



## ROCKS AND ROCKETS: OSLO'S INEVITABLE CONCLUSION

MOUIN RABBANI

*Though the al-Aqsa intifada took the world by surprise, Palestinians are now almost unanimous in attributing its scope to the failures of Oslo. The author analyzes these failures from two perspectives: those concerning implementation and structural flaws. In describing the unfolding of the intifada and particularly its militarization, the author analyzes the primordial role of Fatah, the single most important factor in transforming the early clashes into a sustained rebellion.*

IN LATE SEPTEMBER 2000, a general consensus existed that Israel and the Palestinians were on the verge of an agreement—if not before the 6 November U.S. presidential elections, then certainly by Bill Clinton's final 20 January exit from the White House. Israel and the Palestinians had quickly resumed negotiations following the collapse of the hastily convened Camp David summit in July, and by September they were meeting in both the United States and the Middle East. Reports suggesting that the remaining gaps were being narrowed were reflected by a 25 September dinner hosted by Prime Minister Ehud Barak at his private Kochav Ya'ir residence in honor of Palestinian Authority (PA) President Yasir Arafat. Four days later, the world was stunned when Ariel Sharon's provocative intrusion into the Haram al-Sharif triggered a Palestinian rebellion that in its first five months would cost as many lives as did the first intifada in its first year.

### WHY AL-AQSA WAS UNEXPECTED

In retrospect, it is the astonishment that greeted the explosion that is the real cause for surprise. At the time, however, and despite increasing signs of popular unrest in the year preceding the al-Aqsa intifada, there seemed good reason to dismiss the possibility of a sustained rebellion with marked similarities to the uprising of 1987–93. Most important, neither leadership wanted a protracted conflict, which would challenge and potentially destroy the foundations of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation established at Oslo, and in so doing threaten both the PA's political hegemony and the Barak government's stability. Additionally, the political forces considered to have the greatest interest in fomenting an uprising, the Palestinian leftist and Islamist oppositions, had since Oslo been effectively neutralized by the PA, in the first case

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MOUIN RABBANI is director of the Palestinian American Research Center in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

through a process of political marginalization and fragmentation resulting in its virtual irrelevance, and in the second through a campaign of repression coordinated with Israel and the CIA reducing them to organizational and military paralysis. The mainstream Fatah movement headed by Arafat, which had played a central role in the previous intifada, was during this period typically written off as little more than an appendage to the PA.

At the same time, the Palestinian economy, whose development was considered critical to the success and legitimation of Oslo, was finally beginning to show signs of life after shrinking by more than a third relative to its already battered state at the end of the first uprising. While it had by no means recovered to pre-Oslo levels, it had at least ceased to deteriorate further and, according to the World Bank and others, was exhibiting encouraging signs of growth. The general population, after seven years of PA rule governed by the strictures of Oslo and generally increasing hardship, seemed preoccupied with the struggle for survival, and the generation that came of age after 1993 seemed, to the chagrin of older activists, little different in its priorities, concerns, activities, and ambitions than youth elsewhere.

More broadly, opinion polls continued to reveal strong, if declining, levels of support for the continuation of the peace process.<sup>1</sup> If the population's growing disillusionment reflected genuine anger at Israel's systematic prevarication with respect to signed agreements and the institutionalization of its blockade of the occupied territories, the continued support for the peace process suggested both a determination to maintain the degree of normalcy PA rule had restored to daily life after the violent mayhem of the intifada's final years, and the hope that the remaining impediments and larger political issues perpetuating them could eventually be resolved. Overall, then, the prospects for mass mobilization seemed remote.

This is not to say that a further round of violence was unanticipated. Indeed, another confrontation was widely predicted in the wake of the collapse of the July 2000 Camp David summit, but it was expected to serve the interests of both the PA and Israel—improving a bargaining position here, establishing the outer limits of flexibility there, and reminding skeptical constituents everywhere of the terrible alternative to an imperfect peace. Israeli military planning took into account the possibility of a general Palestinian uprising involving the extensive use of firearms against Israeli soldiers and settlers. Such scenarios—detailed in the Field of Thorns operational plan completed in September 1996—were premised upon a short conflict lasting a few weeks at most, and which, however sharp, would from beginning to end be closely orchestrated by the PA.<sup>2</sup> In other words, a controlled confrontation that would not go beyond an extended replay of the Israeli-Palestinian clashes that engulfed the West Bank and Gaza Strip the same month Field of Thorns was completed—the so-called tunnel intifada.

The September 1996 clashes, which left approximately eighty Palestinians and fifteen Israelis dead in the space of one week, had been the most violent the occupied territories had experienced since 1967. They demonstrated the

ability of the lightly armed PA security forces to give their Israeli counterparts a bloody nose even as the latter resorted to combat helicopters and tanks and exacted a much higher price from the Palestinians. More important as far as Israel, the international community, and the PA itself were concerned, the tunnel intifada established the capacity of the Palestinian leadership, when left with no diplomatic alternatives, to marshal the Palestinian street and, through its security forces, to rapidly take control of popular unrest, contain it, and ultimately channel it back into the peace process.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, the May 2000 Nakba clashes, which featured widespread demonstrations in support of the Palestinian right of return, were similarly interpreted as a PA production staged for domestic and international political considerations.<sup>4</sup> Reports that Palestinian gunmen fired at Israeli positions despite strict instructions to the contrary and of an increasingly critical tone emanating from the Fatah movement failed to impress those Israelis, Palestinians, and others who continued to reduce the sum total of Palestinian politics to the calculating mind of Yasir Arafat.

Against this background, the development of the September 2000 confrontations into a full-fledged Palestinian rebellion against Israeli occupation took participants and observers alike by surprise. In this respect, 29 September 2000 closely mirrors the beginning of the first intifada on 9 December 1987, when those who had been predicting that Israeli policy was bound to set off a Palestinian explosion had already been proven correct but did not yet know it. And with the new intifada, as with the old, there was no shortage of individuals in positions of power and influence whose refusal to confront the facts they helped create and rationalize led them to respond to the ultimately predictable results with disbelief and condemnation, thereby essentially reducing the origins of the al-Aqsa intifada to an inadmissible response to an unacceptable provocation. According to them, neither the provocation nor the response would have transpired if the letter of Oslo or, failing this, its "spirit," had been properly respected. Yet the record of Oslo's seven lean years more than suggests that the "spirit of Oslo" would inevitably be revealed in the form of the Grim Reaper.

## THE RENEGOTIATIONS OF OSLO

The affront to national and religious sensibilities represented by Ariel Sharon's 28 September 2000 entry into Jerusalem's Haram al-Sharif was certainly sufficient cause for mass protest, but even in combination with the shooting death of seven Palestinians the following day does not account for the intensity and duration of the al-Aqsa intifada. In similar precedents, neither the 1990 al-Aqsa massacre in which fourteen people were killed, nor the 1994 massacre of twenty-nine Muslim worshippers at Hebron's Ibrahimi mosque by Baruch Goldstein during the holy month of Ramadan, nor the September 1996 opening of a tunnel alongside the Haram al-Sharif and onto

the Via Dolorosa by the Netanyahu government produced a comparable reaction.

Nor does the fact that Sharon was perceived (correctly) by the Palestinian leadership as acting in collusion with the Barak government, belligerently flaunting Israeli control over East Jerusalem at the height of permanent status negotiations on Jerusalem, add enough fuel to the fire to account for the ensuing explosion. While Israel has repeatedly accused the PA of fomenting the intifada to bolster its diplomatic position, the unprecedented human, material, and economic costs borne by the Palestinian population during the first five months of the uprising—under circumstances in which Palestinian security agencies, in contrast to the 1996 tunnel intifada, as a rule did not intervene as an organized force—further suggests that however important the role of the PA, other factors were also at work.

While the uprising's immediate context does much to explain its origins, an appreciation of its scope and objectives must take into account the framework for Israeli-Palestinian relations negotiated at Oslo in 1993. Equally important is the impact of its subsequent implementation on the lives and aspirations of West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinians, who in their majority initially supported the agreement. In this context, the fact that military occupation, settler colonization, and economic underdevelopment preceded Oslo is less significant than the reality that, since Oslo, they have been consolidated where most expected their removal. Indeed, it was the prospect of peace, security, freedom, and prosperity, rather than Israeli suppression, that dealt the final blow to the 1987–93 intifada. And just as the population's hopes help explain the end of the previous uprising, so the frustration of these hopes is central to understanding the current one. In this regard, the debate between critics who, like Edward Said, have consistently argued that Oslo was structurally doomed,<sup>5</sup> and those who share the Palestinian leadership's view that the process ran aground because Israel refused to abide by its commitments, merits closer examination.

The Palestinian claim that Israel refuses to implement signed agreements and violates its commitments is beyond dispute.<sup>6</sup> A simple comparison of the September 1993 Declaration of Principles ("Oslo"), the September 1995 interim agreement ("Oslo II"), the January 1997 Hebron protocol, the October 1998 Wye memorandum, and the September 1999 Sharm al-Shaykh agreement<sup>7</sup> reveals a clear pattern in which Israel first refuses to implement its own commitments, then seeks and obtains their dilution in a new agreement, subsequently engages in systematic prevarication, and finally demands additional negotiations, leading to a yet further diluted agreement.

This pattern is most evident with respect to the removal of Israeli military forces from West Bank and Gaza Strip territory. Whereas Oslo already distinguishes between an "Israeli withdrawal *from* the Gaza Strip and Jericho area"<sup>8</sup> and the further "redeployment of Israeli military forces *in* the West Bank and Gaza Strip,"<sup>9</sup> it nevertheless specifies that "Israel will be guided by the principle that its military forces should be redeployed outside populated

areas” and “to specified locations.”<sup>10</sup> Nowhere does it suggest a distinction between the character of withdrawal and that of a redeployment. Indeed, whereas Oslo does permit “[f]urther redeployments to specified locations” to be “gradually implemented commensurate with the assumption of responsibility for public order and internal security by the Palestinian police force,”<sup>11</sup> it states nothing about the fragmentation of the West Bank into areas designated as “A” (Palestinian security control), “B” (Palestinian civil and Israeli security control), and “C” (continued Israeli occupation) introduced in Oslo II. Nor does Oslo stipulate the phasing of the redeployment into three installments over eighteen months for reasons not specifically related to the preparedness of the Palestinian police.

Similarly, whereas Oslo II’s redeployment applied to all the occupied territories save those areas specifically excluded (“specified military locations,” East Jerusalem and other West Bank territory annexed by Israel since 1967, Jewish settlements, and parts of Hebron), the Hebron agreement, which *inter alia* renegotiated Article VII (“Guidelines for Hebron”) of Oslo II’s Annex I (“Protocol Concerning Redeployment and Security Arrangements”), reversed this principle. Henceforth, even territory not subject to the above mentioned exemptions from Israeli redeployment would, unless specified otherwise in additional agreements, remain under full Israeli control. Thus Israel would redeploy *from*, rather than *to*, specific locations.

Wye reinforced this principle and added several innovations of its own. Pursuant to its terms, an area’s change of status from C to B or B to A (and thus either *from* full Israeli or *to* full Palestinian control rather than from full Israeli to full Palestinian control) was sufficient to meet the criteria for redeployment. On this basis, the agreement required Israel to transfer only 1 percent of West Bank territory from C to A (an additional 12 percent would change from C to B, and 14.2 percent from B to A).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the PA was required to designate fully a quarter (3 percent) of the new B areas as “Green Areas and/or Nature Reserves,” an entirely new category in which no construction was permitted.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Wye stretched the implementation of a single Oslo II redeployment into three stages spread over ten weeks.<sup>14</sup> And the scope and implementation of the final, third redeployment specified by Oslo II was in Wye made subject to agreement by a joint Israeli-Palestinian committee,<sup>15</sup> a development that gave Israel the formal right to revise commitments it had already made.

At the Sharm al-Shaykh negotiations, which dealt with Wye’s unfulfilled second and third stages of Oslo II’s outstanding second redeployment, Israel sought to terminate the interim transfer of territory altogether. Instead, Barak—who as chief of staff had been openly skeptical of Oslo and as a cabinet member abstained when Oslo II was brought to a vote—hoped to integrate further redeployments, particularly Oslo II’s third and final one, into the final status negotiations, thus substantially weakening the PA’s bargaining position. Only partially successful in this attempt, Israel (not for the first time) resorted to calculating the redeployment percentages on the basis

of a West Bank from which annexed East Jerusalem, no-man's-land including the Latrun salient, and the portion of the Dead Sea located in the West Bank had already been subtracted. By not including these areas, which together total 315 square kilometers,<sup>16</sup> Israel reduced the area of the West Bank by some 5.4 percent, thereby reducing the actual size of the areas from which redeployment would take place. After one such exercise in late 1999, Israel unilaterally brought the redeployment process to a halt.

Thus, seven years after Oslo was sealed with a handshake on the White House lawn, three and a half years after Oslo II's final deadline for the final redeployment had passed, and more than a year after the entire process was to have concluded with "a permanent settlement based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 . . . [which] will lead to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338,"<sup>17</sup> the PA was in full control of less than a fifth of the West Bank and scarcely two-thirds of the Gaza Strip.

If its experience of the interim agreements failed to do so, the permanent status negotiations—begun in earnest only in summer 2000—provided the Palestinians with unmistakable evidence that, for Israel, Oslo's recognition of the legitimacy of Israeli sovereignty over 78 percent of historical Palestine was but one component of the compromise, and that the remaining 22 percent occupied in 1967 was also on the table. Israel's determination, with full U.S. support, to negotiate rather than implement the terms of UNSCR 242—to "compromise the compromise"—was strenuously denounced by the Palestinians, who considered full recovery of the 1967 territories the irreducible minimum of their national claims. From the leadership's perspective, tactical concessions to keep the interim phase (and thus the prospect of a permanent settlement) alive are one thing, strategic capitulation on final status issues quite another.

### **THE HARVEST OF OSLO'S "CONSTRUCTIVE AMBIGUITY"**

In sharp contrast to Oslo's faithful, its opponents consider that it is the agreement's structure that has determined the manner of its implementation. In other words, an agreement repeatedly violated with impunity is first and foremost a bad one.

Thus, as Said has consistently argued, Oslo's fatal flaw is that it is neither an instrument of decolonization nor a mechanism to implement UN resolutions relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather, it is a framework aimed at changing the basis of Israeli control over the occupied territories in order to perpetuate it. As such, the process is structurally incapable of producing a viable settlement and will ultimately result in further conflict.<sup>18</sup>

In support of their position, Said and other critics argue that the relationship between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) forged in Oslo is demonstratively not based upon a reciprocal recognition of equal (or even comparable) rights. Whereas the lion's share of Palestinian concessions historically demanded by Israel was made in the letters of recognition

immediately preceding Oslo, the relevant agreements never refer to the West Bank and Gaza Strip as “occupied”; do not explicitly commit Israel to desist from illegal activities such as settlement building designed to further consolidate Israeli rule; and make no attempt either to resolve the core issues that collectively define the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (e.g., borders, refugees, Jerusalem) or establish unambiguous guidelines for their resolution. Instead, the latter are shunted aside under the heading “final status issues” and postponed for negotiation at the end of the process.

To quote from the record, PLO Chairman Arafat’s August 1993 letter to Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin explicitly “recognizes the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security” (without specifying borders); “accepts” UNSCR 242 and 338 (without defining them); “commits” the PLO to the “peaceful resolution” of the conflict and resolution of “outstanding issues through negotiations” (without conditions); “renounces the use of terrorism and other acts of violence and will assume responsibility over all PLO elements and personnel in order to assure their compliance, prevent violations and discipline violators” (again without conditions); “affirms that those articles of the Palestinian Covenant . . . inconsistent with the commitments of this letter are now inoperative and no longer valid” and promises to “submit to the Palestinian National Council for formal approval the necessary changes” to the Covenant; and, in both this and a separate letter to Norwegian foreign minister Johan Jorgen Holst, all but explicitly commits the PLO to terminating the intifada. Rabin’s response, comprising all of one sentence, commits Israel “in light of the PLO commitments included in your letter . . . to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East process.”<sup>19</sup> Full stop. The contrast between the specificity of the Palestinian letters and Oslo’s calculated silence on core Palestinian concerns (repackaged by Israeli, Palestinian, and American diplomats as “constructive ambiguity”) could hardly be greater.

Thus the imbalance of power inherent in Oslo determined its distorted outcome. Through it, an ascendant Israel seeking to end the tactical burden of direct military occupation forged a functional partnership with a weakened and exhausted PLO, in which the former would retain possession of strategic assets in the West Bank and Gaza (land, water, borders, Jerusalem) and the latter would assume formal responsibility for the indigenous population in the framework of a recognized Palestinian entity. It is a process whose foundation stone is Israel’s own interpretation of its security interests to which all else, including individual and collective Palestinian rights, is subordinated.<sup>20</sup> It is a process that necessarily leads to separation within the occupied territories under continued Israeli hegemony, as opposed to the partition of Palestine through a comprehensive Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In doing so, it formalizes arrangements tantamount to apartheid. (The Dutch/Afrikaans word literally means “separateness.”)

Seen from this perspective, the massive acceleration of Israeli settler colonization since 1993, the parallel construction of a road network to connect the settlements to Israel and each other in a manner that bypasses and encircles Palestinian population centers, the deliberate fragmentation of PA areas into noncontiguous ethnic enclaves, the strict Israeli control of Palestinian movement into, out of, and between these enclaves, and the sustained effort to prevent the emergence of an independent Palestinian economy together reflect the true “spirit of Oslo.” Moreover, in view of the bilateral character of the agreements (whose implementation was never guaranteed by the international community but rather sponsored by Israel’s strategic ally, the United States), it becomes inevitable that the dynamic of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship would be primarily governed by the huge imbalance of power between them. Because this dynamic makes it virtually impossible to correct either Oslo’s studied neglect of the requirements for peace or Israel’s additional distortions of Oslo, it effectively paves the way to further conflict.

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#### **SOWETO ON THE MEDITERRANEAN**

The facts on the ground certainly bear the burden of such an interpretation. Between September 1993 and 2000, the total settler population (excluding Jerusalem and its environs) increased from 110,000 to 195,000, a staggering 77 percent. In absolute terms, the annual rate of implantation of Jewish settlers in illegal West Bank and Gaza Strip colonies averaged 4,200 between 1967 and 1993, 9,600 between 1986 and 1996, and more than 12,000 between 1994 and 2000.<sup>21</sup> Land expropriations have also continued apace, amounting to 40,178 dunams (1 dunam = .25 acre) in 1999 alone.<sup>22</sup> So insatiable has been Israel’s appetite for Palestinian land since 1993 that few could fault the observer who concludes that Oslo’s actual achievement was to broker the end of the Arab occupation of Judea and Samaria.

The relevant statistics also show Barak to have been a considerably more avid settler than Netanyahu. During Barak’s first year in office, his “peace cabinet” authorized 1,924 housing starts across the Green Line, as opposed to 1,160 by Netanyahu’s rejectionist cabinet in 1997. Similarly, Barak permitted construction to resume in eleven of the seventeen unauthorized settlement outposts established immediately after the Wye agreement in response to Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon’s appeal to “grab every hilltop” but frozen by the Netanyahu government in 1999.

And in order to integrate these new homes and outposts within Israel, \$198 million in road projects were under construction across the Green Line in 2000. Because every 100 kilometers of colonial road require 10,000 dunams of land, more than 40 percent of the lands expropriated in 1999



(16,657 dunams) were dedicated to this purpose, causing the uprooting of some 15,000 trees.<sup>23</sup> These roads serve the additional purpose of bolstering and perpetuating the encirclement of the several dozen isolated Palestinian enclaves, a reality that has to be seen on a map in order to be properly appreciated.<sup>24</sup> And with the segmentation of the land, it has become impossible to drive more than a few kilometers without entering Israeli-controlled territory and that unique world of military checkpoints manned by soldiers dedicated to the systematic brutalization and humiliation of anything Arab.

Meanwhile, in the economic sphere, Israel's continued control of the occupied territories' external borders and internal boundaries and its institutionalized, permanent blockade of the West Bank and Gaza Strip had taken a harsh toll on the population. The marketing of Oslo to the Palestinian public in 1993 and 1994, instead of denying its political imperfections, had emphasized the economic prosperity it would bring. Yet more than seven years later, more Palestinians were more impoverished than on the eve of the process, and the tens of thousands of public sector jobs created by the PA as its main response to this crisis did little more than prevent a worsening situation from deteriorating even further. According to the World Bank, Yemen is now "the only country in the MENA [Middle East/North Africa] region that has a lower average income than the WBG [West Bank and Gaza Strip]."<sup>25</sup> Israel's systematic restrictions on labor flows, trade, and movement—well in excess of anything experienced prior to 1993—ensured that the pipe dream of a Palestinian "Singapore of the Middle East," trumpeted so often following the White House handshake, inexorably gave way to the reality of "Soweto on the Mediterranean." Viewed from the ground, the problem of Oslo was not so much that it failed to match initial expectations, but that, apart from some meager improvements here and there, things kept getting worse. Only the PA and the prospect of an acceptable permanent settlement stood between the growing popular anger and an explosion.

It was against this background that Barak made his Camp David proposals, which seemed to offer conclusive proof of the apartheid-cum-bantustan scenario that Oslo's critics had been condemning for the better part of a decade. Although full details have yet to emerge, it is not disputed that Israel in these negotiations sought, among other objectives, permanently to annex strategically located Jewish settlement clusters and roads (fragmenting the proposed Palestinian state into a series of enclaves); maintain ultimate authority over the Gaza-Egyptian and West Bank-Jordanian borders; retain overall control of a substantially expanded Jerusalem; and achieve formal and disproportionate water rights.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the Palestinian entity—in arrangements akin to the interwar mandate system established by the League of Nations—would be reduced to an Arab protectorate under Israeli domination and supervision. Within these strictures, as Israeli leaders never tired of pointing out, the Palestinians were free to define their entity as a state, empire, or any other term to their liking.

“Has the world been deluded,” asked Said, “or has the rhetoric of ‘peace’ been in essence a gigantic fraud?”<sup>27</sup> Both, if Palestinians are to be believed. While Barak repeatedly claimed to have “left no stone unturned” at Camp David in his search for peace, the Palestinians came to the conclusion that, on account of his “five no’s,”<sup>28</sup> he had disregarded rather too many stones unturned and began literally throwing them at Israel’s soldiers and settlers to drive home their rejection of continued occupation.

### THE MILITARIZATION OF THE UPRISING

Although the al-Aqsa intifada did not begin as a revolt against Oslo, a refusal to return to the status quo ante is its driving force and the main factor uniting all levels of Palestinian society and politics. Propelled by the bitter harvest of the 1987–93 uprising, and deeply impressed by the stark contrast between Israel’s systematic disdain for its Palestinian “peace partner” and its comparatively scrupulous respect of unwritten understandings with its bitter enemy Hizballah, those leading the current rebellion insist that, this time around, the struggle will continue until Israel both agrees to a genuine peace and actually implements it. For leaders such as Fatah West Bank secretary general Marwan Barghouthi, the days are history when Israel exploited the illusion of a peace process to camouflage its expansionist policies, simultaneously tying Palestinian hands with interminable negotiations over increasingly insignificant redeployments while Dennis Ross jettied around the issues proposing ever-more convoluted confidence-building measures.

In its opening phases, the current uprising seemed much like the last one: mass demonstrations resulting in clashes between armed Israeli soldiers and stone-throwing Palestinian youths; general strikes; the formation of a broad coalition of Palestinian factions (the National and Islamic Forces, or NIF) to give direction to the revolt;<sup>29</sup> and rapid expansion from one region to the next. Within days, there were also echoes of the 1996 tunnel intifada: exchanges of gunfire between Israeli and Palestinian gunmen; armed offensives against Israeli outposts in Palestinian towns, including the tomb in Nablus declared by settlers in the early 1970s to be Joseph’s; huge numbers of casualties resulting from the massive deployment of Israeli force; and frenzied American and Arab efforts to get the peace process back on track.

Very quickly, however, things began to deviate from these patterns. Instead of the armed intifada containing the popular one, they reinforced each other, repeatedly being driven to new heights by each new Israeli outrage. Instead of the leadership intervening to put an end to the unrest, it withdrew the security forces from the battlefield and sent mixed messages to the street. Instead of the clashes being limited to the boundaries between area A and territory under Israeli control, they briefly spread across the Green Line as Palestinian citizens of Israel took to the streets in demonstrations of national solidarity. Perhaps most important, instead of the PA performing the functions of the South Lebanese Army, Fatah began acting like Hizballah.

Without a doubt, the active participation of Fatah as an organized force acting with relative autonomy was the single most important factor in trans-

forming the early clashes into a sustained rebellion.

The militarization of the uprising, tantamount to the Lebanonization of the occupied territories, is another primary characteristic of the al-Aqsa intifada that has emerged in the context of Fatah's undisputed leadership of the struggle. At the same time, the uprising's failure to transcend the level of a prolonged outburst

of resistance to the occupation and develop into a sophisticated campaign to end it—and, as an integral part of such a strategy, to nurture a civil rebellion by a mobilized population—must also be ascribed primarily to Fatah.

The explanation for these factors is in significant part to be found in Fatah's complex relationship with the PA. Although Fatah members form the backbone of the PA, the movement as such is not the party of government. Rather, it has suffered an identity crisis since Oslo. One trend, generally identified with the senior echelons of the formerly exiled PLO bureaucracy, considers Fatah's mission all but accomplished and would like to see it gradually transformed into a bureaucratized ruling party (like the Ba'ath party in Syria or Iraq) whose main functions would be to legitimize the state, co-opt elites, dispense patronage, and check the opposition.

The other trend, primarily associated with Fatah's pre-Oslo organizational infrastructure within the West Bank and Gaza Strip, was generally more skeptical with regard to the peace process and had a more developed vision of the future Palestinian society. For both these reasons, and also because it is less influential within the PA than its rival wing, this trend has sought to maintain Fatah as an autonomous political movement that is neither subordinate nor in opposition to the PA. Instead, its aim is to remain connected enough with the popular base to be able to mobilize it behind national objectives and lead Palestinian society into a new era and sufficiently involved with the PA to be able to obtain the resources to fulfil this ambition.<sup>30</sup>

The problem for this more activist wing within Fatah was that the movement's close association with the PA in the popular mind caused it continually to lose ground (with polls showing ever increasing numbers checking "none of the above" for party affiliation). Through the uprising, it has been able to demonstrate its distinct identity vis-à-vis the PA and recoup its losses in spectacular fashion. Only Fatah, which has tentacles throughout the security services and which the PA leadership will confront only under the most extreme circumstances, was in a position to resume the armed struggle; had Hamas or the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) initiated the uprising in a direct challenge to the PA, they would immediately have been crushed by the security services. Similarly, only Fatah has the clout to conduct operations such as the 17 January 2000 assassination of Hisham Makki, the notoriously corrupt and universally reviled Arafat confidante and

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head of the Palestinian Broadcasting Company.<sup>31</sup> Had it been Islamic Jihad, the shots that killed Makki could well have unleashed a bloodbath. At the same time, it is Fatah that ensures the formal loyalty of the NIF (which includes Hamas, the PFLP–General Command, and other opposition groups) to the PA. It is also thanks to Fatah, primarily through the militarization of the uprising, that (apart from itself) a genuine popular movement whose fury might be directed inward has not emerged.

Just as it is absurdly simplistic to assert that Fatah—as the movement led by Arafat and which supplies the security services with most of its cadres—essentially provides the PA with plausible deniability to continue the uprising, it is equally erroneous to view their relationship as heading for an inevitable confrontation. While there is a basic contradiction between the PA's approach to the al-Aqsa intifada as a tactic to bring Oslo to a successful conclusion and Fatah's as a strategy to transcend it, these can coexist so long as the uprising does not develop in ways that threaten the very existence of the PA, and as long as the latter does not commit itself to terminating the uprising prior to the end of the occupation.

On the ground, Fatah's strategy has primarily been to turn the tables on Israel's infrastructure of control. Where Israel has established isolated settlements within or on the outskirts of Palestinian towns in order to strangulate them, these and the bypass roads that service them have been subject to almost daily attack, underscoring both their vulnerability and the more general point that the settlements and associated roads, far from contributing to Israeli security, are in fact its Achilles' heel. As a result, for the first time since 1967, more settlers are leaving than moving into the territories. If Israel responds with massive reinforcements, it only increases the number of potential targets. If it tightens the closure, it increases support for and participation in acts of armed resistance. If it resorts to the aerial and naval bombardment of Palestinian cities and the assassination of Palestinian militants by airborne death squads, it exposes itself to heightened international censure and regional isolation. And should it decide to eliminate the PA or substantially weaken its security services, it need only remind itself what replaced the PLO in Lebanon after Israel expelled it in 1982.

The problem for Israel is that its Field of Thorns strategy—an escalating combination of overwhelming firepower, wholesale punitive and collective sanctions, and special operations culminating in the outright military invasion of PA territories—is specifically designed to secure the status quo.<sup>32</sup> Yet for both the PA and Fatah (to say nothing of the opposition forces) the status quo is precisely the problem, and opposition to it is what unites them.

Indeed, the al-Aqsa intifada's main political demands clearly reflect the accumulated anger and frustration of the past seven years: Oslo's terms of reference must be replaced with the relevant UN resolutions; these must be implemented, not negotiated; and the process must be guaranteed and where necessary enforced by the international community. Specifically, Israel must withdraw to the 1967 borders and dismantle its illegal Jewish

settlements. It must choose between land and peace. To help Israel decide, the uprising provides a daily reminder that it cannot have both.

It is clear that Israel is not going to concede these demands anytime soon. In order to make the point, it has unleashed a level of violence unprecedented in the history of the occupation and imposed a siege that has paralyzed Palestinian life and stopped the economy dead in its tracks. It is the test of wills all over again, but with a much higher price. This makes it all the more difficult to predict where it will end.

## NOTES

1. The most comprehensive and regular polling of West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinian public opinion since 1993 has been conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center (JMCC), based in East Jerusalem, and the Center for Palestine Research and Studies (CPRS), based in Nablus.

2. Shraga Elam, "‘Peace’ with Violence or Transfer," *Between the Lines* 2 (December 2000), pp. 11–14, and references cited therein, particularly Anthony Cordesman, *Peace and War: Israel versus the Palestinians. A Second Intifada?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2000).

3. For more on the September 1996 uprising, see Mouin Rabbani, "Palestinian Authority, Israeli Rule: From Transitional to Permanent Arrangement," *Middle East Report* 26, no. 4 (October–December 1996), pp. 2–6; Graham Usher, *Dispatches From Palestine: The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process* (London: Pluto, 1999), pp. 117–21.

4. For more on the May 2000 clashes, see Graham Usher, "The Territories Erupt," *Middle East International* 625 (19 May 2000), pp. 4–5.

5. Edward W. Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (New York: Pantheon, 1998); *Peace and Its Discontents* (New York: Vintage, 1996); *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969–1994* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994). For more recent analysis, see Said, "Palestinians under Siege," *London Review of Books* 22, no. 24 (14 December 2000), pp. 9–14.

6. Israel does not deny that it has refused to implement key provisions of its various agreements with the Palestinians,

but it claims this has been on account of Palestinian violations of the same agreements. The available record supports the conclusion that although there have been clear Palestinian violations of various provisions of the agreements, Israel's territorial ambitions and/or internal political constraints typically provide a more accurate explanation of its conduct. The bi-monthly *Middle East International* (particularly the contributions of Graham Usher) provides an excellent record of the Oslo era in this (and other) respects, as does the "Peace Monitor" regularly published since 1995 in this journal.

7. Each of the above agreements has been published in the documents section of *JPS*, and they are also available on official Israeli and Palestinian Web sites.

8. Declaration of Principles, Article XIV.

9. *Ibid.*, Article XIII:1 (emphasis added).

10. *Ibid.*, Article XIII:3.

11. *Ibid.*, Article XIII.

12. The Wye River Memorandum, Articles I:A:1 and I:A:2. Whether these percentages apply to the West Bank surface area or total lands within a particular designated category is left unspecified.

13. *Ibid.*, Article I:A:1. Despite the recognized illegality of Jewish settlement in the occupied territories and consistent Palestinian demands that Israel immediately cease such activity, the passage cited, prohibiting *Palestinian* building activity within the West Bank, is the only explicit reference to a construction freeze in the entire corpus of Israeli-Palestinian agreements. In practice, moreover, additional PA areas, such as those within 1 kilometer of the Gaza-Israel boundary, are also off-limits to construction.

14. *Ibid.*, Articles 2–4 of the appended Time Line defined in its preamble as an “integral attachment.”

15. *Ibid.*, Article I.B.

16. See “Monitoring Israeli Colonizing Activities in the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza,” a joint project of the Applied Research Institute in Jerusalem and the Land Research Center in Jerusalem, available at [www.poica.org](http://www.poica.org).

17. Declaration of Principles, Article I.

18. In addition to the works of Said cited in note 6 above, see Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel and The Palestinians*, updated edition (Boston: South End Press, 1999), pp. 533–65; Norman G. Finkelstein, “Securing Occupation: The Real Meaning of the Wye River Memorandum,” *New Left Review* 232 (November–December 1998), pp. 128–39; Finkelstein, “Whither the ‘Peace Process,’” *New Left Review* 218 (July–August 1996), pp. 138–50; Graham Usher, *Palestine in Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 1995).

19. *JPS* 23, no. 1 (Autumn 1993), Special Document File, p. 115.

20. Norman G. Finkelstein, “Securing Occupation.”

21. Figures provided in *Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories* (by the Foundation for Middle East Peace) and cited by Said, “Palestinians under Siege,” p. 9; and Rassem Khamaisi, “Settling the Land: A Pattern of Domination,” *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture* 7, nos. 3–4 (2000), p. 89.

22. *PASSIA Diary 2001* (Jerusalem: PASSIA, 2001), p. 257 (citing *Law Annual Report 1999*).

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 257–258, citing *Law Annual Report* and Peace Now.

24. See for example the map (produced by Jan de Jong) in Geoffrey Aronson, ed., “Settlement Monitor,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 1999), p. 122. For more on these “bypass” roads, see Jeff Halper, “The 94 Percent Solution: A Matrix of Control,” *Middle East Report* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2000), pp. 14–19.

25. The World Bank Group, “Poverty in the West Bank and Gaza,” *Palestine-Israel*

*Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture* 7, nos. 3–4 (2000), pp. 129–30.

26. See further, Akram Hanieh, *The Camp David Papers* (Ramallah: al-Ayyam Press, 2000) and *JPS* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2001); Said, “Palestinians under Siege” (particularly the maps of Jan de Jong contained therein); and Jan de Jong, *Palestinian Planning Imperatives in Jerusalem, with a Case Study on Anata* (Jerusalem: PASSIA, 2000).

27. Said, “Palestinians under Siege,” p. 9.

28. Enunciated amid much fanfare on the eve of the Camp David summit, these are no withdrawal to the 4 June 1967 boundaries; no dismantling of (all) settlements; no division of Jerusalem; no Arab army west of the Jordan River; and no return of Palestinian refugees.

29. Unlike the United National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) of the previous intifada, which included only secular groups (except, at the very beginning, Islamic Jihad), the NIF comprises all PLO factions, most of the factions of the “Damascus Ten,” and all the Islamist factions except for the Islamic Liberation Party (Hizb al-Tahrir).

30. The activist wing of Fatah has, particularly among Israeli and foreign observers (and increasingly among Palestinians), come to be known as the Tanzim (“organization”). Formally, however, Fatah in its entirety is known as Tanzim Fatah (the “Fatah organization”), and membership in Fatah or the Tanzim is thus one and the same. For more on this wing of the movement, see Graham Usher, “Fatah’s Tanzim: Origins and Politics,” *Middle East Report* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2000), pp. 6–7.

31. The PA on 17 January blamed “criminals” and “collaborators” for the assassination. The following day, the Anti-Corruption Unit (Wihdat Mukafahat al-Fasad) of the al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade (Kata’ib Shuhada al-Aqsa), a new militia spawned by the activist wing of Fatah, pointedly took responsibility for the killing.

32. For full details, consult Elam, “‘Peace’ with Violence”; and Cordesman, *Peace and War*, pp. 83–89.