

by Amer G Zahr

It would not be an overstatement to say that today's Middle East peace process is in a sheer state of catalepsy. The Oslo agreement, and its "spirit" along with it, is kept alive only by periodic jolts of false meetings, phony verbal agreements, and disingenuous promises. Meanwhile, everyday Palestinian life has become a hell on earth, so much so that many people are now almost longing for the days of direct Israeli occupation. Hopes of liberty have diminished, though the Palestinian thirst for a just peace has yet to be quenched.

Opposition to the Oslo Agreement originally consisted, for the most part, of intellectuals, academics, and Hamas. Now, however, the dissenters have been joined by ordinary citizens who have come to feel betrayed and cheated by a peace process which created a corrupt Palestinian Authority (PA) that has lowered, rather than fostered, expectations of democracy, freedom, and justice in Palestine.

Oppressors Old and New

Of course the Israelis, both Labor and Likud, have also done their part to weaken Palestinian faith in Oslo. Settlement building on the West Bank has increased since Oslo (and even more since Wye), and large amounts of Arab land continue to be confiscated for settlement expansion. Moreover, hundreds of Arab homes have been destroyed for a variety of contrived reasons, and hundreds more are lined up to be destroyed, with the clear intent of suppressing Arab growth throughout the territories, but mainly in East Jerusalem.

Much of the agitation and strife, however, revolves around the conduct of the Palestinian Authority, the same authority that was initially received by an elated Palestinian public in the hope that it would stimulate freedom from the shackles of military occupation. But the PA has turned out to be a model of corruption run by one man, Yasser Arafat, who holds all the reins, administering all the financial and political decisions. It is frightening indeed. Even more troubling, though, is that Arafat's authority is not clandestine. It is unveiled and institutionalized in the police which he has empowered to oversee the lands of the PA—these police, ironically enough, are equipped with Israeli arms. Palestinian police brutality is rampant, and the overwhelming number of PA police heightens the already anxious atmosphere of restlessness amongst Palestinians on the ground.

Thus, the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza have not escaped military rule; they have only eluded that of the Israelis, and even this only to a modest extent. In fact, in many cases, today's citizens of the previously occupied territories are facing military brutality from two antagonists, one internal, one external. However, to the psyche of the Palestinian people, the internal brute is much more damaging. The assaults on the Palestinian people by their own government cut deeper, but the names and faces of the victims are so numerous that they simply become anonymous. What could ravage more the morale of a people expecting progress and achievement, than for their own "heroes" to shadow the frightful past of their oppressors? How can a people reconcile going from military occupation by an arch enemy to a police state governed by its own blood?

There is no breathing room for Palestinians. Accounts abound of oppression and suppression of democracy and political freedom. There is, for example, the story of Daoud Kuttab, a Palestinian journalist imprisoned in 1997 by Palestinian officers for broadcasting proceedings from parliamentary meetings of the PA when tempers ran high and emotions ran wild. There is also the episode of a newspaper writer, in the early days of the PA, who wrote an article profiling the new Chairman. Days later he found himself sitting in a Palestinian jail cell, when the newly elected Arafat realized with displeasure that the article was not entirely on the front page! These sorts of actions by Arafat and his right-hand men illustrate the blackheartedness with which the PA is managed.

Palestinian struggles today are at least as much against Arafat's puppet politics and role as an Israeli tool, as they are against Israeli superiority itself. In response, Arafat looks to silence political dissent by Palestinians, eliminating any hopes of free speech, free press, and democracy. Arafat's PA performs at Israel's summoning, cleaning up its messes and taking care of Israel's dirty work in the West Bank and Gaza. All of this is done in the hopes that the US, and its collaborators, will pour even more money into the PA, lining the pockets of Arafat and his cronies. Arafat is inherently incapable of honestly administering his duties as a political leader. As a result of this, linked with incessant Israeli browbeating, he has become nothing more than a marionette touring the world, speaking in Western platitudes, perhaps quite happy to have more of a blanket with which to shield his own ceaseless corruption.

The Wye meetings themselves were nothing more than such a political stage on which Arafat, Netanyahu, and Clinton could show the world that they have not forgotten about the peace process. The theatrics at Wye led the world temporarily to ignore the trio's collective and individual corruption,

returning to the "real business" of making peace. But Wye, with all its "deathbed-drama", yielded an unsettling result, detrimental to the Palestinian cause: the "agreement", as many people call it, was in fact no agreement at all. What emerged from Wye was a merely suggestive memorandum, not a binding agreement. There was no guarantee that either Middle Eastern leader would fulfill his oft-made promises, and neither side has. Netanyahu has sped up settlement building while Arafat has released scores of Hamas bombers.

Perhaps the only directive of Wye which has been implemented provided for the PA to legitimize American spying on Palestinian operations. The CIA will probably be used for two main purposes: 1) to inform Arafat of Palestinian oppositions brewing in all territories, and 2) to pass on the intelligence it does not give to Arafat to the Israelis for them to use as a bargaining chip. Certainly, we will hear no reports of Palestinian corruption out of American intelligence circles. Corruption in the PA will continue to go unchecked, especially by Israel and the US. It would not be a stretch to assert that instability and insecurity in the PA is an Israeli and American political goal. It is clearly in the interests of the Israeli government to foster the development of a PA that is corrupt, out of control, and easily bought. In this scenario, the Israeli government would have more excuses to avoid peace talks and continue settlement building, and the PA Chairman would have more opportunity to stuff his pockets.

Leaders Old and New?

These days, as Israeli politics reels under right-wing rhetoric, Palestinian citizens have become more aware of a strong, politically motivated Hamas. In September of 1997, a failed Israeli attempt to assassinate a Hamas official in Amman set in motion the release of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin from an Israeli prison. Yassin's return to Palestinian political prominence opened a new chapter in this saga, for since his release, Hamas bombings have decreased, signaling that perhaps some kind of political foundation is being laid to challenge the Palestinian Authority and Arafat. It is this fear of Hamas that has led to Arafat's recent release of some infamous Hamas bombers from prison.

But it is too late for the PA Chairman; he long ago alienated Hamas by giving in to US and Israeli demands to crack down on Hamas facilities and to imprison suspected Hamas operatives. These actions will perhaps linger in the minds of Hamas leaders and lead to a massive effort to undertake Palestinian leadership and sway a Palestinian public opinion that is already highly doubtful of Arafat and his corrupt policies. Arafat has been discredited in the eyes of most Palestinians, especially those still in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria waiting for the day of return, who have come to see clearly that the peace process is bringing them no closer to the restoration of their rights. Arafat has forgotten these refugees, and indeed has forgotten all diaspora Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, and has no intention to include them in any future framework.

Another highly psychological issue, rarely mentioned by analysts of Palestinian society, contributes to Arafat's inherent incompetence and impotence. During his years as the leader of the Palestinian government in exile, Arafat was just that: in exile. Let us keep in mind that Arafat never lived in Palestine prior to Oslo. He never experienced the horrid living conditions that the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza endured. During his intellectual upbringing, he was in Cairo, and after that, as the leader of the PLO, he traveled the world, living most of his years in financial comfort. His life has been characterized by dishonesty and betrayal, and riddled with profiteering and defilement. He has no clear social connection with the Palestinians that have been locked to the territories since 1948 and before. His mindset is not that of an oppressed citizen living under Israeli military rule, but rather of a revolutionary on the run, a man whose life is based on political seasoning, and not social experiences. He cannot and will never truly identify with the Palestinian mother living in Ramallah who has watched her eldest son be dragged away to Ansar Prison. He cannot feel the anguish of the father in Nablus who has carried two of his sons through downtown funeral processions. He has never chanted with the demonstrators, never grieved with the families. His experience lies in the diaspora. A revolutionary by no means incarnates what a young nation needs in a political leader. Arafat lacks dynamics. He is corrupt. His popularity today is contrived, and Palestinians are feeling the ramifications of his political downfall.

At the end of the day, we find a discredited Palestinian Authority, a corrupt kleptomaniacal leader, and a tattered, disenchanting Palestinian public. Time is running out, and indeed may have already run out, for a peaceful resolution for Israelis and Palestinians. The Declaration of Principles was as crooked as the hesitant handshake which sealed its fate. It was a diseased start, leading to dreadful results for the Palestinian people. Chairman Arafat has adulterated the innocence of a young nation yearning for justice and deserving of democracy and legitimacy. The second Intifada may be near; only this time Palestinian citizenry will have to battle two foes, the unrelenting Israeli occupation forces, and their junior partner, the Palestinian Authority. ☑