvation and loss. Just like Israel continuously dredges up the history of the Jews, reminding the world over and over again of their persecution, keeping their past alive as a means of justifying their present, the Palestinians need to constantly remind the world that the Israelis have no monopoly over human suffering.

On this 60th anniversary of Al Nakba, the opportunity has arisen once more. To be fair, there have been events organized by Palestinian grassroots organizations to mark the occasion, such as marches and demonstrations. On May 15, Palestinians will release 21,915 black balloons (one for every day of the last 60 years) into the sky from Qalandiya checkpoint and Bethlehem to counter Israel's celebrations and to remind the world of the destruction and death Israel has brought upon the Palestinians since then.

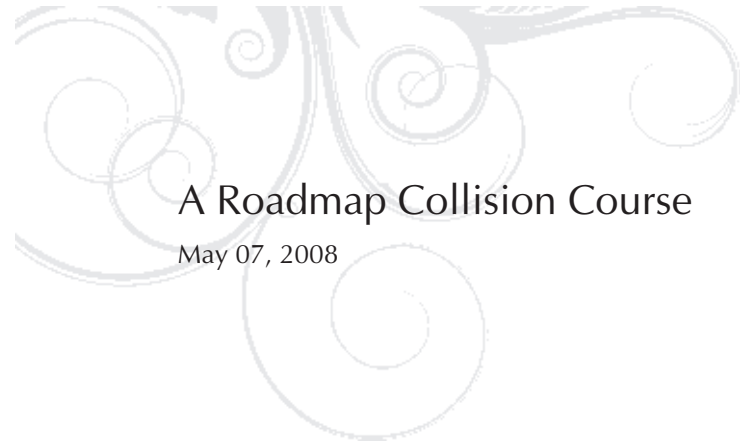
For those refugees, however, even more must be done. There has been an acute lack of acknowledgement of their plight by the world and an outright denial of any wrongdoing by the Israeli government. For many who have endured exile and years of hardship in the squalid refugee camps of South Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Gaza Strip, a start to the

solution is for their story to be told. Every leader, without exception, every state representative in the United Nations, should know the story of Palestinian refugees - how they left to protect their families from another massacre carried out by Jewish gangs, how they were forced out by Israel's nascent army or how they fled in fear with the belief that they would be allowed to return in a matter of days. They want the world to know how they left their chickens with little feed and their windows open, hastily picking up a few thin mattresses, a small bundle of clothes, whatever money and personal possessions they had along with their children at their heels and locked their door, strung the key around their necks and never returned.

So when the Palestinian leadership insists on the right of return for Palestinian refugees, it is speaking of a right embedded in the lives of real people. These refugees also know that much of what was their homes no longer exists, torn down and replaced by jarring foreign structures offensive even to the landscape. Some destroyed villages have a highway in their place, or an airport. Others have remained, turned instead into Israeli national parks. For the original owners, this is an open wound, a wound hardly ever acknowledged. Nonetheless, the right of return is still an inherent and inalienable right that cannot be nullified regardless of time.

Hence, for once let us rain on Israel's parade. As it waves its flags, invites world dignitaries to share in its celebrations, and pats its own back over its vast achievements in the face of such horrible adversity, let the images of those Palestinians made homeless in the wake of Israel's creation cast a shadow over the jubilations.

An injustice so great should not be so hard to defend. The facts speak for themselves. They only need the right amount of committed people to turn up the volume.



A Roadmap Collision Course

May 07, 2008

On the five-year anniversary of the US-brokered roadmap for peace, there is not much to celebrate. According to plan, an interim Palestinian state should have been established and a final status agreement negotiated by now. Instead, like so many other agreements before it, the once-deemed optimistic and viable plan has traveled southward, circling the drain.

It is no wonder, given that the United States is the "mastermind" behind it. Any sensible onlooker will realize that the US, no matter how good intentioned it claims to be, can never be an honest and objective broker as long as it remains such a staunch ally of Israel.

The roadmap was presented to the Palestinian Authority and Israel on April 30, 2003 by the United States in cooperation with the Quartet Committee. The goal-driven plan full of timelines and benchmarks required both sides to fulfill certain requirements as part of the first phase of the three phase plan. Five years later, the two parties are still squabbling over the obligations of phase one, each side accusing the other of breaching the agreement and shirking their responsibilities. In short, the Palestinians were required to halt violence and "terrorism" against Israelis everywhere while the Israelis were to freeze all settlement activity, retreat to positions prior to September 28, 2000 and take measures to improve the Palestinians' humanitarian situation.

To understand the reason for the roadmap's failure, one must understand its inherent faults. All Israeli settlements, built on Palestinian land occupied in the 1967 war are deemed illegal according to international law, regardless of whether they are sprawling colonies spread out over thousands of dunums of expropriated land or a few mobile homes inhabited by diehard settlers camped out on an isolated hilltop just around the corner of an unwelcoming Palestinian village. The fact that the Americans completely disregard this fact and ask for a "freeze" on settlement building instead of the dismantling of existing settlements offers a dangerous premise for the creation of an Israeli altered arrangement hardly agreeable to Palestinian interests.

This became apparent early on in the game. One year after the roadmap was introduced, US President George W. Bush outlined his endorsement of major settlement blocs in the West Bank, blocs Israel has adamantly insisted it would never relinquish in a final agreement. The letter, sent to then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (known as the "father of the settlement movement") read: "In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949, and all previous efforts to negotiate a two-state solution have reached the same conclusion. It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities..."

With such an explicit endorsement, Palestinians were already several steps behind at the start of negotiations. Not only did Israel not freeze settlement activity, it continued to expand existing settlements (claiming the tenders had already been allocated years earlier) and accelerated construction in settlements around Jerusalem. This particularly tweaked the ire of Palestinian negotiators, who claimed Israel was openly violating its roadmap obligations. Israel, in its incessant search for loopholes, insisted Jerusalem was never part of the deal, claiming the

city is Israel's eternal capital. Again, international law disagrees, deeming east Jerusalem, captured in the 1967 war as occupied territory while the international community has never officially recognized Israel's unilateral annexation of this predominantly Arab-populated sector of Jerusalem.

In this regard, the United States once again fell short of fulfilling its role as honest broker. As Israel pushed on with its settlement construction in east Jerusalem, creating more and more facts on the ground that would be harder to reverse once a final settlement was forged, the US offered no more than a slight verbal slap on the wrist.

Even where the Palestinian obligations are concerned, the lopsidedness is obvious. In the first phase, Palestinians were to reign in "terrorist" groups and halt the attacks on Israelis. While Israel has allowed a limited deployment of Palestinian policemen in the Nablus, Jenin and Ramallah areas predominantly for this purpose, Israel continues to retain the right to invade, arrest or kill any Palestinian it deems a threat, irrespective of Palestinian security efforts. The Gaza Strip, which Israel officially withdrew from in 2005, has been under constant Israeli bombardment and siege ever since. Not only does this undermine Palestinian security efforts, it hacks away at the Palestinians' confidence in their own security services because of Israel's constant incursions into their areas.

If nothing else, Phase I of the roadmap called on Israel to "take measures to improve the humanitarian situation for the Palestinians." One only has to look at the dire situation in the Gaza Strip, the 600 checkpoints severing West Bank areas and the offensive West Bank separation wall that dissects and isolates Palestinians from each other and their own land to realize that this clause has been the most disregarded of them all.

It is no surprise then that US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has called on the Palestinians and Israelis to publish a memorandum of

understanding on the progress of their final status negotiations before President Bush arrives in Israel next week for Israel's 60th anniversary independence celebrations. It should be mentioned that since phase one of the roadmap was not implemented on time, the parties have been striving to fulfill the obligations of phase one and three concomitantly.

The US has gone from optimistic architect of the roadmap, which was to ultimately result in a final agreement and an end to the conflict, to a "vision of a two-state solution", then to an agreement by the end of 2008 and now finally to a meager memorandum of understanding, which by the way, neither side is happy about.

These half-baked efforts could only fail. The United States does not have Palestinian national interests at heart, only Israel's security. That is why a plan that does not address the root of the problem, which is the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, will never bear fruit, only endless frustrations and false promises.



Reason to Believe?

June 18, 2008

The question lingering in the air right now is, "What will make this time any different?" Ceasefire agreements between Israel and Hamas have been reached before, all of which have flown right out the window with the slightest provocation. Nevertheless, it is nearly impossible for the Palestinians not to get their hopes up at the news that a "tahdi'ah" agreement has been reached through Egyptian mediation between the two warring parties, effective as of June 19.

The agreement has been months in the making, with both Hamas and Israel copping out at the last moment, both citing the other side's intransigence. This time, the deal went through, with an announcement on June 17 that both sides have agreed to "halt all hostilities and all military activities" in the Gaza Strip. According to the agreement, trade crossings will be opened and the blockade lifted off of essential goods. In week two of the ceasefire, Egypt will host representatives from Hamas, the Palestinian presidency and European parties to Cairo to discuss a mechanism for reopening the Rafah border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Ostensibly, the ceasefire is to last for six months and will then be implemented in the West Bank, according to Egypt.

These seem like grandiose plans when the reality of the situation on the ground is considered, not to mention past attempts at maintaining calm in Gaza. Just hours after Egyptian and Palestinian sources announced that a deal had been reached, Israeli air strikes killed six

Palestinians, five of whom were members of the Islamic Jihad's Al Quds Brigades. In the course of two days, Israeli military strikes have killed 10 people in Gaza.

Still, Israel is maintaining it will stick to the deal if Hamas reciprocates. Israeli defense ministry official Amos Gilad said on June 18 that Israel would "exhaust all possibilities" but that the ceasefire is in no way a peace agreement. In almost the same breath, however, Israeli government officials have warned they have not let down their guard, not by a long shot. Should the truce fall apart, Israel is prepared to carry out large-scale military action into the Strip.

This "one foot in one foot out" policy is hardly exclusive to Israel. Hamas Politburo Chief Khaled Meshaal also expressed this cautious optimism when he both endorsed the ceasefire and also warned Israel that if it violated it, Hamas would be right there to reciprocate. "If you go back, we go back," he said simply.

Egypt should at least take credit for getting the ball rolling. One major sticking point that had previously stifled all other ceasefire efforts was the fate of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, taken captive by Hamas in June 2006. Israel has so far insisted that Shalit be released before any ceasefire agreement is reached. Hamas would not heed the demand, insisting for their part that Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails be set free in exchange. According to Egypt, Israel has agreed to separate the Shalit issue from the ceasefire deal.

All the same, realistically speaking, how much can we hope for from this new "tahdi'ah"? While the Palestinian presidency has also jumped on board, with President Abbas endorsing the ceasefire, calm in Gaza always seems to be hanging by a thread. The mutual distrust between Israel and Hamas has already started seething from both sides, each threatening to strike back hard if the other drops the ball. Israel has already jumped the gun even before the ceasefire sees the light of day,

postulating that it fears armed Palestinian factions would carry out an attack on Israeli targets just before the ceasefire goes into effect just to flex their muscles.

Such an atmosphere of suspicion coupled with the fact that the agreement does not come even close to resolving the core issues of the Gaza Strip, all give cause for doubt. Israel has always said it retains the right to act independently of any agreement or truce it reaches with the Palestinians. In other words, it can invade the Gaza Strip, assassinate its activists, level land and blockade its crossings whenever its "security" is at risk.

Hamas understands this completely and has thus said it would retaliate immediately should Israel breach the agreement. So, even though the ceasefire has not even left the womb, ill intentions and suspicions have already spoiled the before-party.

In the best-case scenario, such a ceasefire agreement would constitute a stepping stone to more comprehensive truces between Israel and the Palestinians and perhaps bring some peace to the residents of Gaza who have suffered far too long under Israel's grueling blockade and continuous military attacks.

However, the more likely scenario - at the risk of putting a damper on the joyous news - is that the ceasefire will bring temporary reprieve to the people, bring about a lull in Israeli attacks on the Gazans and a halt of homemade Palestinian rockets into Israel, but will constantly be on the brink of collapse. This is not to belittle the Egyptian efforts in mediating the ceasefire or the Palestinian and Israeli consent to it, but is more of a reality check than anything else. As long as Israel still maintains its occupation over Palestine, including its revised form in the Gaza Strip, no ceasefire deal can ever be lasting.

Nevertheless, this is not a time for skepticism. If a halt of hostilities holds between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, perhaps this will give the Palestinians ample time to put their own house in order. While the Fateh/Hamas rift has somewhat narrowed with the Abbas initiative, there are still significant differences between the two, namely who has rightful control over Gaza. If the two parties step back from the dangerous precipice they have been hanging over, it will give them the opportunity to reunite and concentrate their efforts on the larger picture. This is also a potential opportunity for Israel. Even while instability and hostilities in Gaza might serve Israel's interests in keeping the Palestinians disunited, a major Israeli incursion into the Strip does not. Israel learned from the Lebanon War that military incursions into somewhat uncharted territory often cost them dearly without reaping any major political gains. A period of calm in the Gaza Strip would allow Israel to also focus on pumping up the West Bank government under President Abbas, which it is hoping will eventually overcome a weakened Hamas.

So, whether this ceasefire holds for six months or not, at least it might give the people there a moment to breathe. Even a few months of no Israeli shelling, no incursions and relaxed borders is better than the open-air prison they have endured for too long.



Welcome Home, for One Month Only

July 21, 2008

On July 5, 1950, the Israeli Knesset enacted item 5710-1950, otherwise known as the Law of Return. This law was to change the demographics of Palestine forever, beginning with just a few simple words: "Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an Oleh [immigrant to Israel]" and "A Jew who has come to Israel and subsequent to his arrival has expressed his desire to settle in Israel may, while still in Israel, receive an Oleh's certificate". In essence, any Jew, from any part of the world, was afforded the right to simply show up and declare themselves citizens of Israel. In the eyes of the Jews, 2000 years of wandering were officially over. Unfortunately, for the Palestinians, the real struggle was just beginning. That very law, enacted some 58 years ago, still welcomes those making Aliyah (literally meaning "ascent"). The Law of Entry into Israel is the law that governs the entry of those not making Aliyah and it is this very law which is now being called into question, with Israel tightening its grip on issuing visas to tourists and for work purposes.

Having only a week ago experienced the infamous Passport Control interrogation at Ben Gurion Airport, it intrigued me as to how exactly Israel decides who should and should not be allowed into their country. I arrived at Ben Gurion in the early hours of the morning, to be greeted by not one but two Israeli immigration officials. After welcoming me to Israel, they opened my British passport to discover my Palestinian surname. This immediately appeared to incriminate me in their eyes and I was asked to go into a room with another officer who questioned

me for over one hour as to the purpose of my visit in Israel. When I explained that I wanted to stay until late September, he coolly explained to me that it was “illegal” for me to be granted more than a month in the country (although he could offer no sound reasoning) and proceeded to stamp my passport with a three-month stamp, then corrected it by hand to permit me one month only. When I questioned this, he told me new regulations were in place whereby tourists are only allowed three months within any given year and that if I wanted an extension, I would need to apply to the Ministry of Interior. Although I knew this to be a complete fabrication and that this officer was acting as a law unto himself, I did not argue back as I knew this would be futile and could indeed result in me being given a week, or at worst, being denied entry.

Meanwhile, just outside of the room, an American tourist was ranting and raving about having lost his passport “somewhere in transit on a connecting flight from the United Kingdom”. After a short wait, an officer came and informed him that they would issue him a temporary paper to allow him entry into Israel. Incredible, but also very revealing. Whenever Israel is exposed as taking a separatist attitude towards Palestinians, time and time again it retorts with the excuse of “security reasons”. Yet, here is a foreign national being granted free access into the country without so much as a passport, whilst I, with all the necessary documentation and not posing any threat to the state of Israel, am forced to accept four weeks. To suspect someone purely on the grounds of their Palestinian name is not only racist, but also is dangerous and foolish; after all, “terrorists” no doubt come in all races, shapes and sizes.

As I was leaving the airport, I saw a woman who I had earlier overheard telling a fellow passenger that this was her first time in Israel and that she was “making Aliyah”. Now, as I left dejected, with my one-month visa, I saw her being welcomed by a taxi driver holding a sign saying “Birth-Right” with her name on it. The sign also read “Welcome Home”; this is to a woman who had never before set foot in the country. It was

then that the injustice really became apparent. Only recently, Zeina Ashrawi, a Palestinian woman living in the United States, had her Jerusalem ID revoked. As she rightly observed “If I were a Jew living anywhere around the world and had no ties to the area and had never set foot there, I would have the right to go any time I wanted and get an Israeli passport. In fact, the Israelis encourage that. I however, am not Jewish but I was born and raised there, my parents, family and friends still live there and I cannot go back! I am neither a criminal nor a threat to one of the most powerful countries in the world, yet I am alienated and expelled from my own home.”

Section 2 of the Law of Entry into Israel indicates all the various visas that the Ministry of Interior is entitled to grant. The wording of this section, among many other sections, reflects the broad discretion that the Israeli law gives the Minister of Interior. Tourists receive a B-2 tourist visa once they enter Israel; furthermore, anyone requesting a more permanent status needs to apply for one, which is granted by the Minister of Interior, who can approve or deny all such requests at his own discretion.

Entering the Palestinian territories is a whole other ballgame. Israel’s arbitrary and abusive exercise of discretion over entry into the occupied Palestinian territories continues to cause serious and unjustified harm to Palestinian families, educational institutions and businesses. In December 2006, the Israeli Ministry of Defense’s Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories outlined new procedures for entry into the occupied Palestinian territories. In March 2007, a similar statement was issued by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and addressed to third state missions entering Israel and the Palestinian territories. Despite reported assurances from Israeli officials that under the new procedures entry denials would be based on legitimate security considerations, documented cases of persons denied entry indicate that the practice resulting from the implementation of CoGAT procedures remains arbitrary, abusive and internationally unlawful.

The two notices issued by Israeli authorities address only the issue of temporary admissions (typically for short term family visits, tourism and humanitarian, business, educational or other professional activities). Procedures for granting residency to foreign nationals whose center of life is in Palestine remain unaddressed. Together with the many foreign nationals who have established their primary business, investment or professional activities in the oPt, or otherwise aspire to build their lives in the oPt, the new procedures place them, at best, in a state of continuous uncertainty under constant threat of expulsion and exclusion. In comparison to the worldwide Jewish community, consider the position of Palestinians whether they are refugees or of Palestinian-heritage, living in another country. What right of return do they have? According to Israel, none whatsoever. The Palestinian Right of Return principally asserts that Palestinian refugees, both first-generation and their descendants, have a right to return to the homes they were forced out of in either 1948 or 1967.

Two years before the Law of Return for Jews was passed, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 was passed on December 11, 1948. This resolution recognized for the first time the right of return for Palestinians. Article 11 of the resolution reads: "The General Assembly resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so as the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return...". However, as is often the case, the exact meaning was disputed from the start. Israel has argued that the recommendation applies to those who wish to leave in peace with their neighbors and as a consequence of the wider Arab states' unwillingness to live in peace with Israel, there is no obligation to permit the refugees to return. So, although a discussion of the refugee status is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that since Israel is prepared to deny the Palestinians their homeland, there is no reason for them to be welcoming to any other foreigners. After all, their aim is

to keep Israel a Jewish state and they will go to any lengths to maintain the status quo.

It is now that time of year, when people are preparing for their summer trips to Palestine, perhaps to visit family and friends. Certainly anyone with relatives in the Gaza Strip can be assured they will not be visiting that area anytime soon. Moreover, Israel constantly denies being an occupier; yet how much more evidence of an occupation do we need? The situation now is such that Israel is controlling exactly who comes in and out of Palestine, which amounts to an occupation with a very hefty price tag for Palestinians and some foreign nationals as well. Meanwhile, any Jew, with no original ties to the country can come and set up home here. If only Palestinians were that fortunate.



Israel's Lopsided Legal System

July 31, 2008

Israel's policy of demolishing Palestinian homes is nothing new. Since the inception of the occupation in 1967, thousands of Israeli military orders have been handed to Palestinians informing them of the imminent destruction of their houses. The reasons - or excuses - for this destructive policy are many: involvement in resistance against the Israeli occupation [known as "terror" to Israel], illegal construction, or for "urban planning" [i.e., when the decades-old home and surrounding land is in the way of a new Jewish settlement in the West Bank or east Jerusalem].

So, Israeli government plans to demolish the homes of Palestinians living in Jerusalem because they were involved in attacks against Israelis, hardly raises eyebrows. Not because this punitive measure is not cruel or inhumane but because Israel has never been known for its overly humane treatment of the Palestinians under its occupation.

Still, Israel continues to take the world for a fool - at least the Palestinians - when it feigns legality when debating the issue of demolishing Palestinian homes in Jerusalem. This week, Israeli government officials say they are close to overcoming the legal hurdles necessary to get approval to demolish the home of 'Ala Abu Dheim, the east Jerusalem resident who gunned down eight yeshiva students last March. The orders to demolish the homes of the two men who ploughed through Israeli traffic with their bulldozers earlier this month is still pending.

Of course all three men were killed on the spot by Israeli police. At no time did Israeli security officers try to apprehend the men and actually give them their fair day in court, which is the usual procedure in democratic countries. Israel's "shoot to kill" attitude has become the run of the mill, all in the name of security. Children playing ball in the vicinity of the border between Gaza and Israel were shot at and killed because patrolling soldiers believed they were "terrorists" trying to infiltrate into Israel.

The point here is that Israel still feels obligated to use the justification of legality when it carries out these highly illegal acts even though in reality, legality is the last consideration. Besides, in what civilized country is demolishing the home of a criminal considered "legal" and not inhumane collective punishment? When Baruch Goldstein sprayed a Hebron mosque with bullets, gunning down 29 Muslims kneeling in prayer, Israeli bulldozers hardly rushed to tear down his home in the settlement of Kiryat Arba. When an Israeli F-16 fighter plane dropped a 500-pound bomb on a Gaza apartment building, destroying the homes of several families and killing at least 16 people, the pilot did not have to worry about his family losing the roof over their heads because of his terror-filled act.

Even if we move out of the murky waters of Israeli/Palestinian politics, this brutal form of collective punishment is unprecedented in other parts of the civilized world, at least against its own citizens. While the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh who was held responsible for the deaths of 168 people was arrested and later sentenced to death, his family's home is still standing. The punishment was meted out against the perpetrator only; the way it should be.

However, when it comes to Palestinians, different standards are applied. While Israel claims such punitive measures are meant as a deterrent to further attacks against Israelis, the real purpose is plain and simple: punish the Palestinians, even if they have nothing to do with the crime.

On a more massive scale, this is the policy the United States undertook post-September 11, 2001. We all know Israel takes its cue from the US, or vice versa. Following the Twin Tower and Pentagon attacks which took the lives of almost 3,000 Americans, the US, or President George W. Bush and his cronies, decided someone had to pay. Of course those who actually carried out the attacks were already dead and the elusive mastermind behind it is still at large. That did not stop Bush from forcing whole nations pay the price for the lives of innocent Americans. Thousands were killed in the bombings in Afghanistan and thousands more in Iraq, with the body count still rising. Of course there are several other factors at play here besides the declared purpose of catching Osama Bin Laden, first and foremost, western dominance in the Middle East. Still, the similarities are chilling. When Israel invades the entire Gaza Strip, killing hundreds of Palestinian civilians in the name of one Israeli soldier, is this any different from Bush's gung-ho attitude? Hardly.

In Rafah, the Israeli army forces razed approximately 1,500 homes over four years, predominantly to close smuggling tunnels from Egypt and to create a buffer zone between Gaza and the Egyptian border. In this case, Israel did not even bother with legal channels given that the residents were Palestinian Gazans [as opposed to Israeli-ID Jerusalemites] and because like in all other Israeli arguments, defending their security trumps all.

East Jerusalemites - and Palestinians as a whole - face these discriminative, racist-at-heart punishments every day. Only because they are Palestinian, and in comparison, only because the 9/11 bombers were Arab and Muslim - were these extreme measures taken. In both cases, whether it was the Bush administration or the Israeli government, the attitude is one of arrogance and superiority. That is, because they are the US and Israel, this gives them a carte blanche to act with impunity. Any other less influential country would have been criticized or even forcefully stopped by the so-called international community for similar transgressions. We all remember when Saddam Hussein

foolishly decided to enter Kuwait and "occupy" it. That occupation didn't last 40 days much less 40 years.

So, when the Israeli media reports that the "legal obstacles" preventing the demolition of 'Ala Abu Dheim's house "had been removed" and that the demolition of the other two Palestinian homes was still up against "legal difficulties", it is clear this is part of a more comprehensive master-plan for the Palestinians in general and for Jerusalem in particular. Israel, and even America, hardly worries about the fact that they have blatant double-standards or that their actions come across as racist.

This is not to justify violent acts against any party, whether Palestinian or Israel because it is a well-known fact that violence only begets more violence. However, in the occupied territories, only Palestinian violence against Israelis merits such extreme reactions. It is not only a punishment for the families of those who carried out the attacks but a reminder to all Palestinians that even a flicker of resistance against Israel will not be tolerated.



Ni'ilin: Known for All the Wrong Reasons

August 4, 2008

Ahmad Husam Yousef Moussa, the nine-year old boy who was shot dead by the Israel Occupation Forces on Tuesday July 29 in the West Bank village of Ni'ilin, is the latest child to become a symbol of the Palestinian and international struggle against the Israeli occupation. Ahmed was killed by what an initial Israeli Border Police investigation confirmed was a live M16 bullet fired by the driver of a military jeep which advanced on a group of youths and children, including Ahmad.

Ni'ilin, along with many other places in the West Bank has shown its willingness to resist Israel's military occupation, whose sole purpose is to colonize as much Palestinian land as possible, if not the entire West Bank.

Ni'ilin is one of the villages threatened by the further construction of the separation wall. Certainly, Ni'ilin has been the main one dominating the headlines recently, with footage being released only two weeks ago of an Israeli soldier shooting a handcuffed and blindfolded man in the foot, at close range. The village is located in the West Bank, 26km to the west of Ramallah. The village of Ni'ilin has become a site of active buzz in the struggle against the wall. Frequent peaceful demonstrations and protests between villagers and Israeli soldiers are staged on the site where bulldozers are razing land to build the latest segment of the Wall.

The local Popular Committee to Resist the Apartheid Wall has mobilized both residents in neighboring villages as well as international activists, organizing a number of actions against the ongoing construction of the Wall. Weekly Friday protests as well as other actions during the week have slowed construction and brought considerable attention to the local struggle. The actions against the construction have nearly always been met by force. Ahmad is not the only victim; scores of people have been injured and arrested by occupation forces. Bulldozers have uprooted a number of olive trees, while fires started by tear gas canisters have burnt others. The heavy-handed measures of Israeli occupation forces have failed to break the resolve of those campaigning to save Ni'ilin, and the strength of the local solidarity between Ni'ilin and the surrounding villages continues to grow.

The threat and actual dispossession has only strengthened resolve within the community to resist until the village lands are returned and dignity and justice are restored for the people in Ni'ilin and Palestine as a whole. Only recently, the Israeli army informed the village about a new tunnel it is planning to build at the entrance to Ni'ilin on the western side of the village. Some 150 dunums of the land will be confiscated for this purpose. The current entrance will be closed, and the tunnel is to be built under Road 446 to take its place. The first aim of the tunnel is to control the life of Ni'ilin's 5,000 inhabitants and to cut them off from their links with the surrounding villages, as well as Ramallah city. It will be built on some of the village's most fertile agricultural land, and will see the destruction of hundreds of olive trees that serve as livelihood for the local people.

The tunnel will divide the village into two parts: upper and lower Ni'ilin. On one side 1,000 inhabitants living in the upper area will be isolated and prevented from accessing the lower area. This means they will be cut off from health, education and other services in the upper part, as well social networks. Their movement will depend on the whim of Israeli soldiers, who will open the gate to upper Ni'ilin for 45 minutes

each day, as is already taking place in other parts of the West Bank. The second aim of the gate is to destroy the village's economy, and the third aim is to isolate farmers from their agricultural land.

Despite its troubles, Ni'ilin continues to remain strong in the face of the occupation; however, in 1948 there were 2,500 inhabitants living in Ni'ilin. Today, 60 years later, there are some 5,000 inhabitants. According to the Stop the Wall campaign research that has been undertaken, under normal growth rates, the population should be five times higher. Continuous land confiscations has taken its toll and resulting poverty and unemployment, together with closures, have led to continuous and forced displacement and many people had no other choice but to leave the village in search of work opportunities.

Given this state of affairs, it is understandable as to not only why the residents of Ni'ilin are fighting for their town, but also why there is a huge rallying of support from international groups and individuals.

When Ahmad Moussa was killed, the Israeli army attempted to offer their feeble claims that the demonstrations were violent and that they were responding to protests fuelled by civil disobedience. The question remains as to whether the actual use of live ammunition can ever be justified when facing an unarmed demonstration? The killing of a nine-year old only serves to fuel the people and will not end the resistance to the building of the separation wall. It also serves to highlight Israel's position as the aggressors. At no point can that unarmed child have posed a threat to the great Israeli Occupation Forces, with all their imposing military might.

Meanwhile, whilst the protests, demonstrations and Israeli military aggression continue in Ni'ilin, a family is left without their son. Nothing will bring him back. Images on television this week have shown young men joining the procession outside their home, some with green Hamas and yellow Fateh flags, marching past the Mousa family's white two

storey house to the adjacent cemetery chanting: "Mother of the martyr, ululate, all the young here are your children". In the center of this village in the hills west of Ramallah, freshly painted red graffiti on the wall proclaims, "The death of the martyr Ahmed Mousa will increase our struggle against the occupation." The sad reality is that these religious and political statements don't mean anything to the grieving family, other than a bitter reminder that their son is another statistic, another pawn in the battle between the two sides. Their personal loss is tragically a political gain; one that may lead to more fighting in the long term.

Meanwhile, the Israeli camp has adopted their usual style of shrouding everything in secrecy and all that has been released is a statement saying that an investigation into this child's death is being carried out and that a 'border policeman involved at the scene at the time of incident was questioned for 24 hours and kept under house arrest for five days in connection with the incident". This vague and insulting information is likely to offer no comfort to the Mousa family, who as of last Tuesday evening will be starting a sentence of their own.



Why We Should Never Forget

September 24, 2008

September 16 and 17 mark a very difficult anniversary for the Palestinians. Twenty-six years ago, approximately 2,000 Palestinian men, women and children were massacred in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla in Lebanon by Israeli-aligned Phalangist troops under the chief of the Lebanese Intelligence Forces Elie Hobeika and Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon.

Unarguably some of the darkest days of Palestinian history, the Sabra and Shatilla massacres are now a reminder of a cause we as Palestinians should never allow ourselves to forget. The plight of Palestinian refugees has remained unresolved since its creation in 1948, with atrocities such as Sabra and Shatilla painful reminders of why a just resolution to it must be found.

Israel's part in the massacre should also not be forgotten. In 1982, Beirut was under siege by the Israelis. The Palestinian resistance was to quit Beirut under an American-brokered deal but only after the PLO was given guarantees by the US that the Palestinian civil population would be immune from attack. Days after Palestinian troops had evacuated, Israel occupied West Beirut and encircled the Sabra and Shatilla camps. It then allowed the Phalangists in. Israel provided them with weapons, protection and most importantly, a green light, to enter the two camps - now devoid of armed Palestinian fighters - and carry out one of the most gruesome massacres in history. Thousands of Palestinians were

killed, women raped and slaughtered, men lined up on walls and shot down and babies killed alongside their horror-stricken mothers. Once the Phalangists' 40-hour rampage was done, the Israelis let them return to their bases, unscathed and unpunished. In the independent Israeli investigation, the Kahan Commission, Sharon was found indirectly responsible for the massacre. It did not, however, hinder him from moving forward in his political life. Although he resigned his post as defense minister at the time he eventually became Prime Minister of Israel Still Sharon's intentions towards the Palestinians were never disguised and even certain Israelis understood this. Following the massacre one Israeli commentator wrote, "you can't toss a snake into a cradle, then act surprised when the baby gets bitten."

The fact that Israel was never held accountable for the horrendous atrocities that took place in the two camps is indicative of Israel's status in the international community; Israel believes it can operate above the law - international and otherwise - and for good reason. It has proven time and again that it is immune to internationally - imposed punitive measures for the violations it commits against the Palestinians, the Sabra and Shatilla massacre being the most glaring of them all.

It is not however, only the deaths of innocent people for which Israel should be held accountable. These innocent people would never have been left unprotected in squalid and impoverished refugee camps if Israel had heeded international resolutions demanding that they be allowed to return home. Every year, the United Nations reaffirms Security Council Resolution 194, passed in December, 1948 which calls for the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes and every year it is tossed aside along with the other disregarded resolutions concerning the Palestinians.

Not only does Israel shun these resolutions, it does not take responsibility for the creation of 800,000 refugees who were forced to flee their homes in 1948, never to return. Furthermore, any mention of the refugee right

of return has been immediately shot down by Israel irrespective of the governments in place. Left wing Israeli leaders have rejected the right of return just as vehemently as right wing governments with the main argument being that any major influx of refugees to what is now Israel would severely compromise the Jewish character of the state. Last week, outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert came as close as any Israeli leader has ever come to recognizing the refugee problem when he said, "I share in expressing regret over what happened to the Palestinians in 1948," but said he would never accept the right of return almost in the same breath.

The result, no doubt, has been devastating. With approximately seven million refugees today scattered across the world, for the Palestinians, the refugee cause is as alive today as it was 60 years ago, precisely because it is ageless. Whether refugees are granted the right to return in their lifetimes or not, it is an inalienable right that cannot be invalidated with the passing of time.

For those who live in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan and for those who survived the Sabra and Shatilla massacre, the right of return has shaped the course of most, if not all of their lives. The slaughtering that took place 26 years ago in these two camps was an atrocity against humanity and one which has gone unpunished despite Palestinian and some international efforts to bring Sharon before an international war crimes tribunal. It was a crime that should forever lay heavy on the conscience of the world. It should also remind it that the people who endured the unspeakable horrors that went on over the course of two days have also endured another formidable injustice over the course of 60 years.

The camps have since been rebuilt as well as possible. For the newest generation of refugees, born and raised in exile, the stench of dead bodies rotting in the hot sun has most likely vanished. But for those who still remember the horrors of the massacre, the images of people

executed in the streets and dead mothers clutching dead babies will always be an indelible image in their minds' eye. That is the cross they must bear. As for the world, the United Nations in particular, it is high time it puts its resolutions into action. The massacre of Sabra and Shatilla in addition to a long list of other grievances is a direct product of the unresolved refugee problem. "Never Again," should be a vow printed in bold letters above the entrances to Sabra and Shatilla, where atrocities no less horrifying than those of a concentration camp took place and, unlike the Holocaust, have never been recognized.



Getting Drunk on Weapons

October 13, 2008

Israel has just come back from its latest spending spree. By the standards of your average shopper, its shopping list was quite boring, with only one item on it: weapons. What for? To tackle those pesky Palestinians who will not stop talking about some occupation they claim to be living under. And of course, there's the need to defend the mighty nuclear state of Israel against the possibly nuclear (maybe, maybe not) state of Iran. Israel has just spent \$15.2 billion on 25 F-35 bombers, each plane costing about \$70-\$80 million. On the other end of the scale, it has also invested funds into developing a new weapon called skunk gas. The aptly named skunk gas is a concoction of organic but absolutely disgusting ingredients that results in a foul-smelling but harmless liquid which is then sprayed onto the offenders (mostly those pesky Palestinians again). The stench is so bad that most people who are sprayed with it retch and try to rip off their clothes to get away from it. Only - they can't. The smell lingers for about a week and permeates your skin, your clothes, and pretty much everything you touch. Needless to say, if you get sprayed by skunk, you'll be a very lonely individual for the following week. Israel has invested in this new invention as a less noxious alternative to rubber bullets and tear gas. Perhaps they're learning their lesson, even if it is very late in the day. Accused on a daily basis of using excessive force to disperse protests and demonstrations, and scare off rock-throwing children, clearly their poor soldiers are getting sick of shouldering the criticism. After all, there's nothing like an accusation of human rights abuse to get you down.

I remember when Israel introduced that fancy assault rifle with its little video monitor that can see around corners so you can shoot around them without getting your head blasted off by...a rock. Or a shoe. Indeed, Israel has a great deal to be proud of. Israel Military Industries Ltd., or IMI, is an Israeli weapons manufacturer of some repute. They developed the infamous Uzi, a submachine gun that became very popular with armies, terrorists, rebels, and revolutionaries alike around the world. They manufacture firearms, ammunition and military technologies, mainly for the Israeli army, more affectionately known to Palestinians as the Israeli Occupation Forces. Interestingly enough, IMI has a history that stretches back to the time of British Mandate Palestine, when Haganah, the Jewish underground paramilitary organization which spawned the IDF [Israel Defense Forces], began manufacturing illegal weapons.

Yet despite all these high-tech weapons and the millions of dollars invested, Israel faces the same problem it has faced since 1948. All sarcasm aside, the Palestinians will not be beaten down by any weapon-physical, mental, or emotional. Whether you agree or sympathize with the Palestinian position makes no difference. When a people truly believe they have right on their side, that they have the moral high ground, nothing in this world can convince them to abandon that ground. David Ben-Gurion had the right idea when he gave an interview back in 1956. In a moment of great profoundness, he said, "Why should the [Palestinian] Arabs make peace? If I were an Arab leader I would never make terms with Israel. That is natural: we have taken their country. Sure, God promised it to us, but what does that matter to them? Our God is not theirs. We come from Israel, it's true, but 2,000 years ago, and what is that to them? There has been anti-Semitism, the Nazis, Hitler, Auschwitz, but was that their fault? They only see one thing: we have come here and stolen their country. Why should they accept that?" Arguably, he did follow that comment up with the statement that Israel should maintain a powerful army, but his initial analysis was correct. He was looking at the situation from a Palestinian point of view.

If Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, could understand that back in 1956, why can Israel not figure it out 60 years later. Sixty years down the road, we Palestinians are still clinging to the hope that we can create a state, though much diminished, on just 22% of our original lands. Even if it were one percent, we would still fight for it because we believe it belongs to us. Since the beginning of the second Intifada in September 2000, Israeli forces have killed 5,389 Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem. This includes 194 women and 995 children. During the same period 135 Palestinian patients died in one of the 630 military checkpoints installed throughout the Palestinian Territories. We have bore all this and so much more. Do Israelis really believe that adding to their already impressive catalog of weapons will intimidate Palestinians enough to back down? Israel didn't learn this lesson when it went after Hezbollah in Lebanon back in 2006, nor will it learn this lesson in time to stop an attack on Iran. According to many analysts and Israeli politicians, Israel's hard power tactics are about to be employed there too, possibly before December of this year, when Iran's first nuclear electricity generating plant will go critical, and thereafter any air attack would become impossible as it would trigger a nuclear explosion.

You can't kill a belief with man-made weapons, just like you can't intimidate the Palestinian youths who throw rocks at tanks. Every person has their boiling point. I have it, and I've crossed it too. In fact, every time I'm stuck at a checkpoint, I feel my anger reaching the boiling point. I remember once when Israeli soldiers set up a checkpoint just yards away from my house. I was on my way home from school, and with my house directly in my view, an 18-year old, acne-covered soldier pointed a gun in my face and told me that, for my protection, I could not pass through the checkpoint. After five minutes of arguing that: a. I was 14, b. I was unarmed, and c. my house was RIGHT THERE, I quit arguing. I said to him, fine - shoot me if you have to, but I'm going home. Needless to say, he didn't shoot me. Otherwise I very much doubt you would be reading this article today.

I'm just hoping, along with millions of other Palestinians, that Israel will come to terms with what it has done to us, and give us our state. End the occupation. Otherwise, we'll continue to be that nagging tooth ache that just won't go away. Bring on all your weapons, your F-35's, your tanks, and your skunk gas, but it won't do you any good. Tennessee Williams wrote in his play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, "There ain't nothin' more powerful than the odor of mendacity. You can smell it. It smells like death." And he wasn't talking about skunk gas. Mendacity is the system we live in, the system that allows 1.5 million people to be starved because of a democratic decision they made; the system that allows Israel to continue on as a respected member of the international community even though it has violated the most UN resolutions on record; the system that allows apartheid to flourish, and basic human rights to be ignored. Men get drunk on alcohol to escape mendacity. Israel gets drunk on weapons to do the same.



Palestine's Partner for Peace?

October 29, 2008

After a month of haggling, Tzipi Livni, appointed to replace outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, announced this week that she has not been able to form a coalition government to support her rule. "Let the people choose their leaders," she said instead, calling for early elections likely to take place in February of next year. Most observers called her decision a huge blow to peace. Livni's inability to create a coalition government sends more than just the message of snap elections. It tells us that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas may not have a partner for peace in Israel's government after all.

Israel's political system is a notoriously complicated one, with a large number of small parties effectively preventing any one party from winning a majority of the Knesset's 120 seats. In order for any government to survive, they must create an often unstable coalition with small parties that they do not necessarily have much in common with. This requires sacrifices on their part for a precious few seats. PM Olmert's Kadima party succeeded in 2006 in building a coalition that included Labor, a large center-left political party, and Shas, a right-wing ultra-orthodox faction with 12 seats. This time round, Labor again agreed to join a new coalition. Shas, on the other hand, demanded in return for its support a large budgetary increase of 1 billion shekels (\$261 million). More controversially however, it also asked for guarantees that Livni would not discuss the future of Jerusalem in talks with Palestinian negotiators. Other small parties such as the Pensioners

Party and United Torah Judaism (UTJ) followed Shas's lead, leaving Livni with little hope of engaging them as potential partners. Right-wing party Likud also refused to join the team. Its current leader, former PM Benjamin Netanyahu, has openly sworn off the Annapolis Agreement altogether, in favor of a joint economic development program in areas where the borders of Israel and Palestine meet. His infamous "three no's" remain: no withdrawal from the Golan Heights, no discussion of the status of Jerusalem, and no negotiations under any preconditions.

The only way Livni would have been able to form a coalition government would have been to concede to these demands. It does not need to be spelled out that without Jerusalem, negotiations will go nowhere. Hence, realistically, even the formation of a coalition government would have signaled a death knoll for negotiations with the Palestinians. Often accused of not being a "partner for peace", it would seem now that the Palestinians are the ones who will have nobody to negotiate with in the future.

In Israel's complicated political system, Israeli members of Knesset (MKs) technically have 21 days after October 29th to put forward an MK who they believe can create a coalition government. Needless to say, if Livni could not do it, then it is doubtful that anybody else can. But of course, it must be considered as a possibility. Hence, the following potential scenarios now present themselves, none of which are palatable to the Palestinians. Either Israel is ruled by an unstable coalition of unwilling partners who will not discuss the status of Jerusalem, one of the major issues at the heart of future Palestinian-Israeli peace. Or, snap elections take place, with victory for one of two likely winners, Kadima or Likud. A poll taken this week suggested that Kadima might pull forward with a slight margin. However, for much of the past two years, Netanyahu, Likud's leader, has been the favorite in polls which asked prospective voters who they would prefer as prime minister. Unfortunately, the same polls also showed that Labor is likely to lose seats.

Still, 90 days in politics is a long time, and a lot could change on the Israeli domestic front. While Netanyahu still has his checkered past to deal with (he was investigated for corruption and haunted by rumors of various scandals), Livni's record casts her in a more favorable light. A Mossad agent based in Europe in the 1980s, she has proven herself a strong politician, especially after she refused to capitulate to the demands of Shas, which she called political blackmail. However, even with a win, the February elections are unlikely to provide her with a stable majority in favor of a peace deal. All barring a sizeable swing in favor of left-wing parties, even a victorious Livni would still have to rely on the support of right-wing or ultraorthodox religious groups. Unfortunately, most of them are deeply opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state and handing back occupied east Jerusalem to the Palestinians. If Likud were to win, Netanyahu would find the support of such right-wing parties much easier to gain, but of course, a marriage of such parties would hardly elicit a positive or hopeful response from the Palestinians.

Likud is hoping to take advantage of the general shift of public opinion towards the right of the political spectrum. Israel's own policies, despite Olmert's late surprise admission that Israel will have to return the West Bank, east Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights if it wants peace, suggests that they are giving in to right-wing pressure. Israeli settlers are becoming much more vocal and violent (defying even their own government's orders), settlement numbers have expanded very sharply, more right-wing orthodox Jews have moved into east Jerusalem, basically entrenching themselves in Palestinian neighborhoods, and the separation wall is near completion, having stolen even more land from the West Bank. The situation on the ground is moving away from peace, not towards it. With Israel's left of center parties losing ground and the right of center parties gaining, both blocs are becoming fairly evenly split, leading to a deadlock that could debilitate efforts at peacemaking in the future, as they have done in the past.

Palestinian affairs have also affected the outcomes of Israeli national elections before. Many argued that the hawkish Netanyahu's victory against the seemingly "dove-ish" Shimon Peres in the 1996 prime ministerial elections was aided by Hamas-owned suicide attacks in retaliation for Israeli incursions and assassinations. An increase in instability in Palestine is likely to shift Israeli public opinion even further right. And as always, transgressions are often overlooked when standing in the shadow of fear.

In the meantime, however, and despite the uncertainty following Livni's call for new elections, Palestinians are forging ahead with unity talks amongst Palestinian factions, mainly Fateh and Hamas. Israel and Hamas's shaky truce continues to be maintained. And President Abbas' Palestinian security forces have been deployed in several large Palestinian towns, including, most recently, Hebron. These forces are attempting to improve security and stability, as well as to deny Hamas the possibility of extending its control over the West Bank.

Hopefully Palestinians will continue in this course. If Labor does not lose as much ground as it is projected to, and if Livni, with her own personal strengths, is able to convince the Israeli public to elect her party, they might just be able to shift the dynamics enough to give the likes of Shas and UTJ less power to demand such concessions from the major parties.

Peace is the only acceptable conclusion to this conflict and Livni alone will not do as a partner. As Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said, "We do not want to make peace with one faction in Israel. We want peace with all Israelis."



Clutching at the Thinnest of Straws

November 05, 2008

After two years of campaigning, debating and fund-raising, the US presidential elections are finally over. And after probably his first decent night's sleep in two years, President-Elect Barack Obama can finally start to act instead of talking - by making decisions and appointing the team that will guide him for the next four years. He has already said he will not waste any time in doing so and expects to hit the ground running in January.

Palestinians, probably along with most other nationalities around the world, were pleased and not a little relieved to witness an Obama victory. His background and political outlook is much more "global" than his Republican rival John McCain's. In a time when America's supremacy remains unchallenged, the American presidency begins to look somewhat more like a global presidency. After breathing a sigh of relief, we foreigners will now watch his next moves closely, for they are decisions that could affect our own lives.

Palestinians in particular, despite their jaded outlook and cynicism - the natural result of living under Israeli rule and occupation for 60 years - couldn't help but feel a slight warmth of optimism in their hearts when he won. Most Palestinians are not naïve. They do not expect Obama to come flying into the country on a magic carpet to set things right. On the contrary, Obama has made it clear that his priorities lie within the realm of US domestic politics - the economy, health care, immigration

laws etc. We also heard his speeches to Jewish communities in the US. In his largely publicized AIPAC speech in June, he pledged his support for Israel in no uncertain terms. In debates, he called the security of Israel sacrosanct. He promised continued US friendship with Israel. Hence, most American tax payers can expect to continue footing the \$3 billion a year bill in financial aid to Israel. He has also used harsh words when discussing Iran, North Korea and Russia, amongst others.

All of this rhetoric was to be expected. After all, the man was running for president of the United States. In such a race, voicing any sympathy for the Palestinian cause would have seen him immediately labeled as little better than a terrorist himself. With the middle name Hussein, he had to distance himself from any Muslim or Arab ties, even though he is a Christian of Kenyan descent. A Democrat with no serious national security/foreign policy credentials, he had to adopt the "tougher-on-terror" approach for the sake of political success.

Obama is a pragmatic character. He knew what he had to do to get elected, and now he has succeeded. Some Palestinians identified this trait in him, and understand it. However, myself and other Palestinian analysts are looking back to his comments and associations before he began his presidential campaign. It was that man and his ideas that we are hoping will return to the forefront in the next four years.

Obama's associations with Professor Rashid Khalidi, then a Palestinian teacher at the University of Chicago, while immediately used as a weapon against him, gave hope to others who saw this association in a different light. According to the LA Times, Obama reminisced about the many dinners he had with Khalidi and his family, and the natural conversations that had ensued. In an enlightened moment, Obama said that his many talks with the Khalidis had been "consistent reminders to me of my own blind spots and my own biases... It's for that reason that I'm hoping that, for many years to come, we continue that conversation—a conversation that is necessary not just around Mona

and Rashid's dinner table," but around "this entire world." If Obama meant that from his heart, then perhaps all is not lost after all.

In Iowa in February 2007, he also said, "Nobody is suffering more than the Palestinian people...The Israeli government must make difficult concessions for the peace process to restart." Even in February of this year, during a closed meeting with Jews in Cleveland, he suggested that too black and white a perspective on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would help no one and called for an open dialogue on the issue. "I think there is a strain within the pro-Israel community that says unless you adopt an unwavering pro-Likud approach to Israel, then you're anti-Israel... If we cannot have an honest dialogue about how do we achieve these goals, then we're not going to make progress," he said.

In calls for open dialogue, Obama did not immediately act upon his own advice. Ralph Nader identified the problem correctly when he criticized Obama for concealing any "pro-Palestinian feelings", censoring his own knowledge and instincts, and making the Palestinian-Israeli conflict an "off-the-table" issue. But this is probably one reason why today Obama is president and Nader is not.

Palestinians also look to Obama's own personal narrative as well. Brought up by a single parent, from a mixed ethnic background, Obama has definitely been on the receiving end of discrimination and prejudice. He has been judged by the color of his skin, by his name, and, as ridiculous as this may sound, by his travel destinations (namely Indonesia and Kenya). He knows well the stories of darker American times - the history of segregation and the struggle for civil rights. If he allows that knowledge and those memories, that humanity, to penetrate just a little of his policies in dealing with the Palestinians and Israelis, then he might be more effective than past presidents have been in moving peace talks forward.

Still, Israel can rest assured that he will not abandon them. No single man, not even Barack Obama, can change the American political system

and dislodge the grip that strong pro-Israel lobbying groups have on the White House. But he can help maneuver it. Signs suggest that he will surround himself with an eclectic "brain trust", a good balance of pragmatism and idealism. In the foreign policy arena, the names of liberal former advisers with experience in the Clinton Administration have been mentioned, such as Dennis Ross and Susan Rice.

Obama has stressed that his priorities will be, first and foremost, domestic ones. However, he cannot ignore the huge security issues facing his country, and therefore, the foreign policy team that he puts together will have a crucial role to play. If Obama truly wants to restore the international community's faith in the US as a global leader, he must smooth the feathers the Bush Administration has so vigorously ruffled. Ignoring the advice of key allies and showing no respect for a country's sovereignty (Pakistan and Syria most recently), the single-minded, short-term strategy that Bush has pursued for eight years will need to be changed - drastically. Obama's multilateralism, on the other hand, is very refreshing. His call for talking with "enemies" rather than boycotting them gives diplomacy priority over war. If, as he says, he wants to win the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims, he will need to promote a practical solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In contrast with Bush's last ditch efforts to have a peace treaty signed by the end of 2008, many Palestinians are pinning their hopes on the possibility of a new Obama effort.

His pre-campaigning associations, his private comments, his own roots and experiences - these are the straws that Palestinians will clutch at in the coming months. Cynical and jaded they may be, but Palestinians are desperate for any glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel of occupation. Perhaps Obama will act on his mantra of change and make life-changing decisions for the Palestinians.



Target Practice in Gaza

November 19, 2008

What came first: the chicken or the egg? And who started the latest round of clashes in Gaza: the Israelis or the Palestinians? Depending on whom one asks, the answer will be different every time - the Israelis, the Palestinians, both are guilty, it depends...

On November 5, Israeli forces entered Gaza, killing six Palestinians in the process. Since then, Palestinian fighters have been clashing with Israeli troops and dodging Israeli missiles. In response to every Israeli action, they play their only card- they fire homemade rockets into Israel. To date, 16 Palestinians have been killed, with zero Israeli fatalities recorded. Palestinians say Israel made the first move by entering Gaza in an unwarranted and aggressive manner. Israel, on the other hand, says it was responding to rumors of possible kidnapping attempts against Israeli soldiers and the threat of more rocket attacks. But debating who started the latest round of violence is an unproductive pastime. Instead, considering the timing and the consequences of these hostilities yields a much more interesting though sad tale.

November 5 was the day after the US presidential elections. It was also a few days before Hamas, Fateh, and other Palestinian factions were to head to Cairo for the unity talks that never happened. Roughly five months into a relatively stable six month truce between Israel and Hamas, Israeli forces and tanks, supported by warplanes, entered the Strip, killed six Palestinian fighters, and then withdrew, all the while

expecting the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire to remain intact. At a time when any semblance of quiet was crucial, Israel didn't feel the need to oblige. What message were they trying to send? Was it to show that the conclusion of the American presidential elections would have no effect on Israeli policies - they would continue to do as they wished regardless of international criticism? Was it to remind the Palestinians that Israel held the upper hand militarily and that they could go into Gaza or the West Bank anytime they liked, truce or no truce? Was it to further divide the Palestinians, knowing all the while that any such attack would weaken President Abbas' position in the eyes of the Palestinian people, and damage a little further the fragile foundations of the peace process? Or was it to make the man who ordered the incursion, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, appear a strong leader as he prepares to run for the office of Prime Minister in Israeli elections next February? No matter what the answer, Israel is either very smart or very short-sighted, though most people would probably agree with the former description.

With its latest intensive incursions, Israel has sent multiple messages that it is strong and ready for battle. It has affirmed to Palestinians that not only does Israel want to have its cake; it thinks it can eat it as well. The incompatibility of an inhumane blockade on Gaza - not to mention the settlements, checkpoints, and a separation wall - with the peace process does not seem to faze the Israelis in the slightest. Similarly, despite their Gaza offensive, they still want to maintain the truce with Hamas.

Unfortunately, an analysis of possible messages will not change the humanitarian crisis unfolding on the ground in Gaza. The Israeli army and Palestinian fighters are engaged in a tit for tat struggle. In addition to the 16 Palestinians killed, the remaining 1.5million residents of Gaza are plummeting even further into a humanitarian disaster of dire consequences. With no fuel, no food and no medical supplies being allowed in, Gazans are living in virtual blackout with severe food shortages. While Gazans have been living in a prison for the past two

years, the latest blockade is making a terrible situation absolutely unbearable. UNRWA, which alone distributes food to more than 750,000 refugees, announced that it would essentially have to close up shop unless the flour, oil, milk and meat waiting to be delivered through the closed Gaza crossings was allowed through. In the last couple of days, Israel has allowed some token deliveries to be made, but they are not nearly enough to prevent the humanitarian crisis from worsening. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights urged Israel to end the blockade immediately, saying that Gaza's 1.5 million residents have been "forcibly deprived of their most basic human rights for months."

Adding to the food shortage problems, Israeli bulldozers went into southern Gaza and razed agricultural lands, leaving them unfit for farming. A blackout of a different kind is also occurring in the Strip, as Israel has prevented foreign journalists and reporters from entering or leaving Gaza. The Foreign Press Association condemned the closure this week, saying, "We regard this as an unconscionable breach of the Israeli Government's responsibility to allow journalists to do their jobs in this region."

In the meantime, Israel has merely shrugged off all criticisms and calls for compassion. Instead, it continues to refer to the homemade rockets as "missile launches", suggesting that Palestinians are in possession of technologically advanced weapons. Instead, what Palestinians have is a primitive rocket fired from somebody's shoulder or backyard. They can cause damage, but more often strike empty spaces since they are not guided. In this latest round of attacks, no Israelis have been killed by them and only a handful has died since the rockets started several years ago.

Many Palestinians believe that the rockets need to stop; after all, as a weapon against Israel's military, they are virtually useless. Strategically, they serve no purpose at all and are counterproductive, with the

repercussions always falling hardest on the Palestinians. They also give Palestinians a bad reputation. One could compare the act to injecting drugs into the body's system. In the short term, it feels good, giving an immediate sense of gratification; but in the long term, only the person injecting it will be harmed. Similarly, stone throwing is also a useless action, but as the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said once commented, "One stone tossed into an empty space scarcely warrants a second thought... but it is a symbolic gesture of joy."

Palestinians have been firing these rockets for years because those who fire them believe they are either symbolic or real gestures of resistance. For its part, Israel is either unaware of or choosing to ignore the fact that no number of incursions, missile attacks, or razing of agricultural lands will stop the rockets. It has been using the same strategy for years despite little success; but rather than shifting tactics, Israel prefers to flex its military muscle, using the Gaza Strip as target practice instead.

In the place of old tactics, new policies are needed. Both Israel and the Palestinians need to end the clashes and reaffirm their commitment to the truce. Israel also needs to remove the blockade it has imposed on Gazans, an inhumane form of collective punishment it should not have embarked on in the first place. Internally, Palestinians need to focus on their own national unity talks in order to present a unified front at the negotiating table with Israel. Peace through negotiations is the only way forward.

Jerusalem's Status: To Be Determined

December 03, 2008

Last week, approximately 100 American Orthodox Jews gathered in Jerusalem's Talpiot district in conjunction with a national convention for the Orthodox Union, an American Jewish group. The choice of location was significant to them, as it was the site designated by the US for the building of a future embassy in Jerusalem. The main objective of the rally was to call for the US government to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the "undivided capital of Israel". The title of the convention was also telling: Keep It One, Keep It Ours.

Despite the significant fact that there are no embassies, only consulates, in Jerusalem, most people around the world are ignorant of one detail: Jerusalem has never been officially recognized as the capital of Israel. On the contrary, most countries consider its status as yet to be determined, with Israel's control of east Jerusalem considered a very illegal military occupation. As such, recognizing the de facto control of Israel over Jerusalem does not equate to recognizing its sovereignty over the city.

Following the 1948 War, Jerusalem was divided into two parts. East Jerusalem was under the control of Jordanian rule while west Jerusalem was captured by the Israelis. This status did not continue, when, after the Six Day War in 1967, Israeli forces entered east Jerusalem, occupying it by force and immediately demolishing hundreds of Palestinian homes in the Old City's Moroccan Quarter in order to facilitate the expansion of the Jewish Quarter. UN Resolution 242,

possibly one of the most oft-quoted resolutions when discussing Middle East politics, deals with the aftermath of the 1967 War, and specifically calls for: "The withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict." Unfortunately, Israel has yet to comply.

The Orthodox Union rally held last week called on President-elect Barack Obama to implement "change" in the Middle East by moving its embassy and executing the Jerusalem Embassy Act. In 1995, the then US Congress passed the Act, which stated that the US embassy should be established in Jerusalem no later than May 31, 1999. However, since then, both former Presidents Clinton and Bush Jr. have suspended the relocation on a semiannual basis, clearly not willing to accept the global repercussions of such a move. On April 1, 2009, the Act will be placed in front of Obama for consideration again, leaving him with the option of further suspension or implementation of it.

Any such decision must be delayed until the final status of Jerusalem is negotiated and decided upon by the Palestinians and Israelis. For now, a decision to implement the Act would have dire consequences. In addition to the fact that it would be flouting UN Resolution 242, it would drastically affect America's standing in the global community. Obama has expressed over and over his desire to see international opinion of his country change for the better. He must know that such a decision would not further his cause. On the contrary, on top of the outcries he would be likely to receive from Arab and Muslim countries, this highly controversial step would further alienate the EU and essentially every ally he is counting on for support in the future he is attempting to restructure.

The EU itself has recently stepped on Israel's toes, speaking openly of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza caused by the continuing Israeli blockade, and against the increase in home demolitions as well as the rapid expansion of Israeli settlements. Most recently, the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* leaked the contents of an EU paper up for discussion in Brussels when the EU's foreign ministers meet in the second week of December.

Israeli newspapers and institutions were quick to disparage “The EU Action Strategy for Peace in the Middle East: The Way Forward”. *The Jewish Newswire* claimed it exposed the EU’s attempt to “shoulder its way into playing a more important role in the global effort to establish a new Muslim Arab state on historically Jewish lands, [and] is reportedly poised to unveil its latest plan for achieving this unprecedented act of state land theft”

Israelis’ acerbic reaction to the paper was caused by, amongst other things, its call for increased pressure on Israel to reopen Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem, specifically mentioning the Orient House, formerly the Palestinian Authority’s headquarters in the city before Israel closed it down. The plan states that, “A key part of building the Palestinian state involves resolving the status of Jerusalem, as the future capital of two states. [Therefore] the EU will work actively towards the re-opening of the Palestinian institutions.”

Jerusalem has always been, to put it mildly, a major point of contention in negotiations and foreign policy. Lately, the situation on the ground has been heating up more than usual. The city has witnessed a large influx of ultra-Orthodox Jews who are attempting to push Palestinian residents out of the city’s Arab neighborhoods and villages. Just a quick look at news reports from Jerusalem will reveal that the number of evictions and demolitions is up significantly. Clashes between Palestinian residents and the settlers along with their armed bodyguards (the Israeli army) have become more frequent and violent. The settlers’ theft of land has also grown more aggressive and resourceful, using every law in the land to their advantage - an easy task when the laws are already biased in their favor. According to a recent Amnesty International report, “In the first six months of 2008 Israel has expanded settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank at a faster rate than in the previous seven years.” Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad expressed similar distress in May when he pointed out that in this year alone there has been a 38% increase in settlement expansion in east Jerusalem.

In the last week, two organizations have filed objections to Israel’s latest attempt to redefine the borders and demographics of Jerusalem. Adalah and the Civic Coalition for Defending the Palestinians’ Rights in Jerusalem (CCDPRJ), on behalf of 73 objectors, officially protested the Israeli ‘Jerusalem Regional Master Plan’, submitted two months ago. The plan contains no consideration for the lives of Palestinians in Jerusalem. According to Adalah attorney Suhad Bishara, it seeks to maintain a permanent Jewish majority within the area designated “united greater Jerusalem.” Under the plan, transportation networks for Israelis will cut off Palestinians neighborhoods from one another and from their land, allowing no room for expansion of their own neighborhoods, and will also advance settlement entrenchment in east Jerusalem. The plan seems to ignore the fact that Jerusalem remains a final status issue for negotiations between Palestine and Israel, despite outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s concession that Jerusalem must be divided if there is ever to be peace between the Israelis and Palestinians.

The rally held last week was not too different to ones held in the past for the same cause, and pro-Israel lobbyists in Washington D.C. have for years been demanding that the US move its embassy to Jerusalem. However, this year there is a greater sense of fear and urgency regarding any possible change in the matter of Jerusalem. Palestinians and members of the international community are becoming increasingly alarmed by the rapid transformations being executed in the city and around the West Bank. While Israel’s policies in east Jerusalem have always been biased against Palestinians, there is a sense now that Israel is in a hurry to change the situation on the ground irrevocably in their favor. An American decision to implement the Jerusalem Act will only serve to support those changes.

Any decision which alters the status of Jerusalem (including a move of embassies to the city) will harm future peace negotiations and render any past progress irrelevant. Change is happening, but it is not the change Palestinians want to see. And if Israel wants to achieve peace with the Palestinians, it is not the change they should want to see either.



Behind Israeli Bars: Palestinian Child Prisoners

December 10, 2008

During Israel's first Universal Periodic Review (UPR) session on December 4 in Geneva's UN Palais de Nations, a number of issues were brought to the fore by representatives of the UN member states sitting in the room. The UPR, a new Human Rights Council mechanism whereby a country's own national report on human rights is subjected to scrutiny by its fellow countries, is supposedly aimed at creating a means of addressing human rights violations occurring throughout the world. Among the concerns voiced by state parties towards Israel's national report was concern over its treatment of Palestinian minors in Israeli prisons. While Israel's panel of experts attempted to put to rest this issue by claiming that a total of six Palestinian minors from the occupied Palestinian territories were in Israeli prisons or detention centers and that all of these minors were 17 years of age, there are a number of Palestinian and international organizations that beg to differ.

The Palestinian prisoner issue has long been at the forefront of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, and has often been used as one of the more flexible bargaining chips that Israel is willing to utilize under the umbrella of "good will gestures". There are over 10,000 Palestinian prisoners currently in Israeli prisons and detention centers both in the Palestinian territories and inside Israel. While this issue continues to remain a grave concern for Palestinians, the incarceration of children is no doubt an even graver concern and a clear breach of several international laws and charters protecting the rights of the child.

According to the Geneva-based Defense for Children International (DCI), as of December 3, 2008, there were 297 Palestinian children being held in Israeli custody. A child, by international standards, is any person under the age of 18, which is also the case under Palestinian law. While this is the case in Israel proper as well, Israeli military authorities governing the West Bank set the bar at 16, with several sub-distinctions that should be taken into consideration.

According to Israeli Military Order 132, a Palestinian child is defined as anyone under the age of 12. A teenager is between the ages 12-14, an adolescent 14-16, while an adult is any Palestinian aged 16 or above. Furthermore, according to Section 78 of Military Order 378, a Palestinian child can be detained by an ordinary, low ranking Israeli soldier or police officer for 96 hours. Afterwards, a child can be held for interrogation for eight days prior to being taken to Court through a formal detention order made by a higher ranking military official. A judge of the military court has the power to extend this period of detention for interrogation up to 90 days. A judge of the military court of appeals has the power to extend this 90 day period further, to a period of up to three months. (DCI)

This is over and above the fact that Palestinian children are tried in the same military courts as adults and not in juvenile courts like Israeli children. Military orders are ordinarily much harsher than Israeli law against Israeli children.

It goes without saying that the detention of children in military detention centers shared by adults is a flagrant breach of international and humanitarian law. Likewise, under the Fourth Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilian Persons in Times of War, it is prohibited for individuals to be transported from the occupied territory to the territory of the occupying power. This is more the norm than the exception with child prisoners held in prisons inside Israel such as Hasharon (Telmond) and Meggido, both inside Israel. The interrogation of prisoners, including

children, is often carried out in Israeli military detention centers inside the West Bank such as Bet El or Ofer.

Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which Israel is a signatory, states that, “No one shall be subject to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile”. However, several Palestinian children have been picked up by Israeli military forces in the West Bank off the streets, from their homes or at one of the 600 checkpoints throughout the Palestinian territories. There have been numerous case studies documenting the mistreatment of Palestinian children at the hands of Israeli soldiers. One jarring case is that of Mohammed, a 14-year old Palestinian boy who was arrested by Israeli soldiers last April, apparently on charges of throwing stones at an Israeli military watchtower. After being taken to the Ofer military camp for interrogation, he eventually appeared before the Ofer military court in shackles and was sentenced to four and a half months in prison.

This is hardly a new practice for Israel’s occupation forces in the West Bank, with the arrest of children an often-used policy during the first Intifada in the late 1980s. The list of incidents, of course, is endless. However, the dispute should not be about how many Palestinian children are incarcerated in Israeli jails but why there are any children there at all. UN member states expressed similar sentiments during Israel’s UPR session. In addition to several Arab countries, states such as the United Kingdom, France and Slovenia all showed concern for the plight of Palestinian minors in Israeli jails, with France specifying the particular Israeli practice of what is known as administrative detention. This type of detention allows Israeli authorities to sentence a Palestinian to up to six months, renewable for any number of times, without offering any hard evidence to the court. Their justification is that sometimes the evidence must remain “secret” for security purposes, which makes the arrest justifiable. The fact that not only adults but children have been subjected to this unjust type of arrest is clearly a human rights concern which Israel must address.

Israel is a signatory to a number of international charters including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention against Torture. While these charters are all non-binding, they are meant to set a high bar which would hopefully serve as a moral compass for states in the preservation of human rights in their own countries.

The inherent rights of a child to protection and safety are something no child, regardless of race, creed or nationality, should be deprived of. Palestinian children living in the Palestinian territories are at a disadvantage from day one given that they must live under a military occupation, which in itself is a violation of basic human rights. Palestinian children as young as 12 years old are subject to arrest and detention, circumstances hardly bearable for an adult. Detention centers and prisons are overcrowded, Palestinians are denied access to legal council for days and even weeks on end, and family visits are sporadic or cancelled all together in accordance with Israel’s security considerations. There have been documented cases of children being interrogated and tortured by Israeli intelligence officers and forced to sign written confessions. They are often deprived of education when they are behind bars, but most importantly, they are tried in a military court rather than a juvenile court along with their adult counterparts.

These are all grave human rights violations that not only the international community but also Israel should be concerned with. While it harms the Palestinians in the most direct fashion, such disregard for human rights towards a people under their rule also adds the risk of moral corrosion for Israeli society as well.

As a Palestinian witness to the daily human rights violations in the Palestinian territories, it pains me to see a potentially constructive process such as the UPR sidelined by Israel in terms of its practices in the occupied territories. As an occupying power, Israel has an obligation under international law to respect the human rights of the people under

its occupation, particularly, in this case, those of Palestinian children. It is my hope that not only will Israel be encouraged to properly address its human rights violations in the Palestinian territories before international forums such as the Human Rights Council, but that the Palestinians will soon have the same opportunity to do so as an independent state. Any country that wishes to heal itself internally must start by rectifying the wrongs it knows it is responsible for.



Victims of Israel's Latest Experiment

December 29, 2008

There is no point in preparing an introduction to this article. Why waste words on compositional niceties when the only thing I can offer is that I'm at a total loss. There are no words or expressions that could ever fully explain what I and other Palestinians are feeling at this moment in time. Since Saturday afternoon, most of us here have been glued to the television, mutely taking in details of the latest bombed target and watching horrific footage of bloodied men, women and children, body parts strewn about, and people offering last minute prayers in the rubble of their homes because they think they're about to die. The hospital scenes offer no consolation, as doctors and nurses wearing bloodied scrubs attempt to aid the injured, knowing full well that they do not have the medical supplies to do so effectively.

Rage disgust impotence disbelief... these are just a few of the feelings swirling around in our hearts and minds for the moment. Those feelings are not just addressed to Israel, but to the international community as well. The UN gathered in an emergency session to issue yet another lukewarm resolution calling on all sides to stop the fighting. Of course, the resolution was missing what should have been a key component, condemnation of Israel's actions. There was no mention of an excessive use of force; no mention of Israel's responsibilities as an occupying power. The US and the UK did not even bother to demand a halt to the violence, instead merely requesting that Israel try to avoid racking up civilian casualties. Israel hasn't even acquiesced to that request, and

how could they? Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. There are no wide expanses of land. Houses are built on top of each other. Government buildings and police stations are nestled in and amongst residential neighborhoods. It would be like trying to pluck out one card from beneath a house of cards, and expecting the whole structure to stay intact. Besides, Israel is not merely targeting government buildings and security compounds as first thought. Looking at the latest reports, Israel has bombed the Gaza port, a local university campus, an Olympic committee building, greenhouses, a school, homes, parked cars, mosques, prisons (full of prisoners), a graduation ceremony for traffic police, and medical storehouses. And still the bombing continues.

Alas, Israel knows it can get away with this latest massacre unscathed, just as it did in Lebanon in 2006. Israel has bombed UN refugees full of women and children (the Qana shelling, 1996) and killed UN observers with precision-guided weapons (Khiyam, Lebanon, 2006), yet still it goes about as a respected member of the world community. Surely no other country would ever be afforded such impunity.

The terrible irony of this latest catastrophe is that this whole situation is of Israel's making, the consequence of one of their many failed experiments in dealing with the Palestinian people. When Hamas first emerged in 1987, it was formed from various Islamic charities based in the Palestinian territories with links to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist movement born in Egypt in the 1920s. Israel allowed these Islamic charities to gain strength in Palestinian areas, hoping that they would counter the influence of secular Palestinian resistance movements. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the wheelchair-bound spiritual leader of Hamas who was assassinated by Israel in 2004, formed Hamas as the military wing of his group the Islamic Association, an association recognized and approved by Israel ten years earlier. Throughout the 1980s, Israel played a significant role in encouraging Hamas' emergence in the belief that such an Islamist group might help fracture support for the Fateh movement.

There was a point in history when Fateh was the target of Israel's wrath. For forty years, Fateh, a reverse acronym of the Arabic title Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini, which translates as the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, was the bane of Israel's existence (especially during the first Intifada). As such, Israel and its Shin Bet secret service went to great lengths to set the popular, secular, and more moderate Fateh party against Islamic movements in the hopes of weakening it. In the aptly named book, *"Devil's Game"* by Robert Dreyfuss, a senior analyst for the CIA, Martha Kessler, was quoted as saying, "[We] saw Israel cultivate Islam as a counterweight to Palestinian nationalism." Dreyfuss also quotes Philip Wilcox, a former US ambassador who headed the US consulate in Jerusalem, who said, "There were consistent rumors that Israeli secret service [Shin Bet] gave covert support to Hamas, because they were seen as rivals to the PLO." Like the US and the UK before it, Israel never learned the lesson that the "my enemy's enemy is my friend" policy often tends to backfire.

As we all know, Israel abandoned its plan of clandestine support for Hamas, recognizing the PLO, of which Fateh was the largest party, as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1993. However, Hamas would not disappear, and was democratically elected to power in 2006. Now Gazans are caught up in Israel's latest attempt to destroy Hamas, paying the price of Israel's mistake with their own lives.

Israel can cite all it wants as justification for this latest attack - the 300 plus rockets that have been fired into Israel and the one resulting Israeli fatality; the "terror" of living within the range of homemade rockets; the destruction of Hamas. But nothing can excuse the murder of more than 310 Palestinians (and counting) and the injuring of nearly 1,600 more in just two days. Well-informed Israeli analysts conceded yesterday that contrary to the belief that Israel had simply run out of patience vis-à-vis the rocket-firing, Operation Cast Lead has been in the planning stages for some six months, starting right around the time the Hamas-Israel ceasefire was first declared. What a coincidence...

Who knows what Israel plans to do next? With 6,500 reservists on call, some claim Israel will deploy ground forces to search for further “rocket production and storage facilities”. Others argue that Israel will not risk its troops coming across the wrath of very motivated, though lightly armed Palestinian fighters. One thing is for sure though. While Israel may succeed in destroying Hamas’ infrastructure and Gazan homes, the reasons and motivations for heeding Hamas’ call have only been strengthened. In addition, the Palestinian negotiating team announced a freeze in peace talks while Israeli airstrikes continue, conceding to numerous demands from Palestinians and Arabs that President Mahmoud Abbas halt all contact with Israel for the moment. “There are no negotiations and there is no way there could be negotiations while there are attacks against us,” chief Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Qureia told reporters.

At present, Palestinians are still getting over the initial shock and rage of the attacks, which are still ongoing. Analyzing the why’s and how’s is too painful. Most Palestinians are still veering between insanely angry rhetoric and numbness. Still, no matter what happens next, Israel can at least proudly own that it has broken one record - its own for the most Palestinians killed in under an hour.