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HOW FARES THE INTIFADA?: ASSESSING THE NEW MOOD

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What is happening to the intifada and to Palestinian society under the intifada today? The answers to these questions may be found by looking at a number of sources: Arab newspapers, sociological research, and the leaflets distributed by the intifada leadership for the past five years. By the fifth year of the intifada over 1,000 leaflets had been published by the various bodies comprising the intifada leadership.

Choosing Between Normality and Revolution

Compare the current image of the Palestinians with the first years of the intifada. In the first two or three years of the intifada Palestinian self-image and collective identity were strengthened. At long last Palestinians were relying on themselves. They were acting successfully together as Palestinians and fighting for their own cause instead of relying on other bodies or other countries to do the job for them.

Yet today, one of the most telling indicators of the current direction of the intifada are these quotes from recent leaflets: "We dealt too much with political affairs. We should now spend more time on economics, to change focus, to concentrate on social problems rather than political problems." And another: "We cannot ask the public to read the wall graffiti if we do not teach the public how to read and write."

The talk is about focusing either on social problems or on political and national problems; about choosing between educating Palestinian society and conducting daily life as normally as possible, or being in the fifth year of a political revolution and ready to sacrifice everything for the national cause.

At the start of the intifada the Palestinians were ready to sacrifice everything for the cause — no elaborate wedding feasts, no soccer games, no coffee houses — all things that today are permitted.

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There are many reasons for this change in focus from the political to the economic. Less money is coming from Palestinians working in the Gulf states. More and more Palestinians who had been expelled from Kuwait are returning to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and families have more people to feed. Jewish newcomers to Israel are replacing Palestinians in jobs in the Israeli economy, adding to growing Palestinian unemployment. The PLO no longer gets money from the Gulf states because it supported Saddam Hussein, and receives no support from Russia because of PLO support for the conspirators against Gorbachev.

A Return to Passivity

Palestinian writings describe the political stage up to 1987 as the period of *tzumud*, to hold on as much as possible to one's land, to one's house, standing steadfastly, firmly, unwaveringly, in what is in essence a *defensive, passive* attitude.

The intifada, starting in December 1987, meant a shaking off, an *active, offensive* stage attempting to end the occupation and to kick out the Israelis.

A new *tzumud* or passive stage began after the Gulf War and is clearly reflected in Arab publications. The tendency in the renewed *tzumud* is to relax, to ease the restrictions that prevented the conduct of a normal, happy life. The Palestinian newspapers in East Jerusalem are filled with wedding announcements, ads for bridal clothes, and announcements of the opening of new shops. The coffee houses have reopened. None of this was seen before the Gulf War.

More and more sectors of the Palestinian population are no longer taking an active part in the intifada. Merchants, workers, women, academics and students were all the backbone of the intifada, but are no longer. The participation of these sectors made it a mass social uprising, but fewer and fewer people are prepared to violently challenge the IDF today except for youth from the refugee camps.

The intifada authorities — the United National Council (UNC) — have begun to complain that when the Israeli army comes to arrest someone, the local population runs away. In the first years of the intifada it was quite difficult to arrest someone because everyone would come to their aid.

The Changed Postwar Climate

The Gulf War pushed the Palestinian problem from the world agenda, and after the war the political process attracted all the attention. The defeat of Iraq in the war detrimentally affected morale in the territories because

the people there felt abandoned by the main countries in the Arab world that fought Saddam: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria. The curfew that Israel imposed on the Palestinians during the Gulf War also paralyzed the activities of the intifada vigilantes. Strikes and demonstrations ceased, schools were closed, and the intifada stagnated. The Hamas was to use this situation to strengthen and expand its own welfare activities, thereby augmenting its status.

The external environment continued to deteriorate for the Palestinians, with growing international support for Israel and withdrawal of support from the PLO because of its blunders. The PLO's support for Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War was only one such mistake. Another was PLO support for the conspirators against Gorbachev in Moscow, which had resulted in the freezing until recently of a European donation of about 60 million Eurodollars that was to have been given last summer to help the Palestinians. The donation had been blocked because the PLO supported "the black forces" in Russia. All of these factors brought about change in the intifada and discussions on how to reshape it.

Daily Life Became Miserable

Prior to the Gulf War there had been two or three strike days a week; today there is only one strike day a month. Merchants now see the strikes as self-inflicted punishment, not as a way to fight for the national cause. The impact of the intifada on the commercially-based middle class has been great. Before the intifada this sector was considered one that wanted to do business, wanted quiet, and would not take part in violent acts. Yet the counterreaction of the State of Israel and the Israeli army against the intifada appeared to be directed mainly against this middle class in the collection of taxes and the regulation of import and export licenses. Gradually they became active supporters of the intifada, but now they would like quiet again. When they did not pay taxes, they received no services from the civil administration, no permission to travel, no renewal of licenses, and daily life was made generally miserable. When the Israelis struck back at the social aspects of Palestinian life, this affected their readiness to continue with their national revolution and produced a waning of the political and military sides of the intifada.

Another factor contributing to the deterioration of daily life was the boycotting of Israeli goods, which caused a sharp rise in prices in the West Bank and Gaza, especially for milk products and other basic necessities.

Yet another factor, the resignation of most policemen, brought in its wake poor daily security, thefts, protection payments, and "tax collections" for dubious (private) purposes. This also enabled the huge rise in violent acts by Palestinians against Palestinians.

Growing Dissatisfaction with PLO-Tunis

Another change is reflected in the growing wish among Palestinians in the territories to make their own decisions pertaining to their lives and fate and not to be dictated to from outside. The remote control of the intifada via fax and telephone by the PLO in Tunis is ridiculed, especially in light of its blunders.

The continuation of the intifada for so long has also contributed to the rising degree of disharmony between the PLO in the territories and the PLO in Tunis. Meanwhile, the status of the local leadership has been rising; they were meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Baker. As a sign of its weakened position, PLO-Tunis was seen as able to determine the basic principles but not the specific conditions for Palestinian participation in the peace process.

A Divided Leadership

There is no longer just one intifada authority anymore. The Islamic fundamentalists in the Hamas have become much more prominent in recent years. In addition, the organizations represented in the UNC — Fatah, the Popular Front, the Democratic Front, and the Peoples Party (formerly the Palestine Communist Party) — each now publishes its own leaflets, to the growing confusion of the local population. So if at the beginning only two bodies published leaflets — the UNC and Hamas — now 4 or 5 groups simultaneously publish their own leaflets.

The link between the headquarters of the intifada (the UNC) and the rank and file of the Palestinian population is the Peoples' Committees. These were to replace the Israeli civil administration with committees for health, education, internal affairs, etc. The so-called police forces in the communities were the "shock troops" composed of youth whose role was to enforce UNC instructions. Today, however, the Peoples' Committees are fighting with the "shock troops" in the wake of their widescale murders of other Palestinians.

Before the summer of 1991 nobody dared to challenge the leadership of the PLO in the press. Nobody dared challenge the leadership of the UNC until the fourth year of the intifada. Yet today in the Palestinian press one can read criticism and contempt for the way both the PLO and the UNC are conducting the intifada.

The criticism now is that the UNC is nothing more than a symbol that appears once a month on the UNC leaflet that determines the strike days that nobody observes anymore. There is disappointment that neither a Palestinian state nor social change in the form of a more democratic society has been achieved. Yet the Palestinians have achieved something from the intifada. Now they are conducting negotiations concerning their own fate, something that never occurred before.

How Has Democracy Fared?

The Palestinian media has been discussing whether self-criticism, a facet of democracy, is the right thing to do while the intifada is still going on, or whether it plays into the hands of the Israelis.

When the intifada started, its leaders spoke of two revolutions. One was a national revolution to achieve independence. Another was to be an internal revolution within Palestinian society to enable it to become a more democratic society than it was before. The status of women would rise, people would be chosen according to merit, there would be more equality, etc. In fact, Israeli democracy was seen as something for the Palestinians to copy and to follow, as they themselves admit. Yet none of these changes have occurred.

The expectation that the intifada would produce the termination of Israeli occupation is now seen as exaggerated and blame is being assigned to poor Palestinian leadership. Many Palestinian writers attribute the poor leadership to the lack of democracy in Palestinian society. The wish to see the intifada as leverage to convert Palestinian society into a democratic society never materialized. Indeed, the sharp increase in the influence of the fundamentalists does not bode well for democracy.

Another facet of the continuing lack of democracy is the internal killings which have produced a negative image in Palestinian society. Some of those who dare to write in the newspapers against the internal killings conclude that a society containing so many collaborators who have to be executed daily perhaps does not merit an autonomous existence.

Continued Lack of Democracy Means a Decline in the Status of Women

What is the situation of Palestinian women within the intifada today? Before the intifada, Palestinian women in Gaza, for instance, had the option of wearing Western clothes. Since the intifada they have had to cover their body and sometimes even their face. The intifada no longer involves mass activities that include

women, but rather acts of smaller armed groups who hit Israeli and Palestinian targets, so Palestinian women have suffered from the change. They have been sent back home to serve as the "womb of the nation," to give birth to many more children and replenish the casualties of the intifada.

The moment Israeli forces began to detain Palestinian women for acts of violence, this was the end of their mass participation in the intifada because it meant breaking a taboo that Palestinian society was not ready to accept. To a Palestinian, a wife or daughter taken into custody by Israeli policemen acquires an immoral stain for life.

The depressed economic situation has also affected life for Palestinian women. Families are more eager to marry off their daughters because it means one less mouth to feed. This has lowered the age of marriage to the point where it is no longer rare to see girls of 12 and 13 getting married for economic reasons. In such a situation the traditional payment the bridegroom pays to the girl's father has declined. However, while this means it is cheaper for a Palestinian man to get married, this has led to a sharp rise in divorce (up to 20 percent in some places) within Palestinian society. It apparently becomes easier for a man to divorce a woman whom he did not pay so much for in the first place. It is also easier for him to acquire a second or third wife.

Though it is extremely difficult to verify, it appears that acute economic pressures have had even more tragic consequences for a number of women who turned to prostitution for economic reasons and were then murdered by the intifada activists for "immorality."

With the rise of Muslim influence, there is constant pressure on Palestinian women to behave in an austere and modest manner, or as if they are in mourning. This atmosphere has now been lifted for Palestinian men, but not for women. Another sign of growing fundamentalist influence is the much more common sight of veiled women and bearded men.

As we see, there has been no social liberation for Palestinian women, as a few had declared at the beginning of the intifada, but rather a general deterioration in their status with increasing subjugation to the moral dictates of religious fundamentalism, severe economic poverty, and even the threat of murder. Sacrificing everything to the national cause meant that the deprived sectors in Palestinian society were pushed back socially even farther than where they had been in December 1987 when the intifada started. In this sense, women were no exception.

Impact on Education

What happened to Palestinian education? Instead of studying, children threw stones. The IDF reacted by closing the schools and universities. This meant that lots of young Palestinians remained in the villages doing nothing because the schools were closed. Students from the villages who had gone to the universities came home when the universities were closed, and became the main nucleus of the intifada in the villages — the vigilantes. A student is considered a learned, knowledgeable person, so he now became the new leadership of the village. However, while they struggled for their cause, a generation of Palestinians was growing up ignorant, something their society could not afford. Again, one cannot expect the public to read the wall graffiti if they do not know how to read and write.

The intifada had brought the youth to the forefront in Palestinian society. Lately, however, the adults appear to be fed up with the function and role of these youth. The youth are seen more often now as immature, lacking the experience of the adults, and bringing about the destruction of Palestinian society. "The aggressive children of the present will be the fascists of the future and this is not democracy," notes a recent leaflet, saying that leadership should be returned to the adults, the educated ones, and calling for Palestinian children to go back to school.

A Return to Traditional Authority

The younger generation challenged the authority of the adults in many rural areas, leaving the status of the father, the notables, and the village *muhtar* badly shaken. The adults were left only to finance the intifada. Yet today we see a return to the traditional leadership. While the intifada meant to replace parochial clan and family loyalties with national loyalties, more and more issues are being settled by members of the traditional notable families. When basic security against civil and criminal offenses does not exist, people must look again to their family ties for protection. If someone is demanding protection payments, the threatened individual returns to his family, to his enlarged clan, to find security. We are seeing signs of a return to previous loyalties, to the old nucleus, after attempts to produce a national loyalty were unsuccessful.

Trends in the Media

Generally speaking, Palestinian society is no different from other Arab societies or from societies in developing countries. Only a small proportion of the population receives its news from newspapers. Many more

listen to radio and watch television and in every house in the West Bank and Gaza there is now a television set. Especially in the rural sector, television is the major communications media.

However, prior to December 1987, debates and discussions within Palestinian society were most evident in their newspapers. This stopped when the leaflets began to appear in place of the newspapers. Since the summer of 1991, the newspapers are again the arena where political and social debates are conducted in Palestinian society, not in the wall graffiti or the leaflets. The leaflets proved to be a disappointment. They were published sporadically by various organizations and contradicted each other. They still called for sacrifices and for austerity while the population wanted to live a normal life.

Differences Between the West Bank and Gaza

There are certain clear differences between the situation in the West Bank and that in Gaza. For example, these days, when somebody is killed in Nablus, the reaction of the population is generally confined to Nablus. Similarly, when somebody is killed in Hebron, the reaction is confined to Hebron. There is hardly any radiation from one place to another in the West Bank. This is not true of the Gaza Strip, however. Since it is one huge human concentration, if something happens in Rafah, the disturbances spread like wildfire throughout the Strip.

The influence of the fundamentalists is much more discernable in Gaza than in the West Bank as well. Unlike in the West Bank, the fundamentalists in Gaza hold veto power over various processes in the society there. As opposed to those living in the West Bank, most of the population in the Gaza Strip are refugees living in extreme poverty, a fact which totally changes their outlook vis-a-vis a possible compromise. While more on the West Bank may support a compromise settlement, the main bulk of the population in the Gaza Strip see themselves as refugees and want to return to their families' places of origin inside Israel. They therefore largely oppose any political compromise which does not guarantee their return. For example, a settlement that linked together the West Bank and Jordan is, at least in theory, one possible solution that

would be accepted more easily in the West Bank where the middle class is much more influential and there is a stronger urban sector.

The Rise of Fundamentalism

One of the major dangers to Palestinian society and to hopes for a peaceful solution is the rise of fundamentalism in Islamic society. The fundamentalists are against any compromise. There is no room for negotiations with the Israelis because Palestine is a *waqf*, a holy trust, and no one has the right to make any concessions over it.

The fundamentalists also depict the struggle as one between religions and civilizations and not as a political struggle at all. They depicted the Gulf War not as states fighting Iraq but as a fight between the Crusaders and the Arabs, between Christianity and Islam, and between the imperialist West and Arab nationalism. On the other hand, the fundamentalists are very pragmatic when it comes to moves which might improve their status within Palestinian society. It was they who initiated the relaxation of restrictions on the population, thereby winning greater support. They objected from the beginning to the involvement of schools and universities in the intifada. "We need a generation of learned people, not of idiots," they declared. The fundamentalists have the "bamboo theory" of behavior. When the storm is very heavy they will bend, but in the end they are convinced that Islam will prevail.

As we have seen, the intifada today not only symbolizes the political Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but also the continued internal Palestinian struggle between fundamentalist religious and more secular nationalist forces. These two struggles are dependent on each other and their outcome is far from clear.

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