

Middle East Peace Process: Stagnation by Design

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I began the preface of my latest book, "The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle," by making the following claim: "The second Palestinian uprising will be etched in history as an era where a major shift in the rules of the game has occurred." But have they? If they have, to what extent and for what purpose?

This question remains critical, especially in a time when brutality against Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli Army is at an all time high. Daily, my email inbox is flooded with messages from readers asking "what can possibly be done to end this cycle of insanity and violence?" Is there anything we can learn from the sacrifices and struggles of the years of the Second Intifada? Perhaps it is within everyone's interests to look back to those years to find some sense of resolve to the quagmire in which we find ourselves today. But in doing so, we must analyze its failures as well as its successes.

Only a well defined and careful comprehension of the Intifada can explain the many dichotomies it presented, its seeming contradictions at times. How could a popular rebellion of an historically oppressed group of people foster so much corruption, disunity and infighting? How could the same uprising that fought for the most basic manifestation of peace, justice and life, inspire death, martyrdom and suicide?

Expectedly, the many folds of political, societal and ideological makeup — the backbone of the Intifada — have opened the stage before wordsmiths the world over to decode this momentous event; doubtless, it also opened up the stage before those who saw every Palestinian collective action as essentially manipulative, directed from behind the scenes by Palestinian politicians vying for concession from a vulnerable, beleaguered state, that is Israel.

In a late November 2006 speech to the media, the exiled political leader of Hamas, Khaled Mashaal, gave Israel six months to negotiate an end to the conflict and the establishment of a Palestinian state, otherwise a "third Intifada" would be unleashed. It was not Mashaal, of course, who introduced the third Intifada expression to the Intifada's growing lexicon, but due to his position as the leader of a movement that has reshaped Palestinian politics, in the Occupied Territories, one must wonder if a popular uprising can be decreed by a political decision and delineated by a confining time frame.

Recognition as a people is a demand for which Palestinians have struggled for generations, going back to a time when Israel completely denied the existence of Palestinians as a separate nation with exclusive rights and demands, itself a continuation of Golda Maier's denial of Palestinians altogether in her June 15, 1969 interview with the Sunday Times, when she ominously stated: "There was no such thing as Palestinians; they never existed."

The tumultuous road starting from the Madrid talks of 1991, then the infamous Oslo accord in 1993 all the way to the disastrous Camp David II talks under the auspices of US President Bill Clinton in 2000 all attest to one predictable pattern, one which continuation will predictably reinvent failure: Summit after summit, negotiation after negotiation, Israelis wished to unilaterally dictate the terms of peace, circumvent international law and any meaningful interpretation of it, using blackmail and arm twisting — with the tacit support or active participation of the US. They succeeded in extracting Palestinian concessions, without halting its settlement buildups or easing its military restrictions, let alone ending the occupation altogether.

Most relevant to the Second Uprising, a few months preceding the ensuing violence, Israeli politicians were locking horns, ironically, for using too soft an approach with Palestinians. A widening chasm between Israel's prime minister at the time, Ehud Barak, and the leading opposition leader, Ariel Sharon, was turning into a major political dispute. Barak was accused of being politically indecisive and feeble, and unlike Sharon, didn't know how to handle greedy Palestinians who were paradoxically merely negotiating the remaining 22 percent of historic Palestine. Barak too agreed that Palestinians were overly greedy: "The Palestinians are like crocodiles, the more you give them meat, they want more," as it was reported in the Jerusalem Post on Aug. 30, 2000.

But Sharon had his own way of dealing with "ungrateful" Palestinians. Addressing a meeting of militants from the extreme right-wing Tsomet Party less than two years earlier, Sharon highlighted his peace strategy on Nov. 15, 1998, by saying: "Everybody has to move, run and grab as many hilltops as they can to enlarge the settlements because everything we can take now will stay ours...everything we don't grab will go to them."

The UN was also an irrelevant international body — practically speaking — as far as Palestinian rights were concerned. Former US Ambassador to the UN, John Negroponte, had advised Arab delegates not to bother presenting drafts of UN resolutions regarding Israeli actions to the Security Council, for they would always be vetoed if they failed to condemn Palestinian terrorism. Now US vetoes in defense at the Security Council stand at 85, allowing the latter to pursue whatever destructive policy it wishes with utter impunity.

It must also be noted that the ideological composition of the Palestinian leadership is truly irrelevant as far as Israel's colonial policies are concerned, for Israel's policy was altered little before Hamas' advent to power in the legislative elections of January 2006, if compared to its decidedly colonial approach under Arafat or his predecessor Mahmoud Abbas. There is always a reason to brand Palestinians, always a reason of why Israel's favored status quo must not be disturbed.

And it's this same status quo that continues to pervade and suffocate any attempts to negotiate a just settlement to this violent and increasingly global conflict.

Amid this deliberate stagnation, the Palestinian people are left with no option but to revolt, as costly and uncertain as it has been throughout the years. Thus, it must be stated that Palestinian resistance, which for the most part has been a nonviolent and popular movement, shall continue as long as the circumstances that contributed to its commencement remain in place. In fact, Israeli oppression has crossed the traditional boundaries of daily murders and small-scale land confiscation. Under the deceptive "disengagement" from Gaza smokescreen, West Bank lands are being vigorously expropriated while Israel's Imprisonment Wall, illegal according to the International Court of

Justice decision of July 2004, is swallowing up whole towns and villages.

This reality, as history has taught us, is only a prelude to another popular Palestinian response, which is already echoing in the angry chants of destitute farmers whose lands are being effectively annexed by the encroaching Israeli wall.

Regardless of how historians choose to chronicle the Second Palestinian Uprising, it will always be remembered by most Palestinians, as well as by people of conscience everywhere, as a fight for freedom, human rights and justice. It will remain a loud reminder that popular resistance is still an option — and one to be reckoned with at that.

Ramzy Baroud's latest book is "The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle" (Pluto Press), and is available at Amazon.com and in the United States from the University of Michigan Press.

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