

Israelis and Palestinians: Towards a New Chapter of the Conflict

Palestinian-Israeli negotiations for a peaceful settlement of a hundred years of conflict officially began, under international guidance, at the Madrid Conference in October 1991. This was the starting point for what became a series of multi-track negotiations based on the twin formulas of land-for-peace and the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967. The two parties, however, reached the essential point of mutual recognition not out of any identification with or acceptance of the other's historical, political or cultural narrative, but rather out of a submission to the pressures of the respective Realpolitik of their situation. In the hope of ensuring their own internal political interests and of overcoming mounting external pressures, each side assumed the necessary positions of mutual accommodation.

The Political Dynamics of Frustration in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

The Israelis realized that they could not simply maintain an endless policy of control and occupation vis-à-vis the Palestinians, nor could they rid themselves of the »problem« by conducting a mass transfer policy against them. In addition, they had finally recognized their failure in manufacturing a malleable Palestinian leadership, which could replace the popular PLO and had begun to fear a further »Islamification of resistance«, which had emerged in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) during the first Intifada (1987–1993).

Meanwhile, the PLO establishment, with its headquarters in Tunis, – often referred to as the »outsiders« – was weakened, isolated and facing imminent political and financial bankruptcy in the wake of the Gulf War. Further »threats« to the tenuous nature of their leadership lay in the rapid growth in popularity of the Islamic resistance

movements in the territories and the long-standing desire of the Israeli establishment to remove them from any future scenario, focusing instead on the »insiders«, i. e., the local political elites and activists in the OPT. The US invitation to the Madrid peace conference exposed this de-facto crisis of leadership and competition for the first time as Palestinian disagreement grew over who should be represented by whom, and who exactly should eventually attend to negotiate. Questions of legitimacy, mandate and representation were raised as the Palestinian political establishment, both »inside« and »outside« sought to resolve under what banner or »umbrella« Palestine would be officially presented.

It was the »insiders« – active on the ground in both confronting the occupiers and drafting proposals for an interim period – who convinced the »outsiders« to go ahead and overcome the humiliating conditions that the Israeli Government had imposed on the Palestinians with regard to the Madrid Conference. The PLO, worried about the future role of the »insiders« and their potential to become future alternative leaders rather than loyal negotiators, eventually decided to appoint a delegation acceptable to Israel and composed of »insiders«, not least to avoid marginalization and prevent the »inside« from becoming an emerging Palestinian leadership.

Thus, at Madrid itself, different, and not wholly compatible, forces drew the Palestinian and Israeli sides forward, while their respective long-term goals were equally opposed and they continued to hold utterly contradictory perceptions of each other's national movement. Israel sought to finally secure official recognition of the Jewish state, amounting to a Palestinian endorsement of Zionism and its pre-1967 political achievements. However, in addition they set out to procure Palestinian acceptance of »sharing«, through a limited autonomy, the 22 percent of what was left

of historic Palestine, i.e., the OPT, including East Jerusalem.

On the other hand, the Palestinians had, through their daily confrontation with the Israeli occupation forces and the long-standing hardships of their living conditions, become painfully aware of the Israeli intention of maintaining the »Jewishness« of Israel. Nevertheless, they changed their claim to all of Palestine and proclaimed for the first time in a Ten-Point-Program of 12 June 1974 the possibility of a two-states solution, with the intention of establishing a democratic, secular state in any liberated part of Palestine. The first Intifada of 1987–1993 endorsed this concept further calling for a two-states solution based on an end to Israeli occupation and the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the remaining 22 percent of their homeland that was known as OPT.

The negotiation process went through many phases in its different tracks for many years and with few satisfactory results. It did not end the Israeli occupation but rather divided the OPT into three areas: »Area A« (the six main Palestinian cities), under limited Palestinian-control, »Area B« with joint patrols, Palestinian civil authority and complete Israeli security control (a patchwork of Palestinian villages), and »Area C« (Jewish settlements and the remainder of Palestinian territory), where Israel retains the occupation in its absolute form. Consecutive Israeli governments, despite their varying political persuasions, have maintained a consistent strategy based on maintaining maximum control over the land and containing the Palestinian leadership by way of an unending track of negotiations, with the clear aim of foreclosing any possibility of the emergence of a viable independent Palestinian state.

Indicative of the extent of this concerted policy, is the fact that today – ten years after the Oslo Accords were thought to have recognized the human necessity of bringing the conflict to an end – Israel's settler population in the OPT has doubled and the society appears more right-wing than ever. Five different Israeli governments can be seen to have shared the goal of rendering peace according to the agreed formulas as complicated as possible, if not inconceivable. In the same period and in addition to the torturous re-negotiations and endless postponements, Israel succeeded in limiting their withdrawal commitments and thus

too the area of autonomy afforded the Palestinian Authority (in Area A), leaving the West Bank territory controlled by the Palestinians today at a mere 17.2 percent, which is less than four percent of historic Palestine.

Despite Israel's perpetual procrastinations and avoidance of the numerous agreements, which accumulated through the Oslo process, the Palestinians retained their hope that withdrawals would take place and progress towards ending occupation would be made. In accordance with the timetable stipulated, and in the face of the clear reticence of Israel to withdraw as pledged, the Palestinian leadership demanded the implementation of unfulfilled Israeli commitments – these making up the framework intended to govern the initial transitional phase – prior to entering the final phase of permanent status negotiations.

During this transitional period, unilaterally extended by Israel, it became apparent that not only was Israel complying with neither the spirit nor the text of the Oslo Accords, but that the transformation of the PLO leadership, from »a national resistance movement in-exile« to a »state-building institution« in the OPT remained painfully far from realization. The Palestinian Authority had swiftly been revealed as a cosmetic, administrative body which was acting, in many ways, as an unwilling (if not unwitting) »agent« for Israel which retained effective and overall control throughout the OPT. The Palestinians, knowing international law to be fully on their side, were increasingly frustrated, angry and helpless in the face of mounting Israeli intransigence. Their sense of despondency was exacerbated by the marked absence of any pressure from world leaders, including those in the Arab world, to bring Israelis into compliance with signed and (re-)negotiated agreements or with international laws and ratified conventions.

Israel's »Red Lines« on a Solution

In May, 1999, Ehud Barak's government illustrated – under the banner of a »united Israel« – the parity between his left-wing Labor and the right-wing Likud agendas vis-à-vis the Palestinians, when he laid out his »red lines« on a negotiated solution to the conflict. These comprised his four NOS:

- ▶ *No* to return to the 1967 borders – as required by UN Resolution 242,
- ▶ *No* to the return of Palestinians refugees – as required by UN Resolution 194;
- ▶ *No* to any withdrawal from east Jerusalem or to accepting any Palestinian sovereignty over it – as required by both Resolutions 194 and 242;
- ▶ *No* to dismantling or »freezing« Jewish settlement in the OPT – in line with UN resolutions and international calls for them to be ceased, as illegal »obstacles to peace«.

In recalling this »quadri-negative« position, with which Ehud Barak soothed the Israeli voter before embarking on his doomed efforts to enforce it upon the Palestinians, it is worth noting that, nearly two years on, in March 2001, the subsequent Israeli coalition government headed by Ariel Sharon, in spite of its many contradictions and the conflicts amongst its members, is setting out to develop another »unified Israeli position«. It is oriented at Sharon's guiding agenda of reaching a long-term transitional arrangement with the Palestinians, rather than any more comprehensive solution. Sharon's NOs comprise:

- ▶ *No* to dismantling a single settlement;
- ▶ *No* to withdrawing from the Jordan Valley;
- ▶ *No* to any compromise on Jerusalem;
- ▶ *No* to the right of Palestinian refugees to return,
- ▶ *No* to any compromise on border issues.

Surveying the past decade, it can be surmised that its consecutive Israeli governments have never held a strategy geared towards reconciliation or peaceful »coexistence« and equal rights, but rather have been absorbed by the shifting internal dynamics and nuances of the modern Zionist movement, especially with its current crisis of definition and purpose in the region. As a result of this inadequate and exclusively introspective political approach to the realities of the occupation, the hegemony and control of the established regime has not been challenged and continues to define the parameters of political discourse both in Israel and between the two sides. Such a costly lack of political vision finds its most obvious expression in the no-positions of both Labor (Barak) and Likud (Sharon).

Indeed, it is immediately apparent that the vanity of power with which Israel has approached the peace process over the years is indicative of an absolute refusal to consider the notion of peace

with the Palestinians as anything more than an »option« which ceases to be attractive the instant it can no longer be shaped according to their every need and whim. This disturbing perspective, which implies a willingness to live indefinitely in a state of war and occupation, was succinctly expressed by Netanyahu when he declared: »If I have to choose between peace and [absolute Israeli sovereignty over *all*] Jerusalem, I will choose Jerusalem....«. As long as the choice of thus occupying »eternally« an Arab Palestinian people, their land and holy sites is placed above that of peace in the region for all its peoples, the Palestinians can and must seriously question the readiness of their »partner« to resolve the conflict.

Amongst the more recent and most dangerous examples of the disingenuousness of both Israeli leaders' agendas was the proposal made by Barak's team at the Camp David summit of July 2000, which – in a reflection of the unbending mindset of the occupier – they considered »generous and of historic significance«. Israel's final status positions »offered« the establishment of a Palestinian demilitarized state on 90–95 percent of the OPT, though not in a single contiguous territorial unit but rather in separate »cantons« defined, contained and controlled by Jewish settlement blocs, military bases and bypass roads, and excluding Jerusalem.

On the issue of Jerusalem, the Barak proposal did not even broach the question of the city in its entirety (East and West), but limited it to a formula of »sharing« East Jerusalem in the boundaries illegally and unilaterally expanded by Israel in 1967. The Israeli proposal denied the fact that East Jerusalem is not only geographically and demographically an inseparable part of the West Bank but the capital of the future state of Palestine. It attempted to even further fragment its Arab neighborhoods, while illegally annexed West Jerusalem remained a non-issue. Regarding the holy sites, Israel has made no secret of its intention to »share« – if not take over completely – the holy Al-Aqsa compound. Such a scenario follows the Hebron model and will remain unthinkable, impracticable and thoroughly unjust for Palestinians, who continue to insist that no party should have exclusive sovereignty over the city nor control the society or administer the city at the expense of the other party, particularly with regard

to holy sites, whose status quo they demand be protected and maintained.

As for the refugees, Israel's ill-founded and arrogant demand was that the Palestinians forgo their fundamental inalienable right of return, accepting only Israel's »offer« to let a selected number (no more than ten thousand) of refugees return. It is quite impossible to think that there will be a Palestinian leader who would close a deal at such high price, conceding, for so little, the rights of the dispossessed two-thirds of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian position has and always will be based on the inalienable right of return as defined by UN Resolution 194, which calls unequivocally upon Israel to recognize the right and agree upon a plan for the implementation of such a return.

In exchange for such »generosity« on the part of the Israelis, the Palestinians were expected to declare »an end to the conflict.« Needless to say that this was out of the question as every point of the above contradicted *their* »red lines«, or basic positions as it were.

Firstly, Palestinians had already made a huge and painful concession on the land issue by recognizing the state of Israel on 78 percent of their homeland and thus limiting their political demands to the remaining 22 percent of the land, i. e., the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in their pre-1967 borders. To compromise even further on these territories was, and is, unacceptable not only because it is unjust and accommodates a dangerous Israeli dissatisfaction with what they conquered in 1947–49, but, more vitally, because it embodies an Israeli insistence on the de-facto maintenance of the occupation. On the issue of settlements, the Palestinians ask for nothing more than the implementation of international law, which prohibits the transfer of any population to occupied territory and the annexation of such territory and which leaves no doubt that settlements are without legal validity.

Similarly, the absolute and unconditional right of return – manifested in UN Resolution 194 – per se is non-negotiable for the Palestinians, who consider the refugee question sacred and at the core of the conflict.

To further stress the absurdity of the Barak »offer« one should recall that whatever deal might have been struck between the two teams, it was

subject to the majority approval of the Knesset, where the failing Prime Minister led an embattled minority and was facing the no-confidence votes which would shortly see him resign. Thus, it would have been an act of political naiveté, if not suicide, for the Palestinians to have even considered bending to the wholly unacceptable proposals described above; yet another recorded concession without gain.

Throughout the Camp David Summit and the later (January, 2001) Taba talks, and despite the obstinately »closed« Jerusalem and refugee files, the negotiators on both sides showed a readiness to consider the idea of land exchanges. Intended to enable Israel to incorporate three large settlement blocs adjacent to the Green Line in return for granting the Palestinians land from Israel of equal potential and value, these talks, too, were persistently undermined by an indefatigable Israeli will to secure yet another exchange which distinctly favored them. This time it was in terms of the land swap ratio and the qualitative differences they sought to exploit in literally offering the Palestinians sand dunes in exchange for fertile agricultural and residential West Bank land.

Needless to say, the advent of Ariel Sharon with his patently racist and hawkish cabinet and their »offer« of a demilitarized state on 42 percent of the West Bank after a prolonged transitional period, represents a giant stride backwards from Barak's own calamitous proposals. One can see in Sharon's approach a disturbing shamelessness that was lacking in the deception of the internationally hailed efforts of Barak. Both, for example, held similar views concerning settlements (Barak presided over the hugest settlement expansion period in Israel's history), yet while Barak's »offer« of annexing Palestinian land sufficient to afford an eventual five-fold increase in current settlement housing was lauded by the international community as »generous and courageous«, Sharon received few laurels when he stated quite clearly that the settlement program south of Jerusalem is being conducted with the specific purpose of »preventing Palestinian contiguity«, adding, »that's clear and natural.«¹ With such parity of purpose and yet polarity of presentation, Sharon and Barak

1. Ariel Sharon to Kofi Anan in Washington, as reported by Aluf Benn in *Ha'aretz*, March 23, 2001.

exemplify the entirely cosmetic nature of the so-called hawk-dove division and cast revealing light on the source of Palestinian frustration with Israel's political posturing over past years.

One might be forgiven for despairing because the responsibility of governing a region and steering its people clear of disaster lies with such leaders. With the obsessively proclaimed »red lines« of successive leaders, settlements expanding apace and armed settler militias controlling swathes of the Palestinian West Bank, it is hard to envisage what the future could offer, yet we may examine certain possibilities.

Emerging Scenarios

The present circumstances in the political arena represent a continuation of the long-established status quo, with Israeli military superiority meshing with Ariel Sharon's »doctrine« to define a state of »limited war« and enforce an apartheid-style separation policy upon the weaker party. Sharon's agenda outdoes those of his recent predecessors in its clear aim of not only obstructing and distancing the inevitable Palestinian state but of weakening and discrediting Yasser Arafat's power, if not stripping him and the PA of all authority in the OPT altogether. Naturally this is being carried out in conjunction with concerted international and domestic efforts to portray the Palestinian people as either unable or unprepared to govern themselves and to portray their leadership as the obstacle in the face of progress towards peaceful negotiations.

Sharon's unchanged military approach, with its focus upon crippling Palestinian society, dismantling its economy and de-legitimizing its leadership, can perhaps be best understood and its potential direction appreciated when his concentrated diplomatic efforts to redevelop Israel's security alliance with Jordan are taken into consideration. The Sharon-Peres government appears to assume that Arab states can be made to feel obliged and even willing to accommodate and smother the urgent socio-economic pressures of Palestinians if persuaded to do so by the US and EU and given the chance to thereby overcome their own economic crises with appropriate material and strategic support.

Arabizing the Search for a Solution

In a signal of what may be a process of re-Arabizing a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Arab leaders and Islamic states have realized the need to translate their verbal support and financial pledges into concentrated political action based on their own stated acknowledgements that peace in the region is a process directly relating to their own national and regional strategy.

A Jordanian-Egyptian initiative, which materialized during the March 2001 Arab summit in Amman, represents a first clear manifestation of this developing Arab mediation role. The initiative covers four areas, stressing first the need to take »steps to end the current crisis between Israel and the Palestinian Authority [by implementing] the understanding reached at the Sharm Esh-Sheikh summit in October 2000«. Secondly there is an emphasis on »confidence building measures... to restore trust through the faithful implementation of their commitments as agreed... in the signed agreements«. Only then does the initiative broach the »rebuilding [of] the negotiating process on all items on the agenda for the permanent status negotiations including Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, borders, settlements, security and water.« Finally, »it is proposed that the sponsors of the peace process: the EU, Egypt, Jordan and the UN Secretary General shall monitor this implementation and its progress.«

Thus far, Israel has reduced its blanket rejection of the initiative to what they describe as a few »reservations«; one being the setting of a timetable for the attainment of a final agreement, the second being that the plan lacks a clause requiring the cessation of »violence« (by which they would like to infer Palestinian responsibility) prior to the renewal of negotiations, and the third being that the initiative expects Israel to freeze its settlement policies forthwith. Despite these reservations, Israeli diplomatic maneuvers have begun making use of the initiative as a tool by which to distract from a climb-down on their position, thus enabling them to save face whilst resuming security *and* political talks despite having so vociferously ruled this out. Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, accordingly said »it is important that there is an attempt and an effort to move things forward. The initiative can serve as a basis,

but the details need to be worked on.«² Sharon then delegated Peres to discuss, if not negotiate, the terms of the initiative with leaders in Cairo, Amman and Washington. Peres immediately manufactured a curious and intriguing political storm in the region by leading the Egyptian President to believe and announce that the initiative had been accepted and was already to serve as the agreed basis for a »cease-fire«, while negotiations would commence in four weeks. The immediate repudiation of any such agreement emerged from Ramallah but Amman maintained a no-comment approach to the statements and left commentators asking whether Israel was making a deliberate attempt to publicly compromise, enrage and thus distance the Egyptians from the initiative and thereby elevate the primacy of their preferred Jordanian ally.

On the other hand, the Palestinian leadership has long been demanding an intervention from the Arab states, though this has now materialized as a mere mediation move rather than a more assertive one which would have been preferred; a strong move toward partnering the Palestinians and defending them in their conflict with Israel. The EU has quickly welcomed the initiative and encouraged the Israelis to accept it, while the US has resumed its facilitation of security talks between the Palestinians and Israelis at the American Embassy in Tel Aviv and State Department statements have clearly favored the initiative.

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana has confirmed that the EU is »taking it seriously because it is the only document at the table now that may help us out of the vicious circle.«³ Whether or not as a consequence of their support for the initiative, Washington has dispatched its former ambassador to Jordan to the region for consultations. Further to this move, President George W. Bush has already received three Arab heads of state at the White House; the Egyptian, Jordanian and Lebanese leaders, while word has recently emerged from the US concerning the imminent nomination of a special envoy to the region. The likely candidates can be said to be specialized in Syria and Jordan, and any appointment to the post would seem to confirm the US's intention to »Arabize« the solution to the conflict either through Jordanian-Israeli security arrangements or through a Syrian-Israeli non-aggression

pact. In any case, Washington cannot afford to maintain a hands-off approach to the conflict in the Middle East, nor the current crisis.

The Jordanian Umbrella?

Jordan's motivation for joining Egypt as a regional mediator for negotiation between the Palestinians and Israelis stems from a need to capitalize on the current opportunity to arrest what are serious and potentially devastating deteriorations in the Jordanian economy as well as to contain mounting frustration and anger with Israel in Jordan. Strong anti-»normalization« forces in Jordanian society are challenging the regime to abrogate its peace treaty with Israel and a black list has been circulated naming those who have had »inappropriate contact« with Israel. The Hashemite Kingdom, with its enormous Palestinian refugee population, is most at risk should the possibility of the Intifada spreading regionally be realized.

There have, alongside these pressures, been arguments amongst the Jordanian ruling class favoring the development of a mediation role in the conflict for Jordan ever since King Abdullah II became head of the Arab Summit for the coming year. Egypt, which has more recently held the position of regional »shepherd« in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, has endorsed Jordan's »open« shuttle diplomacy between Israel and the PA, sharing mutual strategic interests not least with regard to Jordan's economy, which, should it collapse, would have devastating regional effects. Other underlying factors for Egypt's advocacy and support of Jordan's role are the concern about the effects of the US decision to severely reduce its military presence in the Sinai Peninsula. Egyptian anti- »normalization« forces, including the Islamists, have long called on the regime there to challenge Israel rather than limit themselves to the »war of (empty) words«. It comes as no surprise then that the Egyptian leadership is pleased to encourage another regime willing to absorb a part of these popular pressures. Egypt has gone so far as to knock on the doors of EU capitals (including Berlin) and the administration in Moscow, asking

2. *Ha'aretz* April 23, 2001.

3. *Reuters*, April 30th, 2001.

for their support in its newest difficulties. It received the blessing and endorsement of both EU and Russian parties for the Egyptian leadership and the initiative in particular.

Jordanian-Israeli relations are notable in many respects. Both countries share a peace treaty which has, so far, been respected to the letter. In stark contrast to many noises being made elsewhere in the region and abroad (as well as within the Israeli political community), King Abdullah II, during a press conference on his April 2001 visit to Washington, assured his American and Israeli counterparts of his friendship with and trust of Ariel Sharon, referring to his father, the late King Hussein's advice to do so. The King's policy towards Israel has been rapidly reflected by his ministerial staff, the trade minister announced the renewal of the Jordan-Israel trade agreement for the coming year, covering \$150 million in trade between the two states. Meanwhile, the Jordanian foreign minister met Prime Minister Sharon in Jerusalem to formally present the Jordanian-Egyptian initiative, though under the shadow of the Israeli raid on a Syrian post and the Israeli army's reoccupation of PA areas in Gaza. The US has demonstrated its support for elevating Jordan's position in the region by transferring \$75 million in urgent economic aid and \$35 million in military aid as well as by the President's request for Congress to approve the US-Jordan trade treaty, which has been on ice for some time.

Ariel Sharon explains Israel-Jordan relations and his lobbying for US aid to the kingdom by saying »Jordan today, or rather the Hashemite monarchy, is a stabilizing factor, just by its presence. It stands between Israel, the PA, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq to the east. We have an interest in strengthening them economically and militarily. In today's situations, they are important to us.«⁴

The Palestinians, as so often before, risk finding themselves trapped between the militarily enforced agenda of a Sharon government and the machinations of an Arab political maneuver which ultimately serves that regime's priorities and commitments at the expense of Palestinian rights and aspirations. If this initiative, as outlined above, is to shape the direction of a new chapter of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Chairman Arafat can be expected to, as he is so accustomed, adapt his tactics accordingly and accommodate the latest Jordanian-Israeli security arrangement. The Pa-

lestinian leader will be found most adept at playing one side's internal pressures off the other's political characteristics and vice-versa ad infinitum. Having relied upon this art when last in Jordan, developed it in Lebanon and, arguably, mastered it from his Tunis base, Chairman Arafat can now be expected to capitalize on his position in the middle to exert the maximum domestic and diplomatic pressure on Israel. In addition to exploiting Arafat's ability to play a role as the potential »spoiler« for any further normalization between Jordan and Israel, the Palestinian leadership will demand that the Egyptian role be clearly felt throughout, in the hope that it will counterbalance the anticipated Jordanian connivance with Israel. At the same time the Palestinians will be able to put some effort into re-establishing a joint political agenda with Syria – the opportunity for which was signaled at the Amman Arab Summit and which has yet to be followed up by either side.

A Qatari Umbrella?

The Jordanian-Egyptian initiative makes specific reference to the role of the international community in monitoring the implementation of agreements and the Palestinians have accordingly called upon the EU and the UN Secretary General to take up an unambiguous stance in accordance with that component of the initiative. Similar calls upon the international community have been emanating from the Palestinians throughout the current crisis, though response has come too slow and has been limited. One regional response has been signaled in the unexpected statement of Qatar's foreign minister, following his unscheduled meeting with Shimon Peres in New York.

Following the Israeli Foreign Minister and US President Bush's joint statement agreeing to »work very closely with Egypt and Jordan«, the Qatari foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani, was reported to have suggested in a late-night meeting with Peres that Arafat and Sharon might find Doha a suitable venue for further discussions based on current initiatives.⁵

4. *Jerusalem Post*, April 27, 2001.

5. *Jerusalem Post*, May 4th 2001, »Bush to Peres: ...« by Janine Zacharia, p. 1–2.

However, it is likely that this is far less a response to the call of the Palestinians upon the international community, than a response to the strategic openings sensed by the Qataris. In recognizing the approach of the US and the opportunity it affords to any Arab state willing to become directly involved in the process of hosting and »shepherding« peace talks, the Qatari decision reflects an awareness that they are already aligned economically and politically with US regional agendas. As such, they would have less to lose than other states in becoming a venue or springboard for peace talks. In hoping to wrest some of the focus from Egypt and Jordan, the Qatari aim will be to consolidate and extend US economic and military assistance, of which they are already a beneficiary, while hoping to increase their standing in the Arab world by taking a role in the effort to contain the conflict.

It would appear that, in one shape or another and to a greater or lesser degree, this initiative will be the next likely juncture in the path of the conflict. All parties concerned will, naturally, attempt to use and manipulate the process from the outset in order to best serve their needs. Israel will, accordingly, set its probable formula for conditional acceptance of any such new chapter in the negotiations based on wresting maximal normalization while yielding minimal concessions, either to Jordan, the Egyptians, the Gulf States or the Palestinians. Subsequent relations between these Arab nations and Israel will be underpinned by the efforts of the Israelis to render them as dependent as possible upon Israel in order to gradually be able to commensurately increase the weight of their expectations from their »partners« in terms of the latter's containment of the Palestinians.

During this period most parties will be looking towards a post-Arafat and post-Sharon era, formulating their alliances and political contacts accordingly. There is no reason to suggest that the Arab leaders will be naïve to this tact and so, from the other side, we will see them joust diplomatically to preserve the benefits of the strategic arrangement while avoiding, as best they can, falling totally into Israel's pocket and being left to pick up the pieces of a post-Arafat Palestinian political meltdown.

Some ground for hope, on the part of the Palestinians, may lie with the fact that the Arab

umbrella for future negotiation – if successful – can be made to develop towards the birth of the Palestinian sovereign state within the »Arab House« and with greater likelihood of eventual Israeli acceptance.

An Israeli Solution?

Another possibility in terms of emerging scenarios would appear to revolve around Israeli party politics and popular malcontent with the Sharon agenda. That said, and as noted earlier, the Israeli political establishment has not shown sufficient political will, energy or vision in past years for one to pin hopes on its overnight reform. In fact the rise to power of a Sharon government, coming after a ten-year seesaw period of right-wing-left-wing coalitions, would appear to point at once to the singular lack of political maturity that Israel shows for a democratic state, and the »optional-extra« attitude which Israeli leaders and, as a result, voters hold towards the issue of peace and reconciliation. What is desperately needed then is an awakening of the Israeli popular awareness and political will, which is a prerequisite for constructing a valuable negotiation process.

Nonetheless, given the dearth of other initiatives and in acceptance of the fact that Palestinians have no choice but to deal with their occupier »as served«, there remains hope, albeit slight, for significant shifts in the current political scenery. If the Intifada goes on to become a way of life and presents more and more episodes of painful Palestinian suffering, Israeli public opinion may start to reflect the realization that Sharon's style of government will not bring about the promised security and calm, but rather is implementing an accelerated apartheid system which promises only more hatred and confrontation, even if with certain tranquil periods in between. Such a hoped-for change in public awareness, while seemingly far-fetched, did gradually occur to some extent during the prolonged and pained years of the first Intifada. If the Labor party, currently obediently playing the »good-cop« role in the coalition for the benefit of Sharon's international critics, faces such a shift in public opinion, it will be obliged, for the sake of its own survival to seek a way out and to play an effective role in resuscitating Israel's dor-

mant political left. Activists within the peace camp might consequentially be driven to renew efforts to shake both their society and their leaders into maturing their attitudes towards the future of their own state and the Palestinians by recognizing the need for comprehensive peace and the mutuality of rights. Calls for settlement activities to be ceased in Israel would be the minimum sign of understanding Palestinians would hope to see emerging from a reborn peace camp, but far more progressive and comprehensive attitudes would have to be formulated before societal and political change on the scale needed could be achieved. In the event of such a change in Israeli public opinion, however unlikely it may seem at this point, general elections will become inevitable.

Whether or not Sharon is brought down from a split in his broad coalition, a shift in the national consensus or in fact lasts out his short term of office, Israel is set to go to the polls relatively soon and certain questions will then be answered. Foremost amongst these will be whether or not Sharon's doctrine has been irreversibly imposed upon the region. Certainly it would seem that Sharon will leave office content if he manages to use his military threats and power tactics in the region to create a situation that will, as an inherited *de facto* status, represent as immovable a challenge as possible to those who follow. In this regard, it is not the length of time he spends in office that concerns Ariel Sharon but rather the extent to which he manages to follow through this program. Chairman Arafat, on the other hand has already stated that the yardstick of »success« in the current crisis will be his leadership's ability »to survive the battle«!

Conclusions

Recognizing that the Sharon-Peres government's war against the PA and its desire to affect a decline in the PA's legitimacy and popularity reflects the underlying political tendency in Israel at the moment, one can surely expect the reconstitution of a right-wing Likud government – with or without Netanyahu at its helm – following the next Israeli general election. This means that Israel's leadership crisis will persist, as will its lack of vision for a viable long-term political settlement with the Palestinian people.

The attempt of the Israeli establishment and the Sharon-Peres government to lull the world into believing that Chairman Arafat is chiefly responsible for starting and leading the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli troops in the OPT clearly ignores the real causes and indisputable facts that led to, and fuelled, the current uprising. Growing Palestinian anger and frustration, born of the persistent Israeli denial and erosion of their rights to freedom, dignity and independence, has found its expression in a resolved commitment to challenge the ongoing military occupation and to restore these internationally recognized rights.

If Chairman Arafat were to accept Israeli accusations and thereby yield to their conditions and terms by making an official public call upon all Palestinians to halt their resistance in the face of Israeli military intransigence and a brutal occupation, Israel would discover that while the perhaps desired effect of totally weakening his legitimacy would be immediately achieved, such a call would surely fall on deaf ears. Ending Palestinian resistance is not a question of orders issued by personalities, symbols or even recognized leaders, but rather of addressing the will of an entire people who have tired of the deceptions of the Israelis. An end to the Palestinian uprising against the occupation cannot be treated as if its causes were rooted in the enterprise of an all-powerful individual rather than in the popular resistance of a near-powerless people.

Israeli society and its chosen leadership must finally decide how long they can live by the sword and force their Palestinian neighbors to live under a cruel military occupation. The Israelis must open their eyes to Palestinian national aspirations for a homeland and their right to self-determination and face the clear fact that, as a people, the Palestinians will never submit to an apartheid system and bow to a life at the mercy of armed settlers and racist ideologues.

The cycle of fear that cripples the two peoples cannot and will not prevail forever, nor will the Jordanian-Egyptian or Qatari moves be the only new mediation efforts brought forward to end the conflict. Today, an initiative (the Jordanian-Egyptian one) carries the consent of Chairman Arafat's establishment and comes with the conditional support of Washington, Moscow and

Europe. Nonetheless it is underpinned by an acceptance of the fact that Jordan and Egypt are the only two Arab states to have signed a peace agreement with Israel and that they are heavily dependant on US funds and strategic support. Placing too much emphasis on their role may well be indicative of an Israeli underestimation of the serious effect continuous Palestinian suffering will have on these states' respective populations. Indeed, it is uncertain how long Amman and Cairo will be able to contain the angry calls of their people to abrogate their peace treaties with Israel or manage to water down mounting resentment against the Jewish state. What must be made very clear to all involved is the fact that the bottom line for every Palestinian is their need to live in dignity within their own sovereign state with East Jerusalem as its capital and with a geographic contiguity that will require dismantling illegal settlements.

In order to implement any substantial steps towards real peace and stability in the future, bringing in some sort of international protection force will probably prove unavoidable. The Palestinians have been reasonable in their demand for international protection, not only hoping to limit Israeli atrocities against them – of which irrefutable evidence has been documented by numerous fact-finding missions and international human rights bodies – but also recognizing their necessary role as a buffer in any forthcoming process of political separation between the two peoples. Such a force will not only be essential in upholding law and order during a transitional phase but also in creating an environment in which life may carry on as normally as possible, while both parties try to accommodate themselves to a new chapter in the conflict.

However, despite Palestinian demands and the internationally recognized suffering of the Palestinian people, the reality of the regional and global power balance remains such that the Palestinian leadership will be bound to accept almost any initiative that allows for a break in the hostilities and a return to the negotiation table in time to fulfill Arafat's singular ambition of »surviving the battle.« With the Israelis only too aware of this dire position in which the Palestinians find themselves, it would not appear likely that terms put forth by the Palestinians will be accommodated by

the Israelis any more than they have been in the past and so yet again a cycle of Israeli exploitation and abuse is set to characterize the unfolding era, albeit once more cloaked in the guise of a »peace process.« ◀