

The History Behind the Intifadah

Hisham H. Ahmed

The Intifadah's most obvious objective is to end Israeli occupation. Since the *Intifadah* began on December 9, 1987, hundreds of Palestinians from all walks of life have been killed; tens of thousands of unarmed Palestinian civilians have been wounded; and thousands more have been denied a trial or any semblance of due process of law, arbitrarily arrested, and imprisoned in inhuman conditions. Palestinian hospitals, clinics, and maternity centers have been indiscriminately attacked; and grade schools, high schools, colleges, and universities in occupied Palestine have been closed. Yet the *Intifadah* continues. Why? What are its goals?

Like anything else, the *Intifadah* cannot be understood without examining the history that led to it. Similarly, the essence of Israel's brutal occupation cannot be understood in isolation from earlier Zionist colonial plans

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to deny the very existence of the Palestinians as a people.

Imposing the Zionist Plan

The year 1917 is a landmark in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. On November 2, 1917, the British government issued the notorious Balfour Declaration, promising "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." The indigenous people of Palestine had not been consulted, nor had their rights been taken into consideration.

Later, in 1919, the Paris Peace Conference dispatched the American King-Crane Commission to investigate the situation in Palestine and in other provinces of the former Ottoman Empire. The Commission reported, *inter alia*, that the establishment of a Jewish national home on Palestinian soil would represent a flagrant violation of the principle of self-determination.

President Woodrow Wilson also articulated this stance in his "Fourteen Points" address on January 8, 1918, as well as

in his "Four Points" address of February 11, a month later. Furthermore, the King-Crane Commission concluded that the implementation of the Zionist program would result in the uprooting of the indigenous people of Palestine from their homeland.

Because its findings conflicted with Zionist goals, the King-Crane Commission's report was suppressed. After three years, in July 1922, President Wilson granted his biographer, Ray Stannard Baker, permission to publish its findings.

Ironically, in that same year, on September 11, 1922, the United States gave its unequivocal consent to the Zionist settlement of Palestine in the form of Joint Resolution No. 322 of the 67th Congress. And two years later, in the Anglo-American Convention of December 3, 1924, the United States gave its official approval to the British subjugation of Palestine under the mandate system. Thus, the Wilsonian notion of self-determination was denied the people of Palestine.

At that time, the population of Palestine was approximately



photo courtesy of Kino International

**Wedding in Galilee,
Khleifi addresses
issues relating to social
and political systems
of authority. This
time, his subject is
a wedding in a village
in the Galilee.**

of them is showing proof of her virginity on the wedding night. Yet her sense of security and inner strength enable her to resolve a situation that might have proven embarrassing to her husband. Torn by his father's political subjugation to the military governor, the bridegroom is unable to achieve a sense of closeness with his bride on the wedding night.

Samia resolves the situation. She takes her own virginity. The father's honor is saved when, in accordance with village traditions, the blood-stained sheets, symbolizing the woman's honor and the man's virility, are displayed in the village.

Samia's inner strength contrasts with the more traditional role attributed to women inherent in this wedding tradition. The scene is carried out in an unoffensive manner, sensitively, respectful of local customs, and in line with the esthetic sensibilities of most film viewers.

But, Khleifi does not allow a cliché to become a single point of view. Through Sumaya, the sexually provocative and forceful daughter

of the mukhtar, the film exposes a different kind of Palestinian woman who asserts her identity by challenging the nurturing and mediational role attributed to Samia and to the bridegroom's mother. Through her seductive behavior and her choice of dress in more contemporary attire, Sumaya presents a direct challenge to patriarchal norms.

Sumaya represents a more confrontational approach toward the authorities when she provocatively challenges the soldiers. Girlfriend to the youth who is plotting the assassination of the military governor during the wedding, Sumaya belongs to the young generation that favors more direct confrontation with social and political systems of authority. However, she realizes that an assassination would only net her boyfriend a prison sentence, foiling her plans to be married and thus rescued from her father's authoritarian rule. Therefore, she is against the plot to assassinate the military commander.

In Khleifi's work, the accuracy of time and place are sacrificed in order to express unity between Palestinians inside Israel and in other parts of occupied Palestine. The film was shot in villages both in the Galilee and on the West Bank. Curfews imposed by the military governor are a common occurrence in occupied Palestine, whereas, the last curfew imposed on Palestinian villages in Israel was in 1966. Mined fields were a consequence of the 1948 war; most were cleared soon afterward.

These historical and geographical inaccuracies in no way distort the portrayal of resistance methods specific to Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. And of course, the traditional wedding caught on film depicts the customs unique to villages in the Galilee. □

opposed to the mukhtar's more compliant approach. And Adel, the bridegroom, did not want to go through with the wedding.

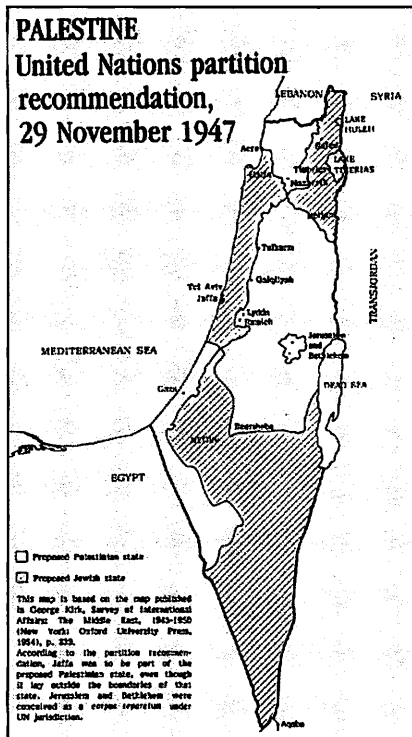
In these instances, Um Adel uses her position as matriarch alternatively to help her husband and her son achieve goals that are important to them. But more importantly, in both instances, she exhibits considerable influence in her role as resolver of conflicts. She helps to speed the wedding and she makes sure that in fact it does take place.

The bride, Samia, adheres to all traditions, some of which symbolize the dominant role of the male, one

700,000. Of that number, 574,000 were Muslims, 70,000 were Christians, and 56,000 were Jews. The Balfour Declaration and the ensuing British and U.S. policies never mentioned the Muslim and Christian majority of Palestine. Rather, they always referred to the majority as the "non-Jewish communities." Along with Britain, the United States promised to help establish a national home for a predominantly immigrant minority in Palestine, and ignored the political rights of the indigenous people. In doing so, the United States violated a fundamental democratic principle which it has so often claimed to defend in the name of liberty and freedom.

The Palestinian people did not accept the Balfour Declaration. They knew that they would be denied their natural human rights if they were to be ruled by an alien minority. Thus, Palestinian resistance against British policies and Zionist plans mounted throughout the 1920s and thereafter. Popular resistance against the British and the immigrant Zionists did not abate. In fact, from 1919 to 1939, many uprisings took place, climaxing in the 1936 Palestinian civil disobedience and six-month strike against British policies. Until the *Intifadah*, this was the longest uprising in modern Palestinian history.

Britain, in turn, became more determined to suppress Palestinians, their liberties, and their right to independence. Between 1936 and 1939 the British deployed 200,000 troops in Palestine to serve this objective. Since the forceful suppression of Palestinian resistance proved to be unsuccessful, however, London followed its tradition of sending a fact-finding



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commission. In 1936, as World War II began its approach, the Peel Commission was sent to investigate the situation.

Britain's tactic was to make it appear as if it had made compromises with the Palestinians. The real goal, however, was to consolidate progress toward Jewish statehood in Palestine by containing Palestinian resistance.

In the period during and after World War II, British repression of Palestine continued and the corresponding Palestinian struggle for self-determination intensified.

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations, under ominous pressure from the United States, and without consulting the indigenous Palestinian people, passed U.N. General Assembly Resolution 181 (II), partitioning Palestine into two states: one Jewish and the other Arab.

Critically assessing the role played by the United States in the adoption of U.N. Resolution 181 (II) and the implications of that resolution on Palestinian rights, Thomas A. Bryson, a Middle East scholar, wrote:

When the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 181 on 29 November 1947, providing for the partition of Palestine and the eventual creation of Israel, U.S. influence was a deciding factor in the passage of this measure—a measure that cast the principle of self-determination to the winds insofar as the Palestinian Arabs were concerned. The Jews, a minority of less than one-third and owning less than seven percent of the total land area of Palestine, were allotted 56 percent of that area.

Another critic, British journalist and author David Hirst wrote:

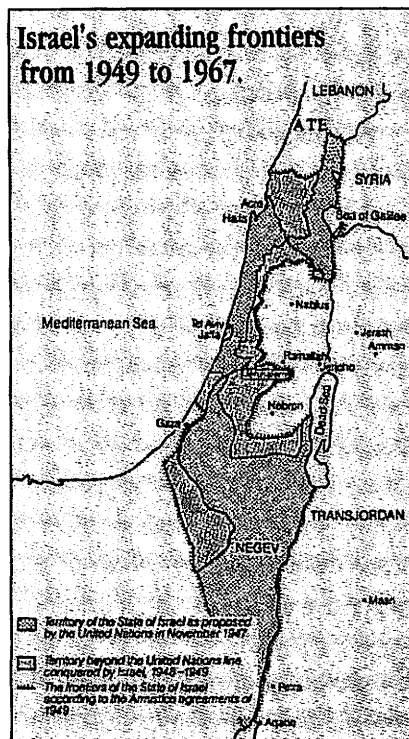
The Arabs were to retain 4,300 square miles while the Jews, who represented one-third of the population and owned some 6 percent of the land, were allotted 5,700 square miles. The Jews also got the better land; they were to have

the fertile coastal belt while the Arabs were to make do, for the most part, with the hills. Yet it was not the size of the area allotted to the Jews which pleased them—indeed, they regarded it as the “irreducible minimum” which they could accept—it was rather the fact of statehood itself. Conversely, it was not merely the size of the area they were to lose, it was the loss of land, sovereignty and an antique heritage that angered the Arabs.

The Palestinians felt cheated. But rather than try to ameliorate the situation, Israel compounded the tension with the Palestinians by its expansionist policies. In May 1948, the newly established state of Israel militarily occupied four-fifths of Palestine. The remainder came under Jordanian and Egyptian rule as secretly agreed, between King Abdullah of Jordan and Golda Meir. This remaining one-fifth of Palestine came under Israeli occupation in June 1967.

When Israel was established in May 1948, approximately 800,000 Palestinians were forcibly expelled from their homeland. They became stateless and homeless. Especially in the West, it is often argued that the Palestinians voluntarily left their homeland when the state of Israel was proclaimed. However, as even Israeli scholars themselves have discovered, this not true. Numerous official Israeli sources have provided details of a range of methods to systematically uproot Palestinians from their homeland and even exterminate them.

In 1948, entire Palestinian villages were totally wiped out



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by Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir—at that time the heads of the Irgun-Leumi Tzvi and the Stern Gang, respectively. In April 1948, Begin and Shamir led a Zionist terrorist group to massacre 254 Palestinian men, women and children in the village of Deir Yassin, and the Israelis “helped spread the word” to other villages that the massacre at Deir Yassin is only the first of many to come.

The thousands of Palestinians who have been massacred, as

in 1976 at Tel Al-Zaatar and in 1982 at Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, are not abstractions in the human memory or isolated incidents of history. They are a perpetuation of the Palestinian tragedy caused by the establishment of Israel.

The PLO

It is out of this ongoing suffering that the Palestinian resistance grew. One overriding Palestinian concern was that the international community grant recognition of its existence as a people and of the legitimacy to exercise its inalienable national rights in its homeland. Because this request was initially ignored, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded in 1964, and in 1965, a newly organized Palestinian armed struggle was launched by those Palestinians whose family members had been killed, and by those who themselves had been made refugees. Then, the respected Palestinian scholar Fayez Sayegh wrote:

The Palestinian people—after sixteen years of dispersion and exile, during which it had reposed its faith in its return to its country in world conscience and international public opinion, in the United Nations, and/or in the Arab states—chose at last to seize the initiative. In 1964, it reasserted its corporate personality by creating the Palestine Liberation Organization (W. Laqueur and B. Rubin, eds., 1984: p. 168).

Before it came to accept the idea of a two-state solution in Palestine, the PLO set as its goal

The Hidden History of Zionism

Geoffrey D. Schad

Schoenman, Ralph. *The Hidden History of Zionism*. Santa Barbara: Veritas Press, 1988.

In this one short book, a veteran leftist political activist, Ralph Schoenman, attempts to offer a great deal: a Marxist analysis of Zionism as an ideology; a Marxist analysis of Israel as a state; an indictment of Israeli brutality toward the Palestinians; an exposé of expansionist Zionist plans for the Middle East; and a recommendation for Palestinian action.

Unfortunately, Schoenman's writing style is not up to his ambitious goals, and his recommendations are anachronistic in the wake of last November's Palestine National Council resolutions. Furthermore his title is inaccurate: the history he claims is "hidden" is in fact well documented, as evidenced by his extensive quotations from published sources.

All this is a great pity, as many Americans are unfamiliar with the

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subject matter, and, in the wake of the *Intifadab*, the Palestinian Uprising, a good general overview of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is sorely needed. Indeed, one wonders who Schoenman's intended audience is. For those who know the subject matter, Schoenman covers too much familiar ground. For uninformed general readers, his disjointed approach is confusing. This is not meant to impugn the author's intentions or integrity—it is only to state that Schoenman's book is not what it could have been.

After a brief preface on the *Intifadab*, written last April, Schoenman gets down to his historical analysis. He begins by debunking what he terms the "Four Myths" of Zionism. In order, the four myths are—Palestine is "a land without a people for a people without a land"; Israel is a democracy; security is the prime motivation for Israeli foreign policy; and Zionism is legitimized by the genocide of European Jews under the Nazis.

Focusing on these four myths is very important, as each has been

used by Israel's apologists, particularly in the United States, to ensure the "blank check" support that Israel has enjoyed. It is important also to pose the idea that any opposition to "blank check" support, or any calls for justice for the Palestinians are not acts of thinly disguised "anti-Semitism."

The first myth is easy to dispel. Once the early Zionists realized that Palestine was in fact well populated, they were compelled to make the myth a reality: they expelled the Palestinians from their land.

Schoenman covers familiar topics in his account of the Israeli massacres of Palestinians during the war of 1948. He discusses the destruction of Palestinian villages and the confiscation of Palestinian property by the absentee property laws, the actions of the Jewish National Fund, and the terror tactics used by Ariel Sharon's Unit 101 during the 1950s and by the occupation authorities since 1967.

Israeli democracy is not assailed so directly. Indeed, one would have hoped for a more thorough treatment of Zionist and Israeli discrimination, both political and

the liberation of the entire Palestinian homeland and the establishment of a democratic, secular state for all who live there, irrespective of race and religion. Since its establishment, the PLO has gradually gained international recognition from the majority of nation-states in the international community. The Palestinian problem which was neglected for a long time, if remembered at all, or treated as a problem of scattered refugees, can be viewed as a struggle for the retrieval of legitimate national rights.

In October 1974 the Arab summit held in Rabat declared that the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people is the PLO. On November 22 of that year, the U.N. General Assembly adopted Resolution 3236 in which it reaffirmed "the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people in Palestine, including: (a) the right to self-determination without external interference; (b) the right to national independence and sovereignty"; and further recognized "that the Palestinian people is a principal factor in the establishment of a just and durable peace in the Middle East."

Both inside and outside occupied Palestine, Palestinians embrace the PLO as their sole legitimate representative. Palestinian allegiance to the PLO has been uninterrupted and steadfast in the face of Israeli military bombardments and U.S. policies in the area.

Nevertheless, there have been serious ongoing Israeli and U.S. attempts to find representatives for the Palestinian people other than the PLO. From the establishment of the "village leagues" in the early 1980s to the trumpeting of the "Jordan

option," (see *The Return*, February 1989, p. 15). However, all such attempts have failed.

The Palestinian people have consistently paid a heavy price for asserting their right to independent representation of their own choosing. The *Intifadab* is the product of many decades of oppression and suffering: it is a declaration that a new stage of Palestinian struggle has commenced, in which resistance to the occupation will be centered in occupied Palestine. Furthermore, the *Intifadab* represents a reassertion of the solidarity between Palestinians under occupation and those in exile, the former being subjected to daily harassment by the Israeli occupation authorities, and the latter being marginalized in their places of residence, or worse, in refugee camps sometimes kept in inhuman conditions.

The *Muntafidoon* (Uprisers) set out to challenge and eradicate the psychological impasse created by the myth of Israeli invincibility. They also sent an unequivocal message to the Arab regimes

who, in their November 1987 summit in Amman, had demoted the question of Palestine. In asserting Palestinian national unity and in affirming their right to choose the PLO as their sole legitimate representative, the Palestinians have proclaimed that their struggle cannot be conditioned upon Arab governments' support or upon dreamt-of fairness from the United States.

What is really happening now in occupied Palestine is a contest between the will of the indigenous people to assert their rights and the lust of the colonial power, Israel, to affirm its control. Naturally, one can predict that the occupier will use all the resources at its disposal to crush the challenges confronting it. By the same token, one would expect that the means the occupied people employ in the struggle will be adapted to correlate with the degree of injustice inflicted upon it. The more oppression Israel inflicts upon the Palestinian people, the more innovative and imaginative the Palestinian struggle will become. □

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