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## ISRAEL'S COLONIAL SIEGE AND THE PALESTINIANS

BASHIR ABU-MANNEH

If there's one short phrase that can describe Palestinian reality under Israeli occupation today, it is this: *enduring under permanent siege, without surrender*.<sup>1</sup>

My aim in the following is, first, to defend the accuracy of this statement. Since the Oslo Agreements of 1993, Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has developed into a colonial siege, gradually atomizing and strangling Palestinian economy and society. Compounded by international boycott, poverty levels are now between 70 per cent and 80 per cent, with extreme and unprecedented levels of unemployment and rising dependency on food aid.<sup>2</sup> Second, although Israeli policy is mainly to blame for this drastic worsening of Palestinian living conditions since 1993, the Palestinian national secular elite is far from blameless. They have, in fact, played a junior yet pivotal role in bringing this new regime into being. By legitimizing their people's continued dispossession and domination by Israel, they have ended up corrupting Palestinian national aspirations for justice and self-determination. With no alternative left project in sight, religious fundamentalism was destined to carry the mantle of an abandoned nationalism and drastically increase its own popular political constituency. Third, siege and capitulation also eventually generated mass resistance. As with the first Intifada of the late 1980s that led to Oslo, Palestinians again revolted in popular protest against colonization and national denial. And with the al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, resistance was re-legitimized.<sup>3</sup> This time round, though, conditions were much worse: social power and political leverage were in even shorter supply. Suicide bombing expressed growing Palestinian captivity and despair, and armed struggle replaced an earlier emphasis on mass political participation. I examine these new forms of resistance and scrutinize their prospects of achieving decolonization under continuing conditions of siege, Hamas-Fatah factionalism, and an absence of unified strategy.

## ATOMIZED AND ENCIRCLED

Siege (or closure) is arguably Israel's most pernicious instrument of colonial control and punishment. It basically means a denial of the Palestinian right to freedom of movement through the use of hundreds of roadblocks and checkpoints, numbering 546 in total. Closure doesn't just restrict movement of goods and persons *externally* between the West Bank and Gaza, as well as from either area to Israel or the outside world. It blocks freedom of movement *internally* within the West Bank as well. Initially imposed as far back as the first Intifada in 1991, this regime was consolidated and incorporated into Oslo, only to be massively intensified since the second Intifada began. As a result, 40 per cent of the West Bank is today inaccessible to Palestinians.

In a recent report by the World Bank on movement restrictions in the West Bank, Israel was strongly criticized for the way 'closure has been implemented through a complicated agglomeration of policies and practices which has fragmented the territory into ever smaller and more disconnected cantons'.<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging (but without going into the deeper roots of the conflict) that Israeli security concerns are 'undeniable and must be addressed', the report clearly states that '...it is often difficult to reconcile the use of closure for security purposes from its use to expand and protect settlement activity and the relatively unhindered movement of settlers in and out of the West Bank... It is also difficult to account for the discriminatory enforcement of zoning and planning regulations which minimize the amount of land available for the normal growth and development of Palestinian areas...'. As a result, the Palestinian economy has been thoroughly devastated and is on the brink of collapse: 'The practical effect of this shattered economic space is that on any given day the ability to reach work, school, shopping, healthcare facilities and agricultural land is highly uncertain and subject to arbitrary restriction and delay'.

Much of this has been known for years. Indeed, four years earlier Salem Ajluni, chief UN economist, described Israel's economic strangulation of the Occupied Territories as a deliberate 'mass impoverishment – indeed immiseration – a process that is unprecedented in modern Palestinian history'.<sup>5</sup> With the recent economic and political boycott of the Palestinian government following on the heels of Hamas's election victory in January 2006, siege has been compounded by even harsher restrictions. As part of what the special rapporteur on human rights in the Occupied Territories, John Dugard, called 'economic coercion for regime change', Palestinians have been strangled even more: 'In effect, the Palestinian people have been subjected to economic sanctions – the first time an occupied people have

been so treated.... [they] have been subjected to possibly the most rigorous form of international sanctions imposed in modern times'.<sup>6</sup>

So what started as 'an ad hoc military-bureaucratic measure crystallized into a fully conscious Israeli strategy with a clear political goal: separation between the two peoples with an *appearance* of political separation, but with only one government – Israel – having any effective power to shape the destinies of both'.<sup>7</sup> If Israel's strategy before the first Intifada was the exploitation and partial inclusion of the Palestinian working class into the Israeli economy as daily migrant labour, since 1991 Israel has reverted to its original Zionist goal of complete exclusion.<sup>8</sup> Unlike apartheid, then, Zionism combines political separation with economic exclusion. Azmi Bishara has described the logic of Zionist colonialism as 'separation, within separation': 'This colonialism displaces people, confiscates their land or bypasses them (the term, often applied to roads, is pertinent). It "develops" the land for settlement, but not for the inhabitants'.<sup>9</sup> The process of Zionist conquest and siege is, thus, more reminiscent of whites' treatment of Native Indians in North America than it is of Blacks under South African apartheid.<sup>10</sup> As Faye A. Sayegh put it: 'The people of Palestine has lost not only *political control* over its country, but *physical occupation* of its country as well: it has been deprived not only of its inalienable right to *self-determination*, but also of its elemental right to *exist* on its own land!'<sup>11</sup>

A major effect of such dispensability, inequality, and separation has been a growing sense of social and political alienation. Occupied Palestinians have become not only alienated from their own leadership, as it has failed to deliver political independence and continues to benefit from VIP passes allowing it to travel freely. They have also become alienated from their own collective powers and capacities. What Amira Hass calls Israel's collective 'theft of space and time' is thus experienced as a maze of bureaucratic measures and arbitrary restrictions which people have to face and navigate as individuals on a daily basis, killing their sense of spontaneity, ability to plan, and everyday normalcy, and resulting in a 'privatization of the occupation' through a growing sense of personal insecurity, uncertainty, and impotence.<sup>12</sup> Stratified and segmented, Palestinians have thus carried the heavy weight of siege on their shoulders as individuals and families rather than as a national collective: 'Once I used to dream of a state', a Palestinian cameraman told Hass, 'Now I dream of getting to the other side of the Erez checkpoint'.<sup>13</sup> Such atomization and helplessness would ultimately generate a very particular form of resistance, one that is isolated and disengaged from mass organizational politics, as I argue below.

The fact that this was actually the *intended consequence* of Oslo is made abundantly clear in a report issued by the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem in 2002. *Land Grab: Israel's Settlement Policy in the West Bank* clearly shows how colonization has always been a 'vigorous and systematic' state-sponsored and state-driven project.<sup>14</sup> Involving a 'massive intervention' by the Israeli army and by both Likud and Labour governments since 1967, Palestinian land was seized and cordoned off in order to establish and expand settlements in contravention of international laws and UN resolutions. This process only intensified with Oslo, leading to a 'dramatic growth of the settlements' and to a near doubling of the number of settlers in the West Bank from 1993 to 2001. In fact: 'The sharpest increase [of settlement housing units] during this period was recorded in 2000, under the government headed by Ehud Barak, when the construction of almost 4,800 new housing units was commenced'. *Land Grab* is unequivocal in stating that the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories constitute a serious violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention: 'The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies'. Settlements and by-pass roads also violate Palestinian rights to self-determination and statehood, to equality, property, adequate living standards, and to freedom of movement. As a result of ongoing colonization, Palestinian territorial contiguity has been shattered, and Palestinian economic development and access to lands and natural resources has been blocked. B'Tselem thus charges the Israeli government, acting with the collusion of the Israeli High Court of Justice, with 'the *de facto* annexation of the settlements to the State of Israel, while avoiding the problems that would be caused by *de jure* annexation, particularly in the international arena'.

*Land Grab* was published five years ago. The situation today is much worse. Today there are 450,000 settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, an increase of nearly 100,000 settlers since 2001. Many of the same mechanisms of land expropriation and settlement expansion continue, but there has been one major drastic development in this period: the Wall. Mostly completed, the Wall is 703 km long and incorporates most of the Israeli settlements. 85 per cent of it is built within the territory of the West Bank, annexing 16 per cent of its territory. As the International Court of Justice advisory opinion clearly states: 'Around 80 per cent of the settlers living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, that is 320,000 individuals, would reside in that area, as well as 237,000 Palestinians. Moreover, as a result of the construction of the wall, around 160,000 other Palestinians would reside in almost completely encircled communities'.<sup>15</sup> Qalqiliya, a city of 40,000, is already sur-

rounded by the Wall, and residents can only enter and leave through one military checkpoint open every day from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. By the time the Wall is completed, there will be over 400,000 Palestinians completely or partially surrounded by it. No wonder the Court warned about the dangers of continued daily subsistence and survival of occupied Palestinians and, significantly, of the possibility of ‘the departure of Palestinian populations from certain areas’.<sup>16</sup> In order to facilitate its colonial objectives and *de facto* annexation of more Palestinian lands, then, Israel has yet again created the conditions for a massive forced exodus of the indigenous population.

The factual record of siege and ongoing dispossession is thus pretty damning: Israel is in permanent violation of international norms and customs. Human rights reports continuously and unfailingly list the international illegality of: settlements, the Wall, an arbitrary permit system, house demolitions, assassinations, killings, Jewish-only by-pass roads, checkpoints and roadblocks, and a cruel and brutal occupation regime bolstered by unending military operations and periodic large-scale invasions.<sup>17</sup> This is not to mention more than 4,000 Palestinians killed since the beginning of al-Aqsa Intifada, 650 in 2006 (a triple increase from 2005, compared to a reduction by half over the same year of the number of Israelis killed, from 54 to 27 – six of whom were soldiers), or the more than 10,000 Palestinians still in Israeli prisons today.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, since 1967 Israel has imprisoned more than 650,000 Palestinians, equivalent to nearly 20 per cent of the population.

How then, one wonders, does a national elite that purports to be leading its constituency to statehood and independence end up, since 1993, participating in a process that has produced such a drastic worsening of Palestinian living conditions, weakening if not terminally undermining Palestinian national survival? Why hasn’t the PLO elite utilized all the aforementioned international laws and conventions, which clearly safeguard and guarantee its people’s inalienable rights and national aspirations, in its struggle against Israel’s occupation? A short answer has been provided by Edward Said: ‘No other liberation group in history has sold itself to its enemies like this’.<sup>19</sup> Political capitulation, or ‘partnership’ with the occupier, has been the hallmark of Oslo, leaving the majority of Palestinians completely vulnerable to the ravages of Israeli colonialism.

#### ELITE CAPITULATION

My intention here is not to review the diplomatic and political record of the PLO/PA, but to focus on two main issues relevant to understanding the nature of the Palestinian resistance that eventually emerged in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>20</sup> One is legal-ideological, and the other is more purely

political. On the legal-ideological level, Oslo undermined the legitimacy of international law as a basis for resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, effectively de-legitimizing Palestinian rights of national self-determination and of resistance against occupation. In one stroke of the pen, self-determination was denied and resistance was criminalized. On the political level, the PA also systematically policed Palestinian society to ensure the security of Israel and of its illegal settlers. PA rule, therefore, was characterized by a combination of political repression, authoritarianism, and co-optation of local economic and political elites. Anti-colonial self-organization and resistance were de-mobilized, and the resources for independent political initiative and participation were effectively undercut. In the face of elite profiteering and collusion, popular apathy and despair grew, until the explosion of al-Aqsa Intifada gave resistance another important lease of life.

Under Oslo, the PLO became Israel's colonial enforcer. As Arafat put it on 9 September 1993: 'The PLO considers that the signing of the Declaration of Principles constitutes a historic event, inaugurating a new epoch of peaceful coexistence, free from violence and all other acts which endanger peace and stability. Accordingly, the PLO renounces the use of terrorism and other acts of violence and will assume responsibility over all PLO elements and personnel in order to assure their compliance, prevent violations and discipline violators'.<sup>21</sup> Arafat declared a political end to the Intifada and unequivocally renounced his people's right to resist Israel's occupation. As Burhan Dajani put it: 'The Palestinian letter of recognition of Israel in effect renounces violence, the right to the Palestinian struggle. That letter amounted to throwing away the most important card the Palestinians had to play: Palestinian legitimacy versus the illegitimacy of Israeli occupation. The result is a series of negotiations that will be a process of entreaty on one side and of giving or refusal on the other'.<sup>22</sup>

What the PLO effectively did by signing Oslo was undermine its own people's national rights while legitimizing the illegal practices of the occupier. This didn't just mean that the sovereignty of an occupier was 'affirmed' and 'consecrated' by representatives of the occupied. It also meant that the agreement gave the occupied no legal powers to prevent further illegal expansion or expropriation of land by the occupier. As Dajani clearly predicted then: 'An unfortunate result of the DOP [Declaration of Principles] is that it makes it far more difficult to challenge Israel's further legislations, and indeed even to challenge, as in the past, Israeli laws permitting the expropriation of land and property and the violation of rights and liberties on the basis of the Geneva Convention on occupying powers'. Israel's illegal colonial sovereignty was ratified.<sup>23</sup>

Ambiguous phrasing and vague formulations about maintaining the status quo aside, Oslo facilitated Israel's continued violations of the Geneva Convention and international humanitarian law. As a result, the PA did the following: it agreed to continued control of East Jerusalem; made 60 per cent of the West Bank negotiable with an illegal occupier; legitimized illegal Jewish settlements; agreed to construction of by-pass roads; legitimized prohibition on freedom of movement, etc.<sup>24</sup> Such abrogation of Palestinian civilian rights under occupation is prohibited under the Convention. This clearly undermines the PA's own authority to flout international law or to sell off Palestinian national rights, and constitutes an important resource for re-legitimizing Palestinian rights and anti-colonial struggle.

The critics of Oslo, then, were proven right. The PA turned out to be what they predicted it would be: a collaborationist regime running bisected and repressed cantons. Achcar formulated it accurately when he wrote at the time that '...the Arafat leadership's "Palestinian self-government" will be an extreme case of indirect colonial administration, closer to a "puppet" government than to the neo-colonial governments emerging from decolonization. Either it will be this or it will not be. The Zionist government has decided to proceed by stages, beginning with Gaza and Jericho, to test the efficiency of the Arafat apparatus in the repressive task that has been allocated to it. If this apparatus proves itself incapable of fulfilling the task, the Washington Accords will end up in the dustbin'.<sup>25</sup> The effect on the Palestinians of what Said called 'a betrayal of our history and our people' was a growing sense of disillusionment and cynicism. Oslo became a crisis of national proportions: it 'plunged the Palestinian people and its political institutions into the most serious and profound moral, cultural, identity, and political crisis'.<sup>26</sup>

Such a degeneration and diminishment of national life can be gauged by examining the way in which the PA reconstructed occupied Palestinian society around its own capitulation and opportunism. This brings me to my second focus: the politics of national de-legitimization. If the PLO's suspicion of democracy and mass mobilization was reconfirmed in its relationship to the first Intifada, its heir, the PA elite, would take the PLO's tight political grip to its logical conclusion, substituting itself for the Palestinian nation. Bureaucracy and authoritarianism became the norm, and security the main means of control.<sup>27</sup> The PA actively undermined and co-opted the democratic and resistance forces that produced the first Intifada. As Glenn Robinson concluded: 'Put bluntly, the PLO in Tunis successfully captured political power in the West Bank and Gaza not because it led the revolution but because it promised to end it. The PA had to construct its own political base, which would diminish the position of the new [university educated



and progressive] elite inside the West Bank and Gaza while consolidating its own power'.<sup>28</sup> With the support of traditional sources of power like clans and notable families, old forms of patronage and control were reactivated and revived. Nigel Parsons, who studied PA rule in meticulous detail, describes Arafat's new centralized apparatus as follows:

Rather than harnessing the mobilizational capacities developed during the first intifada and leading resistance to colonization, the PA engineered social control through patronage. The expansion of the PA bureaucracy diminished the political salience of the NGO community – the heart of Palestinian civil society and a stronghold of the left – through centralizing the provision of services, redirecting resources away from the non-state sector, and widespread recruitment from the professional and technocratic middle class.<sup>29</sup>

Many Palestinians thus became totally dependent on the PA for jobs and work opportunities (140,000 today), and this entangled significant segments of the population with a regime which existed mainly to deny them sovereignty and political independence. With the labour movement either repressed or 'politically quiescent',<sup>30</sup> and with a weak and fragmented working class, reeling from Israel's closure policy, there was little social leverage to either withstand or transform PA mechanisms of rule. As Nina Sovich notes, 'the PA has co-opted and quelled union leadership as well as the grass-roots movements that occasionally arise; and the union leaders themselves lack the discipline, expertise, and political will to mobilize the workers'.<sup>31</sup> Such working-class de-mobilization was compounded by the political left's loss of bearings after Oslo. In a clear admission of failure, the head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) clearly stated, as he looked back on seven years of Oslo, that the secular opposition 'has failed to transform its political discourse into practical, material action', blaming disunity and factionalism for its near total absence from the Palestinian political scene.<sup>32</sup> Little has changed since then.

An important signifier of strong political discontent came from the Committee of Twenty in November 1999. Parsons recounts this important episode in Palestinian dissent, and reads it as 'presaging' al-Aqsa Intifada. Signed by leading political figures, nine of whom were Legislative members for Arafat's own Fatah group, the petition was entitled 'The Homeland Calls Us' and attacked 'corruption, deceit and despotism':

More lands are robbed while settlements expand. The conspiracy against refugees accelerates behind the scenes. Palestinian jails close their doors to our own sons and daughters. Jerusalem has not returned and Singapore has not arrived. The people are divided into two groups: that of the select who rule and steal, and that of the majority which complains and searches for someone to save it.<sup>33</sup>

The signatories looked forward to the day when the ‘collective efforts of the deprived’ would overcome injustice and end the humiliations of Oslo.<sup>34</sup> Arafat responded with severe repression, imprisoning nearly all of the signatories and sparking off public uproar, demonstrations, and solidarity calls from all the opposition factions (Islamic Jihad, Hamas, PFLP, and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine). Less than a year later, occupied Palestinians would revolt again. Deceived by a false peace process, disappointed by their submissive leadership, and besieged by more colonial expansion, Palestinians came out in their thousands to demonstrate and protest. The al-Aqsa Intifada had begun.

#### RESISTING BRUTALITY AND SIEGE

The nature of the second Intifada was very different than the first, however. One of Oslo’s practical consequences was that the Israeli army had redeployed outside major population concentrations, making it extremely difficult for enclaved Palestinians to get at or confront the occupation forces, unlike in the first Intifada. Being fragmented by checkpoints and confined to their locales ‘rendered mass action virtually impossible’.<sup>35</sup> Reflecting the effects of the siege regime through the 1990s, there has thus been a systematic weakening of the capacity of Palestinian society to act and organize as a national collective. As Rema Hammami and Salim Tamari argue, Oslo destroyed all resources for civil rebellion:

Save for massive candlelight marches and funeral processions within the cities, the population at large has been left with virtually no active role in the uprising. This is clearly not by choice, but as a consequence of the fact that the kinds of political structures that made grass-roots organizing the main thrust of the first intifada, at least in the early years, no longer exist. Popular and neighborhood committees as well as mass organizations (and most of the political movements that sustained them) began to collapse at the end of the first intifada under the cumulative weight of Israeli anti-insurgency methods. Their recovery was preempted by the Gulf War and,

even more profoundly, by Oslo and the state formation process it set in motion. The demobilization of the population and their deepening alienation from political action (until the current uprising) has been one of the most salient outcomes of PA rule.<sup>36</sup>

The second Intifada suffered seriously as a result. It was disorganized and lacked leadership: 'Not only was the al-Aqsa Intifada essentially leaderless in the sense of organization, expression of objectives, and tactics; the PA [with its 40,000 armed police], in essence, abandoned its own people to the vagaries of Israel's punishing blows'.<sup>37</sup>

And the blows were indeed immediate and merciless. Three weeks into the Intifada, General Amos Malka, head of Israel's Military Intelligence, wanted to know how many bullets the Israeli army had fired since the beginning of the Intifada. Ben Kaspit broke the story in *Ma'ariv* in 2002:

When the answer arrived by noon, most of the officers who were present, according to an eye witness, turned white. In the first few days of the Intifada, the IDF fired about 700,000 bullets and other projectiles in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] and about 300,000 in Gaza. All told, about a million bullets and other projectiles were used. Someone in the Central Command later quipped that the project should be named 'a bullet for every child'. This astronomical number evinces the facts on the ground.<sup>38</sup>

Israel's severe repression and brutality after the outbreak of the second Intifada had a clear political objective: complete Palestinian submission. Arafat had not been in a position to provide that in the Camp David negotiations of July 2000, refusing to go all the way along with what the US and Israel wanted without getting significant Israeli concessions in exchange. Barak, in response, initiated Israel's long campaign to both de-legitimize Arafat as an interlocutor and 'partner for peace' and to destroy the PA.<sup>39</sup> In a matter of months, Arafat was transformed from a courageous Nobel Laureate of Peace to a mastermind of revolt and terrorism.<sup>40</sup> Israel's immediate use of massive force to crush the Palestinian popular dissent that broke out in September 2000 also had the immediate effect of militarizing the Intifada and pushing Palestinians towards armed operations, rather than trying to revive the conditions for sustained civil participation and mobilization. Betrayed, besieged, and defenceless, Palestinian support for armed resistance and suicide bombings was bound to increase.

Three main groups competed for primacy. The Tanzim/al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades emerged out of grassroots disenchantment within Fatah, and had been active as an anti-Oslo force since the mid-1990s; it was led in Ramallah by Marwan Barghouti, who was captured by the Israeli army during the spring 2002 invasion. The Islamic Jihad was a military-nationalist group made up of fundamentalists active in Gaza since the 1980s and had no interest in social work or in participating in Legislative elections. Hamas, the most powerful resistance group, was, like Jihad, a product of the Israeli occupation, and has been active since the first Intifada. Combining a military wing with social welfare and charity work, Hamas sees itself as the heir to secular nationalism and to the PLO's political programme of liberating Palestine, and has implicitly recognized the two-state solution based on full independence, sovereignty, and complete withdrawal and dismantlement of all settlements.<sup>41</sup>

Between September 2000 and up to a ceasefire in mid-2003, it was estimated that 96 per cent of the attacks against Israeli targets took place in the West Bank and Gaza, with only 4 per cent inside Israel itself.<sup>42</sup> This was a clear indication that the al-Aqsa Intifada was fundamentally an anti-colonial rebellion. Yet Israel managed to obscure this essential fact by arguing that suicide terrorism against Jews is the real core of and motivation behind the revolt. As Baruch Kimmerling put it: 'If the symbol of the first Intifada was Palestinian children throwing stones, the symbol of the al-Aqsa Intifada – for both sides – is the suicide bombers'. Israel exploited this 'to gain domestic and international legitimacy for the unrestrained use of Israeli military power'.<sup>43</sup>

Suicide bombing, however, was susceptible to such appropriation and misconception. Because it targeted civilians inside the Green Line, it could easily be misrepresented by Israel as part of the age-old Palestinian desire to destroy Jewish life and Israeli statehood. As a form of resistance, therefore, suicide bombing had insurmountable internal weaknesses. In their excellent 'On Suicide Bombings', Rema Hammami and Musa Budeiri have shown that both as a means of revenge and retaliation for Israeli terror and violence and as a strategy for forcing Israeli withdrawal, suicide bombing has severe costs and drawbacks: it is counterproductive, inefficient, immoral, and may even risk de-legitimizing the Palestinian struggle for emancipation and justice. Its main effect, however, has been on the domestic Palestinian front:

[It] risk[s] transforming Palestinian society into one in which the only people with a political role are those willing to die or kill while they die. The rest are confined to the role of spectators.

They applaud, but are not called upon to shoulder any task in the ongoing struggle for liberation and independence. The history of political struggle teaches us that such actions belittle the role of the masses and reconcile them to their own powerlessness – they merely exaggerate the feeling among exploited and oppressed peoples that the matter of resistance has to be left to a few martyrs.<sup>44</sup>

Rather than being a means for overcoming siege and ending colonialism, suicide bombing is a symptom of atomization and disengagement. Rather than re-mobilizing people, it exacerbates their demobilization, and risks undercutting their potential for collective participation.

A critical evaluation of suicide bombing was eventually achieved by the Palestinian resistance groups, and an end to targeting civilians within Israel was declared. Nasser Jumaa, Israel's most wanted al-Aqsa Brigades leader, made the following assessment in an interview in 2005: 'We didn't have a clear strategy for the Palestinian resistance. We should have specified the place for its work as the occupied territories, and made its target the settlers and the soldiers that exist to protect them. It would have been possible this way to win a voice within Israeli society. It would also have prevented outsiders from denying our rights to defend our land and expel those who stole and occupied our land'.<sup>45</sup> Having been abandoned by the Fatah PA, al-Aqsa Brigades remains unable either to democratize or to reform Fatah, overcome corruption, or unite the various factions, which remain very loosely organized and localized. Nasser Jumaa concludes: 'We are searching now for a strategy to get out of this miserable abyss'.

### ABSENT STRATEGY

The absence of a clear strategy for national liberation is the most urgent problem facing Palestinians today. Israeli military superiority is still overwhelming, and Oslo has only improved Israel's diplomatic standing in the world, as it de-legitimized Palestinian needs and national rights. Under Oslo, Arab 'normalization' with Israel intensified, and most Islamic and third-world states removed political and economic barriers with Israel. This has radically worsened official international identification with the Palestinian cause, which was very high during the first Intifada. The structural constraints on the Palestinians have thus only gotten worse. The collapse of the Palestinian national project has also made the subjective conditions of national self-realization even harder. The Abbas leadership of the PLO and PA has abandoned refugee rights and representation, a clear measure of the degeneration of the Palestinian cause.<sup>46</sup>

Under such dire conditions, nagging questions remain: Will the Palestinians be able to formulate a successful liberation strategy that can overcome both colonial siege and PA capitulation? What are the political tasks of the present moment, and what role does military resistance play in a reconstructed national project, if any? And how, finally, can the Palestinian question *return* to the realm of popular political contestation?

In the January 2006 Legislative elections, Hamas had an answer which spoke to the majority of the occupied Palestinian electorate. Hamas's Reform and Change list declared its clear and unambiguous defence of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including the right of self-determination in the West Bank and Gaza and the right of return for all Palestinian refugees. Committed to bolstering resistance against the Israeli occupation, Hamas vowed to reform the PA, end corruption and opportunism, work for unity, defend political pluralism, and support Palestinian steadfastness and resilience.<sup>47</sup> Hamas also flagged its regressive social agenda of Islamizing Palestinian society, but only a minority of Palestinians have ever supported that (13 per cent). What attracted most occupied Palestinians to Hamas was neither its elaborate welfare programmes nor its religious fundamentalism (though both played a part). It was, rather, Hamas's promise to revive Palestinian nationalism and lead it to victory.

The Oslo framework was, as a result, put into crisis. Oslo was not intended to facilitate real democracy: elections were a good idea as long as they guaranteed the continuation of the colonial regime, and were dispensable if they didn't. Israel recognized this and was therefore against holding the 2006 elections. The US, however, was caught in a contradiction: its messianic rhetoric on the democratic transformation of the Middle East clashed with its actual hostility to Palestinian nationalism and to Hamas. The US risked elections and hoped for a Fatah victory (as the polls predicted). When Hamas won, the whole might of US imperialism descended on the Palestinians even harder: siege was compounded by economic sanctions and diplomatic boycott. Palestinians would have to be 'starved' for their choice, as the *New York Times* stated. And, true to form, since then every possible means of 'regime change' has been tried by Israel and its allies, including: Israeli military attacks and massacres;<sup>48</sup> assassinations of activists; arrest by Israel of nearly a third of the newly-elected parliament; calls and threats by the US-oriented Abbas to conduct new elections; active marginalization by Abbas of his own government ministers; a politically-motivated civil-service strike that sought to cripple the workings of government ministries even further; endless threats from Muhammad Dahlan, Abbas's main security chief, to 'decimate' Hamas;<sup>49</sup> and, finally, Dahlan's attempt to topple the govern-

ment by force, leading to serious factional armed clashes, which left scores of Palestinian dead and a looming threat of civil war hanging.<sup>50</sup> Hamas was, as a result, pushed towards a military and security build-up in Gaza, yet again deferring possibilities of popular political mobilization and organization. The danger that Hamas will be endlessly dragged down by Dahlan's Fatah into fighting over the breadcrumbs of a prison regime rather than helping people break out of it is very real.

In spite all of this, Hamas - and the Palestinians generally - have withstood the global onslaught. Israel, the US, and local Palestinian capitulators have all failed to reverse Hamas's victory.<sup>51</sup> The US, mired in Iraq, also failed to prevent a new Saudi-sponsored power-sharing unity government from forming, which was motivated by Saudi fears of Iranian sponsorship of Hamas. This attenuated the push towards civil war and national disintegration, though clashes continue to erupt occasionally. What the new government has failed to achieve, however, is an end to the international boycott: the tax-money Israel owes the PA (\$700 million) is still unreturned and international economic and political sanctions are still in place. Israel and the US have also done everything possible to ensure that the new government either collapses or is unable to function effectively or properly. Internal contradictions have been severely exacerbated by Dahlan (dubbed by Hamas as the 'leader of the American, putschist faction'), who is indeed armed and supported by the US and Israel and actively sabotages unity and pushes for armed confrontation and civil war.<sup>52</sup>

On 14 June 2007, the Hamas-Fatah contradiction was resolved by force. Fearing a US-backed military coup, Hamas rooted out Dahlan's apparatus and took over the internal security of Gaza.<sup>53</sup> While announcing very clearly that this was not a military coup but a 'necessary step' to remove the 'stumbling block' facing Palestinian unity and national conciliation, Hamas' action was deemed an illegitimate aggression by all Palestinian factions, objecting to the use of force in Palestinian politics.<sup>54</sup> Abbas exploited Hamas' strategic blunder and declared a national emergency. He also dissolved the unity government and formed a new government of technocrats led by the American-favoured Salam Fayyad. Israel and the Western world applauded this unconstitutional act, promising Abbas support and an end to the boycott and sanctions. This left Hamas isolated and cut off, and risks compounding the geographical separation between the West Bank and Gaza with a political separation between a Hamas-run Gaza and a PA-run West Bank, an outcome that Israel has been working towards since 1991.<sup>55</sup> Such a Fatah-Hamas dual power situation can only entrench Palestinian political division and fragmentation.

Whether unity is restored or new elections declared, one thing is certain: Abbas won't deliver the independent statehood and decolonization that most Palestinians want; while Hamas seems unable to organize a popular mass mobilization against the occupation.<sup>56</sup> The real alternative is still dormant: a nation looks on in discontent. The majority of Palestinians, who blame both Hamas and Fatah for the current crisis, are yet to re-mobilize against Israel's occupation and overcome the militarization of their politics.<sup>57</sup> Collective self-organization is now Palestine's only hope.

One positive recent development is the consolidation of popular non-violent civilian struggles against the Wall. The village of Bilee'n has become a symbol for such local resistance campaigns, with Palestinian-led peaceful protests attracting Israeli and international solidarity activists joining in to protect Palestinian life and land. Though village lands have rarely been saved (Budrus is an important exception), many recognize the value of such collective political practices both in building up international and Israeli popular support for the Palestinian cause and in communicating the justness and urgency of the Palestinian question.<sup>58</sup>

Still missing, however, is a comprehensive liberation strategy. Neither elite nationalism nor religious fundamentalism has succeeded in this task. The elections of January 2006 have again re-opened the question of resistance as a political project. As Azmi Bishara put it, how can 'the occupiers [be forced] to pay a price for their occupation that they are unwilling or unable to withstand morally, materially, emotionally, politically, economically, and socially'?<sup>59</sup> Collective mobilization by all Palestinians around coherent national objectives is still necessary, as is clear elaboration of both short-term tasks and long-term strategic goals. These cannot be achieved without democratic re-activation of grassroots forces both inside and outside Palestine. The closest Palestinians have ever come to such national-popular mobilization was in the first Intifada - what Edward Said called 'one of the most extraordinary anti-colonial and unarmed mass insurrections in the whole history of the modern period'.<sup>60</sup> Only when its revolutionary remembrance comes to animate future Palestinian political organization can sufficient political leverage be created in order to make Israel pay the price of its 40 year-old occupation and begin to rectify the wrongs it has committed against the Palestinian people. A new progressive political agent is now imperative. No less than the survival of an oppressed nation is at stake.



## NOTES

- 1 I borrow this phrase from Amira Hass: 'Just as was the case in the Oslo years, three million individuals are drawing on immense personal reserves to bear the hardships of siege without surrender'. 'Israel's Closure Policy: An Ineffective Strategy of Containment and Repression', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 31(3) Spring 2002, p. 20.
- 2 For Gaza's position after Israel's disengagement, see Gisha's report, *Disengaged Occupiers: The Legal Status of Gaza*, Tel Aviv, January 2007. See also Patrick Cockburn, 'Gaza is Dying', *The Independent*, 8 September 2006: 'Gaza is dying. The Israeli siege of the Palestinian enclave is so tight that its people are on the edge of starvation. Here on the shores of the Mediterranean a great tragedy is taking place that is being ignored because the world's attention has been diverted by wars in Lebanon and Iraq'.
- 3 It was called al-Aqsa Intifada as it was sparked off by Sharon's 'visit' to the Dome of the Rock, accompanied by several thousand police.
- 4 *Movement and Access Restrictions in the West Bank: Uncertainty and Inefficiency in the Palestinian Economy*, 9 May 2007, available from <http://www.worldbank.org>. For the quotations used here see Clauses 3 and 37. In response, Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh accused the Bank of being 'one-sided' and said that restrictions on travel are there to prevent terrorism. Avi Issacharoff, 'Sneh: World Bank Report Slamming Israel One-Sided', *Haaretz*, 10 May 2007. The new Palestinian Minister of Information Moustafa Barghouti welcomed the report and added that it accurately describes Israel's new apartheid system in the West Bank. See Joshua Brilliant, 'World Bank Pessimistic on Palestinian Economy', *World Peace Herald* (Online), 9 May 2007, available from <http://www.wpherald.com>.
- 5 Salem Ajluni, 'The Palestinian Economy and the Second Intifada', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 32(3), Spring 2003, p. 69. See also Sara Roy, *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, London: Pluto, 2007, especially 'Ending the Palestinian Economy', pp. 250-93.
- 6 United Nations General Assembly, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967, John Dugard', United Nations Human Rights Council, 29 January 2007, p. 21.
- 7 Hass, 'Israel's Closure Policy', p. 18.
- 8 For an excellent class analysis of the Palestinian question and of the differences between Zionist settler colonialism and South African apartheid, see Mona N. Younis, *Liberation and Democratization: The South African and Palestinian National Movements*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- 9 Azmi Bishara, 'A Short History of Apartheid', *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 8-14 January 2004, available from <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>.
- 10 Norman G. Finkelstein develops such a historical comparison in his *The Rise and Fall of Palestine*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 104-121.

- 11 Fayez A. Sayegh, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine*, Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization Research Centre, 1965, p. v.
- 12 Lecture at Barnard College, New York, 11 April 2005. See also Hass, 'Israel's Closure Policy', especially p. 10.
- 13 Amira Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza*, New York: Henry Holt, 1999, p. 235.
- 14 B'Tselem, *Land Grab: Israel's Settlement Policy in the West Bank*, Jerusalem, May 2002, p. 69. The subsequent quotations in this paragraph are at pp. 15-16, 37 and 69.
- 15 International Court of Justice, 'Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory', 9 July 2004, clause 122.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 17 The worst was Operation Defensive Shield in March-April 2002, when Israel re-occupied all major Palestinian cities and killed 220 people. See Muna Hamzeh and Todd May, eds., *Operation Defensive Shield: Witnesses to Israeli War Crimes*, London: Pluto Press, 2003.
- 18 See Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2007*, London: Amnesty International Publications, 2007, pp. 147-50.
- 19 Edward Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*, New York: Vintage, 2000, p. 345. After Oslo, Said became the PLO's leading critic. See his *Peace And Its Discontents*, New York: Vintage, 1996.
- 20 The most recent scholarly accounts are: Nigel Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority: From Oslo to al-Aqsa*, London: Routledge, 2005; Cheryl A. Rubenberg, *The Palestinians: In Search of a Just Peace*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003; and Roy's *Failing Peace*. Edward Said's essays are indispensable for understanding Oslo, as are Tanya Reinhart's two books: *Israel/Palestine: How to End the War of 1948*, New York: Seven Stories, 2002 and *The Roadmap to Nowhere: Israel/Palestine since 2003*, London: Verso, 2006.
- 21 'Israel-PLO Recognition: Exchange of Letters Between PM Rabin and Chairman Arafat', U.S. Department of State, posted online July 2003, available from <http://www.state.gov>.
- 22 Burhan Dajani, 'The September 1993 Israeli-PLO Documents: A Textual Analysis', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 23(3), Spring 1994, p. 22.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19.
- 24 These are some of the section headings in Allegra Pacheco's 'Flouting Convention: The Oslo Agreement', in Roane Carey, ed., *The New Intifada: Resisting Israel's Apartheid*, London: Verso, 2001, pp. 181-206. In her important legal intervention, she states that: 'One of the greatest flaws of the Oslo agreements was that they did not commit Israel to abide by the [Geneva] Convention and cease its human rights violations' (p. 186).
- 25 Gilbert Achcar, 'The Washington Accords: A Retreat Under Pressure', in Achcar, ed., *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004, p. 201.
- 26 Quoted in Samih K. Farsoun with Christina E. Zacharia, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, Boulder, CO: Westview: 1997, p. 255. The quotation is taken from Edward Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination*, New York: Pantheon, 1994, p. xxxii.

- 27 Graham Usher dubbed this 'securitisation', leading to a process of the 'de-politicisation of Palestinian society' and corrosion of Palestinian nationalism. *Dispatches from Palestine: The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process*, London: Pluto, 1999, p. 79.
- 28 Glenn E. Robinson, *Building a Palestinian State: The Incomplete Revolution*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 177. This also entailed a diplomatic sidelining of the Madrid peace negotiators, who insisted on upholding international law and obliging Israel to withdraw from all occupied territory and dismantle all settlements. See Rashid Khalidi's important interview with the head of the Palestinian Madrid team Haydar 'Abd al-Shafi, 'Looking Back, Looking Forward', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 32(1), Autumn 2002.
- 29 Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority*, p. 222.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- 31 Nina Sovich, 'Palestinian Trade Unions', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 29(4), Summer 2000, p. 66.
- 32 'The Palestinian Secular Opposition at a Crossroads: Interviews with PFLP's Abu Ali Mustafa and DFLP's Nayif Hawatimah', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 29(2), Winter 2000, p. 84.
- 33 See Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority*, pp. 185–6. For the PA's curbing of freedom of expression and torture, see Amnesty International, 'Palestinian Authority: Silencing of Dissent', September 2000, available from <http://www.amnesty.org>.
- 34 See 'The Homeland Calls Us!', *News from Within*, January 2000.
- 35 Rubenberg, *The Palestinians*, p. 329. Parsons quotes an estimate of only 5 per cent of Palestinian active participation in the Intifada (p. 265).
- 36 Rema Hammami and Salim Tamari, 'The Second Intifada: End or New Beginning?', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 30(2), Winter 2001, p. 17.
- 37 Rubenberg, *The Palestinians*, p. 330.
- 38 Ben Kaspi, 'Jewish New Year 2002: The Second Anniversary of the Intifada', Part I, *Ma'ariv*, 6 September 2002. Israel's brutality led Palestinians inside Israel to rise up in protest and solidarity with their occupied brethren. Israel responded by killing 13 demonstrators and injuring hundreds.
- 39 Operation Defensive Shield in Spring 2002 did exactly that, 'the crux' of which was 'Israel's decimation of Palestinian civilian institutions', as Rubenberg has shown (*The Palestinians*, p. 351). For Israel's 'generous offer' bluff at Camp David II, see Reinhart, *Israel/Palestine*.
- 40 Sharon's biographer, Uri Dan, suggests that if Arafat was not actually assassinated by Israel in November 2004, it was not because they were not prepared to do it. In September 2004 Dan asked Sharon, then Prime Minister for a second term, about his 'precise intentions toward Arafat'. Sharon replied: 'We eliminated the leaders of Hamas – Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi – and other terrorist heads when the time was right. The same principle goes for Yasser Arafat. We will treat him like the others. I see no difference between him and Yassin: they both murder Jews. For Arafat, we will choose the time that suits us best. Everyone will receive his due. The question will be debated when the time is right, as it was for the leaders of Hamas'. Uri Dan, *Ariel*

- Sharon: An Intimate Portrait*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 234. Dan also says that Bush knew that Sharon was planning an assassination: 'On April 14, 2004, Sharon was finally able to extricate himself from the promise that he had involuntarily made to the American president in March 2001 – not to touch Yasser Arafat' (p. 246).
- 41 For an excellent brief review essay of books on Islamic Palestinian fundamentalism, see Musa Budeiri, 'The Nationalist Dimension of Islamic Movements in Palestinian Politics', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 24(3), Spring 1995. Khaled Hroub's two books on Hamas are indispensable: *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, Washington: Institute of Palestine, 2000 and *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*, London: Pluto, 2006.
  - 42 Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority*, p. 271. He adds: 'The rough parity in casualties (355 beyond the Green Line, 393 within it) is due to the much smaller number of attacks within the Green Line being far more likely to be suicide bombings, and hence far more deadly'.
  - 43 Baruch Kimmerling, *Politicide: Ariel Sharon's War Against the Palestinians*, London: Verso, 2003, pp. 161, 137.
  - 44 Rema Hammami and Musa Budeiri, 'On Suicide Bombings', *al-Quds Newspaper*, 14 December 2001 (in Arabic). An English translation, from which I quote, can be found on [www.musabudeiri.net](http://www.musabudeiri.net) under 'newspaper articles'.
  - 45 'From the Heart of the Struggle', *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 14–20 April 2005, available from <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>
  - 46 Randa Farah, 'Palestinian Refugees', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 8(2), July 2006.
  - 47 For a detailed analysis of Hamas's electoral platform, see Khaled Hroub, 'A "New Hamas" Through its Documents', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 35(4), Summer 2006.
  - 48 As John Dugard has reported, from June to November 2006, Israel killed over 400 Palestinians and injured 1500, conducting 364 military incursions into Gaza alone: 'In November 2006 alone there were 656 IDF raids into the West Bank' (United Nations General Assembly, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur', 29 January 2007). All this, Israel claimed, in order to save one captured Israeli soldier, while refusing all comprehensive ceasefire and prisoner-exchange deals.
  - 49 Khaled Amayreh, 'Dahlan Vows to Decimate Hamas', *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 8–14 June 2006, available from <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>.
  - 50 As predicted by Gilbert Achcar immediately after the elections: 'First Reflections on the Electoral Victory of Hamas', *Znet*, 27 January 2006, available at <http://www.zmag.org>.
  - 51 There has also been an important new political initiative called 'the prisoners' conciliation document', ratified by Hamas and Fatah in June 2006. The agreement consecrates resistance, advocates mass participation, and defends Palestinian rights. For details, see my 'Occupied Palestine: Prisoners, Colonial Elites, and Fundamentalists', *Znet*, 11 June 2006.
  - 52 Dahlan is the main reason why the new Minister of Internal Affairs Kawasmeh recently resigned. He protested that he had no powers to implement a newly

agreed on security plan that would put an end to Gaza's 'fawda il-silah' ('chaos of arms'). Looking back at the period since Hamas' election victory, Danny Rubenstein concluded in 'The Original Sin', *Haaretz*, 22 May 2007: 'Without a doubt, a series of reasons – political, economic, social and others – have brought these troubles down on the Palestinians. However, the direct cause of what is happening now in the Gaza Strip is that the traditional Palestinian leadership (i.e. the top echelon of Fatah) was not prepared to transfer authority to the elected Hamas leadership'. See Scott Wilson, 'Fatah Troops Enter Gaza with Israeli Assent', *Washington Post*, 18 May 2007, for details about entry into Gaza of 500 US-trained Presidential Guards, who will come under the authority of Dahlan.

- 53 Jonathan Steele, 'Hamas Acted on a Very Real Fear of a US-sponsored Coup', *The Guardian*, 22 June 2007.
- 54 Press conference by exiled Hamas leader Khaled Mishal on 15 June 2007.
- 55 Akiva Eldar, 'Sharon's Dream', *Haaretz*, 20 June 2007.
- 56 Commentators have also warned that worsening conditions may lead to more extreme versions of Islamic fundamentalism taking hold in Gaza. See, for example, Gideon Rachman, 'Missed Opportunities, Gaza and the Spread of Jihadism', *Financial Times*, 18 June 2007.
- 57 As the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research reported, 75 per cent of Palestinians want new elections and 59 per cent said 'both Hamas and Fatah are equally to blame for the bitter factional fighting that led to the Hamas takeover of Gaza' (Avi Issacharoff, *Haaretz*, 21 June 2007).
- 58 For a powerful account, see Reinhart, *The Roadmap to Nowhere*, pp. 174–217. 'In the months to come [in early 2004], virtually all the anti-occupation groups of Israel were to join the Palestinian struggle along the route of the wall' (p. 198). Ta'ayush and Anarchists Against the Wall are two such groups.
- 59 Azmi Bishara, 'The Quest for Strategy', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 32(2), Winter 2003, p. 43.
- 60 Said, *The Politics of Dispossession*, p. 137.