

Palestine-Israel Journal

Time for Reconciliation

The Palestine-Israel Journal is a quarterly of MIDDLE EAST PUBLICATIONS, a registered non-profit organization (No. 58-023862-4).

Vol.1 No.1 1994 / Peace Economics

Focus

Time for Reconciliation

The Intifada proved to Palestinians and Israelis alike that they could not ignore each other. Now it's time for negotiation and reconciliation.

by Hisham Ahmed

The Intifada in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in December, 1987, signaled the beginning of a new and stormy chapter in Palestinian-Israeli relations. The relative calm which prevailed after the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was disrupted; tensions were exacerbated and both sides incurred enormous material and human losses. During the first three years of the Intifada in particular, Israeli and Palestinian societies were at loggerheads. Not only did neither side feel secure, but their humanity lost more and more of its worth.

The credibility gap between Palestinians and Israelis grew wider, and the likelihood of resolving the conflict seemed nil. In this respect, the Intifada at first played a perpetuatory role: it contributed to the deepening of the classical modes of hostility between the two rivals.

The "power" of the Intifada, however, was at the same time working in a diametrically opposite direction. The two sides which battled each other on the streets of the occupied territories greeted and addressed each other at the negotiating table in Madrid, Spain in late 1991. Distrust and diminution of security, which characterized Palestinian-Israeli relations during the Intifada, compelled the two protagonists to realize that the only way out of the prevalent no-win situation was in creating a mutually beneficial environment. At the instigation of the United States, the vehicle was defined as the negotiating table and the objective was declared by the parties immediately concerned as the break away from instability and hostility. The heralding of stones and bullets, while deepening hatred and insecurity, led to the climax of the conflict, and hence to beginning its resolution.

In this respect, it can be said that the Intifada played a transformative role: It brought home to both parties the impact of the ills of hostility and uncontrolled rivalry. In the process, a new atmosphere was created and a set of new characteristics started to shape Palestinian-Israeli relations: bridges of contact were built and business-like talks were instituted. Participation by the Palestinian delegation in the peace talks along with its Israeli counterpart, and engagement by the PLO in coordinating arrangements with Israeli officials, made the formulation of the Palestinian-Israeli Declaration of Principles on August 19, 1993 and the formalization of the Israeli-PLO recognition agreement in Washington, DC, on September 13, 1993, an inevitable result.

In what follows, the objective is to analyze some of the dynamics which led Palestinians and Israelis to pursue the current peace process, particularly, its prime components, the Declaration of Principles and mutual recognition agreements. Furthermore, an analysis of the impact of the current process on both parties will be attempted.

Despite the fact that the Israeli authorities decided to meet the Palestinian Intifada with determined resistance, to crush it, a strong sense of dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the seeming intractability of the conflict permeated various ranks in Israeli public opinion. Shamir's decision to participate in the Madrid talks was a conversion of broad domestic political sentiments into a foreign policy agenda as much as it perhaps was an attempt on his part to entrap Palestinians into circular diplomatic maneuvers. Israeli public opinion was dismayed by the negative perceptual consequences resulting from the frequent scenes of Israeli soldiers battling unarmed Palestinian children, displayed by the world media. Participating in the talks as well as in its evolving results has concretized a more positive image of the Israeli in the eyes of world public opinion. The dissatisfaction of Israeli public opinion with its leadership's inattentiveness to the realization of peace under the Shamir government was further punctuated by bringing the Labor Party to office in 1992. Although the Labor ministers did not perform any more accommodatingly than the hard-liners towards the Palestinian Intifada before they assumed office, the sheer fact of entrusting them with the government signaled to them the urgent need for a change. No sooner had Labor won the elections in 1992, than they started holding secret talks with the PLO.

Yet it remains to be said that the new Israeli government of Yitzhak Rabin had to balance the determinants of its domestic policy with other economic and foreign policy considerations. The influx of Soviet Jews required more than the rhetoric of hospitality: the demographic and infrastructure changes they created dictated the designing of a strategy that would put the scientific and hi-tech skills they brought with them into practice. The key to the realization of this long-term objective, the new Israeli leadership understood, did not lie in further enhancing military preponderance in the region, but rather, in erecting bridges of economic cooperation with Arab neighbors. No desire for cooperation could have been credible without looking afresh at the Palestinian side of the equation. Hence Israeli and Palestinian leaders conferred and it was they who instituted cooperation and mutual recognition as the defining terms of the present political process. Indeed the spirit of cooperation is inculcated in most of the provisions of the Declaration of Principles document. The focus on coordination signifies not only an attempt to work out arrangements during a transitional phase, but also a recognition of the centrality of mutuality if stability is to ensue. Motivated by domestic policy considerations, the Israeli leadership formulated a foreign policy agenda toward the Palestinians and the Arab world on the basis of interdependence and shared benefits.

Undoubtedly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the consequent reduction of fears associated with it, the diminution of the vitality of territoriality in the Middle East as a function of the Gulf War, and perhaps the noticeable waning of the United States' economic standing in the world, motivated Israeli leaders to infuse their national security with economic cooperative considerations. The geographically-close Arab World was too distant politically and psychologically for the Israelis. The region's rich resources, combined with the richness of Israeli know-how can turn hatred into joint planning for a better future. This is in part why Israelis and Palestinians preambled their Declaration of Principles with an emphasis on the need to move away from hostility to stability and mutuality of benefits. The Palestinians, for their part, convinced that the symbolic achievements gained by the Intifada could not bring about the hoped-for transformation in their situation, viewed participating in the talks as a logical measure they had to pursue. Operating in the midst of a fragmented Arab World, Palestinian interest in stability, which previously diverged from its Israeli counterpart, now converged with it. The deep sense of despair which overwhelmed both sides to the conflict created among Palestinians a strong impetus towards reconciliation. In official Palestinian circles the prevalent perception has been that no longer could there be a determination of Palestinian destiny without concerted coordination with their hitherto rival. Recognition of Palestinian rights by the Israelis, Palestinian leaders calculated, is part and parcel of a process in which consequences have to be mutually beneficial. Such a framework deepened the feelings among Palestinian leaders that Palestinian political rights and Israeli security requirements are complementary rather than divisive compulsions. Neither party could achieve its objectives with ease, as this trend of thinking evolved, without quid pro quo arrangements. The realization among Palestinians grew that exactly as it took two parties to engage in confrontation, it would also take two to pursue cooperation. Hence Palestinian incorporation of their desire for cooperation with the Israelis in most areas of development, as shown in the declaration.

In conclusion, the Declaration of Principles and mutual recognition agreements represent a milestone break away from the past. Instead of the traditional Palestinian and Israeli unilateral assertions of the need and/ or the desire to destroy each other, the new relationship stresses the need to rebuild one another. What remains to be seen however is the extent to which both parties will be able to concretize what the agreement contains.