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The Palestinian Intifada

The Palestinian intifada was an uprising, literally a shaking-off, which dramatically changed the status of the Palestinians and their claims in world opinion. Two intifadas occurred, one from 1987-1993, and the other ongoing since 2000. The two were starkly different in participation, methods, and effects on the prospects for peace.

Mass Mobilization in the First Intifada

The first intifada began in December 1987, when a military truck killed Palestinians at a checkpoint, where Palestinians waited for Israeli military permission to cross into Israel to work, in Gaza. Mass strikes began in the Gaza strip and the West Bank. The intifada was truly a popular rebellion; it mobilized all segments of the population to protest and build alternative civil society organizations. The participation of women, children, and even the elderly was particularly evident. A new, elaborate mobilizing infrastructure emerged, revolving around democratic local committees and a rotating leadership comprised of all the political factions. Tens of thousands of committees were formed to provide for society's needs, from medical committees to education, food, and security committees.

This was not the first time the population protested, but this time the protest did not end. The first intifada saw popular organizing reach a new stage by continuing daily and encompassing all areas of the territories simultaneously. Previous popular demonstrations had been episodic, but this one was continuous. In the period from 1977 to 1982, an average of 500 such protest events took place per year. From 1982 to the start of the uprising, the average increased to between 3,000 and 4,000 annually. While the momentum of protest against the Israeli occupation and Jewish settlements in the occupied territories had been building for years, external events contributed to convince Palestinians in the occupied territories that they would have to make their own destiny. Faith in solution driven by external actors, like the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), based in Tunis, and the Arab countries, had declined.

The intifada reversed the balance of decision-making between internal and external leaderships, as new, young leaders in the territories took control. The uprising itself came as a surprise to the PLO officials outside the territories, who were politely told of local decisions, often after the fact. The new leadership united differing political factions in the United National Leadership of the Uprising. Decisions on demonstrations and strikes were made in this body and announced through communiqués to the populace. Leadership rotated among the factions, providing a steady stream of new leaders despite curfews or imprisonment, and demonstrating coordination among factions markedly different than that present outside the territories. These new leaders mediated quarrels, held trials, made binding decisions and imposed fines, and even replaced religious courts in dispute mediation.

The intifada was relatively non-violent. Its violence was limited to the throwing of stones against the Israeli military within the occupied territories. Unarmed civilians were not targets. The main weapons were economic: the boycotting of Israeli commodities and taxes, and commercial strikes. Stores closed as merchants joined the intifada, refusing to open and sell Israeli goods. In fact, the addition of businessmen to the uprising helped to make the intifada self-perpetuating. The merchants added needed credibility, organizational and financial resources to the uprising. This previously passive group joined in opposing the military occupation as taxes

on them increased and were used to finance the Israeli military government in the Palestinian territories. The merchants shut their stores in a commercial strike, a long-standing method of protest in the Middle East. In response, the Israeli military government attempted to force stores open, by destroying the locks, physically opening their doors, and leaving the merchandise vulnerable. The move backfired, becoming a powerful, visible embodiment of the uprising, particularly since public demonstrations were limited due to curfews. It also spurred the mobilization of young boys (*shabab*) to guard the stores participating in the strike. In turn, the boys relied on a network of women and elderly to bring them food and serve as look-outs, thus widening the mobilization of the populace and publicly affirming the importance of people often limited to behind-the-scenes activities. Then-defense minister Rabin later admitted that trying to force commercial stores to open was the biggest mistake made at that time.

Possibilities for tactically effective protest were limited. Protest took the form of defiant acts against the Israeli military authorities: children throwing stones at soldiers and tanks stationed inside villages and town, and the breaking of curfew by organizing and assembling. Other forms of protest had little tactical utility or were unsustainable. Palestinian labor was not crucial to Israel, as indigenous African labor was to South Africa, removing the bargaining power of labor strikes. Boycotts on Israeli goods had little effect, and tax strikes could not be maintained due to producer needs for licenses from the Israeli authorities. Unable to demonstrate in Israeli public space, roads used by Jewish settlers and the Israeli military became a target of collective action as Palestinians prevented the free-flow of troops through barricades.

The main effect of the intifada was through the media and public opinion. In the beginning months of the uprising, widely-publicized pictures in the western and international media showed the Palestinians as victims. For example, the picture of young men, arms tied, outnumbered and being beaten by several Israeli soldiers impressed observers with the resolve of the Palestinians and began to alter prevailing conceptions of the conflict. At the very least, the Israeli insistence that there were no Palestinians, Golda Meir's famous quote, now was no longer possible. A relatively large peace movement within Israel legitimized international support for a solution to the Palestinian situation, and demonstrated that support for the Palestinians did not have to be anti-Jewish or even anti-Israeli. This important change, that the rights of Palestinians could be met without threatening the existence of Israel, was a crucial step in efforts toward peace. Outside the territories, the PLO affirmed its support for a two-state solution, one for the Palestinians and one for the Israelis. Previously, it supported one, united state with Jews and Palestinians. This was viewed as a destroying the nature of Israel as a Jewish state.

The first intifada led to the Madrid conference after the first Gulf War, a negotiating process involving all parties to the conflict, sponsored by President George Bush senior. The premise of the Madrid conference was that negotiations to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict needed to involve the surrounding countries that border Israel and that host Palestinian refugees. This process was halted and out-staged by the Oslo agreement or Declaration of Principles, reached by Yasser Arafat, chairman of the PLO, and the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. In September 1993, Arafat arrived in the U.S. capital, shook Rabin's hand on the White House lawn, and the parties agreed to recognize each other. The first intifada was over.

Violence and the Second Intifada

The second or al-Aqsa intifada began the day after Ariel Sharon's visit to the Dome of the Rock or al-Aqsa mosque complex in Jerusalem in late September 2000. Palestinian demonstrators and worshipers were fired upon, sparking the ongoing uprising. This intifada

differed from the first. While the first intifada was democratic, involving widespread participation, was secular, basically non-violent, and contributed to peace efforts, this intifada was characterized by participation of a few, the use of violence against civilians and military alike, and widespread religious idioms. It decreased allies of the Palestinians among the Israelis and in the west. Where protesters in Israel previously joined the Palestinians, now Israeli peace activities are few. Violence against random civilians inside Israel quieted much of the peace movement. According to the Israeli organization B'Tselem, in the first intifada about 100 Israelis were killed, about two-fifths of those security forces, and 1000 Palestinians were killed, however in the second a higher ratio of Israelis has been killed and more of those were civilians. Over 1000 Israelis were killed between September 2000 and 2008, versus about 5000 Palestinians.

The context on the ground had changed. The new existence of a Palestinian Authority and police force, armed and in control of some territory, complicated accountability for the violence. Between the end of the first intifada in 1993 and the beginning of the second in 2000, the Oslo accords led to an embryonic Palestinian Authority (PA) controlling some towns in the West Bank and Gaza. The PA had Arafat as president and a Palestinian police. In addition to Israeli continued military control and the building of settlements, Arafat and the PA repressed internal dissent and especially religious groups. Arafat's rule entailed unilateral decision-making and control, which was not well received in a populace that had mobilized democratically and independently. The Israelis assassinated opposition leaders, and the PA repressed the opposition, a duty incumbent upon the PA in the Oslo accords. Further, in the PA's attempt to build an independent power base, it marginalized the internal intifada-era leadership to the benefit of PLO outsiders (sometimes called the "Tunisians" due to their prior residence).

As in the first intifada, activities in the second were capitalized upon by the Palestinian leadership but were not directed or controllable by them. Arafat took advantage of the intifada but groups disobeyed his orders, often overtly, and even those in his own supposedly-loyal Fatah group. Violence spread from the religious groups to the secular ones, and the role of religion among all the groups increased. From Oslo in 1993 to the start of the second intifada in 2000, violence was mainly a tactic used by the Islamist groups, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In the current intifada, the secular groups – Fatah and its offshoots – are responsible for at least as much violence as the religious groups. While before 2000 these groups has followed the PA's orders and battled the Islamists, after the intifada many joined the Islamic opposition. They then formed the unofficial al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade, fought Israeli military forces often against direct orders from the PA, split into numerous groups and began using the tactic of suicide bombing against civilians. PA officials have become targets of these groups. The loss of centralized control made truces or peace treaties increasingly difficult to achieve. Local leaders state that they were not consulted, despite their alleged superiors having agreed to the truce. Truces accepted by some groups, including the Islamists, have been ignored and violated by others.

Opportunities for peaceful but tactically effective protest are fewer than in the first intifada as a result of changes due to the Oslo accords. Oslo entailed the entailed a piecemeal process by which a Palestinian authority would gain partial control over increasingly more land. Fundamental to this process is the fragmentation of the territories into small parcels and their isolation from other Palestinian population centers. New policies increased the geographic difficulties of convening meetings, networking, and staging public protests. A grid of bypass roads bisects the territories, linking the Jewish settlements to Israel but insulating them from the surrounding Palestinian population. Hundreds of checkpoints control the movement of Palestinians out of their towns. Closure policies - preventing the entrance of Palestinians to Israel

to work - furthered the decline of mass activism through increasing poverty by decreasing income. Roads that were a forum for disruptive protest in the first intifada, are now controlled by the Israeli military. Due to the parallel set of roads for Israeli settlers, Palestinian roadblocks achieve nothing. Checkpoints and border crossings, passing from one zone to another, became the main site of confrontation with Israeli soldiers.

Though logistically difficult, mass-based peaceful demonstrations do still occur, but their effect and publicity are limited. Generally, peaceful protests are neither reported by the media nor do their participants escape Israeli military or Palestinian police action. The widespread opinion is that non-violent protest, while desirable in theory, will be met by violence. This opinion is backed by experience, as both the PA and Israel have used lethal force against non-violent demonstrations. Advocates and organizers of non-violent activities end up in jail alongside those engaging in violence, even members of organizations uniting Israeli Jews and Palestinians.

The media context and effect of this intifada differed also. The effect has been primarily among the Arab and Muslim populations. The image of Muhammad al-Durra, a boy killed while hiding with his father during clashes in Gaza, epitomized this intifada. Now with their own media and not dependent on images from the West, Arab audiences received more - and different - information on events in the Palestinian territories than the western media.

See also: Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Oslo accords, Palestinian Authority, Hamas, Gaza, Israel, Fatah, Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasser Arafat, Palestinian refugees, closure, the separation wall, checkpoints, settlements

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