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Israel and the Palestinians: The Bitter Fruits of Hegemonic Peace

GLENN E. ROBINSON

The violence that erupted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip at the end of September 2000 came as no surprise to many observers. Warnings of trouble ahead had been issued repeatedly by many commentators. The path-breaking Israeli-Palestinian parliamentarian Azmi Bishara had warned once again in June that the “maximum Israel is prepared to compromise won’t reach the minimum expectations of the Palestinians. I do not think it is either war or peace, but there is a confrontation coming.” Even Yasir Arafat begged the Americans not to go forward with the Camp David summit in July because the parties were not yet ready to strike a final deal. If the summit failed, he argued, instability would almost certainly follow. His pleas fell on the deaf ears of an American team that was overly anxious to cut a final peace deal in the last days of Bill Clinton’s presidency.

Yet even with these warnings, rarely has such a major foreign policy issue been so poorly understood and reported in the American media as has this recent outbreak of violence. The crisis largely has been reported as “Arafat’s war” (to use *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman’s provocative phrase), a deliberate war launched by the Palestinians against Israeli peacemakers. In this way of thinking, when decision time came for the Palestinians at Camp David—the historic opportunity to accept a generous Israeli offer and end the conflict—Arafat balked, still more comfortable playing the role of guerrilla leader than statesman. Accord-

ing to Friedman, Arafat then returned home and ignited the war that would happily prevent him from ever having to make the hard choice for peace.

Besides showing a breathtaking ignorance of history and Palestinian politics, this argument contains within it what I call the “microwave” theory of political violence: Arafat can push a button and immediately create a rush of frenzied energy, and then push another button to immediately stop it. The notion of Palestinians-as-automatons would rightly be dismissed as ludicrous, perhaps even racist, if applied to nearly any other people. It is an equally absurd path to comprehending the tragic turn of events in Palestine. How should we understand the recent violence?

GROWING DISCONTENT

Palestinian anger in September could be seen at three different levels. First, long-simmering discontent with the Oslo peace process had been growing. Seven years after the famous 1993 handshake on the White House lawn between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian Authority (PA) President Yasir Arafat, most Palestinians have seen few tangible benefits of “peace.” After all those years and so many agreements (Oslo I, Gaza-Jericho, Oslo II, Hebron, Wye), Palestinians still controlled only 13.1 percent of the West Bank and none of East Jerusalem. For the benefit of 400 Jewish settlers living in downtown Hebron, 20,000 Palestinians in nearby neighborhoods were kept under a constant and harsh military occupation. For the benefit of 5,000 Jewish settlers, Israel still controlled one-third of the Gaza Strip—at the expense of the more than 1 million Palestinians living there.

Settlement expansion and new construction have continued every year since the Declaration of Prin-

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ciples was signed in 1993. New settlements have been built in the West Bank and Gaza under both Labor and Likud party governments in Israel. Not only is the transfer of civilian populations to occupied territory explicitly forbidden by international law, the transfers also violate Oslo's prohibition against undertaking unilateral acts that would prejudice the final status negotiations. Even though Ehud Barak was elected Israel's prime minister in 1999 on a clear peace platform, the rate of settlement building increased 51 percent under his government. Today, some 200,000 Jewish settlers live in nearly 200 settlements in the West Bank and Gaza (an additional 130,000 Jewish Israelis also reside in East Jerusalem). Not one settler or settlement has been removed in seven years of the "peace process."

Thus, for most Palestinians, seven years of peace had not significantly changed the daily reality of living under military occupation. Various forms of closure occasionally imposed by Israel prevented workers from going to their jobs and students from attending universities. Any travel outside specific urban areas had to be undertaken with Israeli permission—which was often denied. Access to Jerusalem and its holy places was forbidden to about 95 percent of the Palestinian population. Only for a Palestinian who never left his or her home city could life under military occupation be said to have ended. Indeed, the arguments advanced by Oslo's early opponents were seen to be coming true: this peace process was not leading to a real peace, but to a restructured occupation enforced not by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) but, ironically, by Arafat and the Palestinian police. By the early summer of 2000, Arafat's approval rating among Palestinians had dropped to 31 percent, a startling decline in popularity for "Mr. Palestine." Was he really the president of Palestine or merely Israel's chief of police in the West Bank and Gaza?

The Camp David summit in July created a second level of discontent for Palestinians. Surveys over the past seven years had shown two, perhaps contradictory, findings. First, Palestinians overwhelmingly supported peace with Israel, a finding

that did not vary significantly with the vagaries of the peace process. However, the surveys also showed that Palestinians were perhaps naïve or even myopic about what the Oslo process would accomplish: despite the cautions given by numerous opposition figures and intellectuals, most Palestinians believed that peace would lead to the removal of illegal Israeli settlements, a recognition of the right of return for millions of Palestinian refugees (and the actual return of many to what is now Israel), and a complete withdrawal by Israel to the 1967 borders, as called for in UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338.

The Camp David summit showed clearly that the peace envisioned by Palestinians was not the peace Israel was prepared to offer. In the wake of Camp David's failure, both sides offered starkly contrasting descriptions of what had actually transpired in the closed meetings. By mutual agreement, no official

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documentation (for example, minutes of meetings) was released, save the closing communiqué read by President Clinton.

However, Israel likely was prepared neither to acknowledge the Palestinian right of return as laid out in UN resolution 194 (and therefore to accept responsibility for the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948), nor to accept more than a token return of Palestinians to Israel—and only under humanitarian, not legal, provisions. Moreover, Israel insisted on maintaining sovereignty over most of East Jerusalem, including the Old City. Finally, most West Bank settlements would be annexed to Israel.

While the failure to reach agreement over Jerusalem was reported to have been the biggest stumbling block at Camp David, the proposed annexation by Israel of about 10 percent of the West Bank was an equally large problem from the Palestinian perspective.¹ Israel's reported proposal would have cut the West Bank into three cantons, each completely surrounded by areas of Israeli control. Israel would annex the area around the settlements of Ma'ale Adumim and the Etzion Bloc, extending Israeli territory from West Jerusalem to the Jordan River. This would split the West Bank in half. A second area of annexation would stretch from the settlement of Ariel in the northern part of the West Bank all the way to the Jordan, cutting the West Bank into thirds. Finally, Israel would annex a ribbon of land all along the border with Jordan, effec-

¹The figure has been variously reported as annexing from between 5 percent and 13 percent of the West Bank. Since no official maps or documents were released by the parties, the figures vary according to interpretation.

tively encircling each of the three cantons.² For Palestinians, this proposal to turn the West Bank into a series of Bantustans was unacceptable, and could not serve as the basis of a viable state.

After Camp David, no Palestinian could misunderstand what Israel's view of peace entailed—and it was widely and deeply rejected. Israel was negotiating as though the conflict had begun in 1967, while the Palestinians were negotiating as though the conflict had begun in 1948—which, of course, is historically more accurate. Thus, for Israel, refugees were not a major issue, and its willingness to cede about 90 percent of the land taken in 1967 was viewed as extremely generous. From this standpoint, the Palestinians were highly inflexible in rejecting Israel's offer. For the Palestinians, dating the conflict to 1948 meant that the refugee issue was central, and also that their concession was the 78 percent of historic Palestine that Israel had already taken. From the Palestinian perspective, for Israel to also try to claim part of its gains from the 1967 war was not only greedy, but also in violation of the terms of reference for the negotiations, that is, UN resolutions 242 and 338.

The spark that ignited this tinderbox of Palestinian resentment, the third level of discontent, was Likud party leader Ariel Sharon's deliberately provocative visit to a religious site in Jerusalem on September 28, a place known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary (Haram al-Sharif). Bluntly put, in Palestinian historiography, Sharon is an unindicted war criminal. He has been associated with some of the most horrific episodes in the Palestinian national tragedy, dating nearly 50 years. In 1953, as a young officer in the IDF, Sharon led the infamous Unit 101 in a nighttime attack on the Palestinian village of Qibya in which 69 civilians were killed, most by having their homes blown up over their heads. Eighteen years later, Israel once again called on Sharon to suppress a Palestinian uprising in Gaza. He did so ruthlessly, killing and exiling scores of Palestinians. Sharon was the mastermind of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon that killed an estimated 19,000 Arabs, mostly Palestinians, and included the massacre of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Palestinian civilians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla. The massacre occurred after the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had already

departed Lebanon, leaving the safety of their remaining families in American hands—an obligation the United States failed to fulfill. Although an official Israeli investigation found that Sharon bore personal indirect responsibility for these massacres, his political career in Israel blossomed.

Sharon's September visit to the Temple Mount occurred just a few days after the observation of the eighteenth anniversary of the Sabra and Shatilla massacre. A tireless proponent of settlements and an opponent of Oslo from the beginning, Sharon has provocatively established a residence in the heart of the Muslim quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. In short, it would be hard to imagine an Israeli more hated by Palestinians than Ariel Sharon, and his visit—designed to politically kill Oslo and Ehud Barak, and to slow the political return of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu within the Likud ranks—was largely successful from Sharon's point of view.

The story of the recent turmoil and violence should be understood, however, not in terms of personalities and tactics, but rather in deeper, structural terms—that of a hegemonic peace.

THE HEGEMONIC PEACE

A hegemonic peace is defined as a peace between two significantly unequal powers that nevertheless retain the autonomy to accept or reject the terms of settlement.³ It is not a peace between relative equals, nor is it a "peace" completely imposed on an utterly vanquished enemy. Unlike these last two types of peace, a hegemonic peace tends to be destabilizing to both the hegemon (in this case Israel) and to the weaker party (Palestine). The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is clearly hegemonic in nature, accurately reflecting the broad (im)balance of power between Israel and Palestine.

While many hold dear the notion of a "just peace," peace treaties invariably reflect power, not justice. The Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and agreements over the past seven years are no different. On every major issue, Israel's power has held sway over Palestine's justice. All the key issues have been left for last—at Israel's insistence. Only at Camp David, for the first time, were the central issues of Jerusalem and refugees—among others—discussed. On each core issue, Israel holds the power on the ground to decide what to implement. No refugee can return without Israel's approval; no settlement can be dismantled without Israel's say-so; no land can be returned to the Palestinians without Israeli consent. The peace process should be

²See *Ha'aretz*, November 14, 2000, and the derivative maps at <www.infopal.org/palnews/amira2.htm>.

³Some of the discussion in this section draws on Glenn E. Robinson, "News and Analysis," Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine, September 12, 2000.

understood more as an internal Israeli debate about how much to concede of all that it controls, rather than as negotiations between Israel and Palestine. Most of that internal Israeli debate has centered on how much of the 22 percent of Palestine not captured in 1948 should be returned to the Palestinians. Israeli hawks want to maintain permanent Israeli control over all the Palestinian lands, while Israeli doves are willing to cede virtually all the West Bank and Gaza.

The Palestinians have no comparable leverage on Israel. No illegal Palestinian settlements exist in Israel; no Israeli refugees pine to return to Gaza; no Palestinian troops occupy Israeli lands. The only leverage Palestinians have over Israel is the autonomy to reject Israeli proposals. This autonomy is not inconsequential, because this rejection prevents Israeli normalization with the Arab world, and it can create serious instability—as the last few months have shown. Still, in the final analysis, Israel controls what happens—or does not happen—on the ground.

A hegemonic peace tends to be far more unstable than a peace based on a reasonable balance of power or on complete domination. Compelling logic can be offered as to why a hegemonic peace produces instability for both polities. For the weaker party, explaining instability is rather obvious. Considerable opposition to the government will arise for signing a peace that so obviously compromises national rights in the eyes of the population. Political opposition at the social level strengthens, while the “capitulating” government feels compelled to crack down on dissent. Polarization occurs that, in simple terms, pits the state against its own society.

Ironically, a hegemonic peace is destabilizing for the powerful party as well. Outsiders usually view such a peace as disproportionately benefiting the more powerful party. Internally, however, dissent against the government focuses on the utter lack of necessity to make any significant concessions. By definition, the powerful party is not compelled by the weaker party to concede anything. The opposition in the hegemonic power uses a discourse created in wartime to assert that any meaningful concessions are not only unwarranted given the circumstances of power and (their own constructed) morality, but are a sign of government weakness and betrayal.

This has been the history of the past seven years in the West Bank and Gaza. While moments of exhilaration have occurred, such as during the fall 1995 Israeli withdrawal from some major urban

areas in the West Bank, for the most part the peace process has failed to realize Palestinian national rights. Through the years, as the failure of the PLO to “deliver” in its negotiations with Israel has become more apparent to more Palestinians, dissent has increased. In turn, the PA has had to use various types of repression to ensure containment of the opposition. The violence during the fall of 2000 temporarily strengthened Palestinian unity, but the internal contradictions within Palestine eventually will resurface. The polarization, repression, violence, and instability born of a hegemonic peace will only intensify.

Israel too will continue to suffer from instability brought on by a hegemonic peace process and any final deal that is eventually cut. While Palestinian oppositional discourse rejects as unjust the peace terms, the oppositional discourse in Israel, speaking the language of power, rejects as unnecessary any significant concessions to a much weaker—and much hated—party. As with Palestine, this pattern has been apparent in Israel since the first Oslo accord was signed in 1993. The large Israeli opposition has consistently berated Prime Ministers Rabin, Peres, and Barak for “selling out” Zionism when no significant external pressure on Israel compels it to make concessions. Even the rejectionist Netanyahu government was harshly criticized by the opposition in Israel when it signed the Hebron and Wye River accords.

While the assassination of Rabin in 1995 was the most obvious example of the instability born of a hegemonic peace, the sharply vitriolic turn of Israeli public discourse since Oslo is perhaps a better indicator of the impact of this kind of peace on the Israeli body politic. As in Palestine, Israelis have rallied around the flag somewhat during the recent violence, but this will be short-lived.

Compare Israel's three peace treaties with Arab countries. Although Israel was clearly more militarily powerful than Egypt, their peace treaty in 1979 was between two strong states that had shown they could cause considerable damage to one another. There was a rough parity. That peace, however cold, has stood the test of time. Few in Israel question its wisdom. Broadly speaking, a similar statement can be made for how Israel's public has greeted the Jordan–Israel peace treaty: no significant force in Israel has denounced the government for making that peace deal because Israel was compelled to make no significant concessions (its popular reception in Jordan, conversely, has been quite hostile).

Only with the Palestinians has peace proved so

destabilizing to Israel. Given Israel's domestic political cleavages, no final-status peace deal likely will change this. In fact, if the past seven years of assassination, recrimination, and vitriolic public discourse are prologue to Israel's future, then intense and often nasty polarization of Israel's domestic politics predicted by one of Israel's more astute scholars will likely be at hand.⁴

THE INSIDER–OUTSIDER DIVIDE

While the concept of hegemonic peace provides the broad parameters within which contemporary Palestinian politics should be understood, inside those parameters Palestinian politics has been fluid since the failure at Camp David. The most significant internal Palestinian political cleavage today is not between the militant Islamic group Hamas and the PLO (which have temporarily mended their fences), but between the “insiders” and the “outsiders.” The Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza (the insiders) openly refer to the 100,000 or so Palestinians who have returned to Palestine since Oslo as “outsiders.” More precisely, since the PLO headquarters returned to Palestine from Tunisia, the PLO returnees are known as the “Tunisians.” The great irony of the Oslo accord is that it brought to power in Palestine an outside political elite that did not lead the revolution—the 1987–1993 intifada, or uprising—but rather promised to end it. In trying to consolidate their newfound power, Arafat and the PA undertook to restructure Palestinian politics toward an authoritarian bent.⁵

The “Tunisians” dominate the PA bureaucracy in Palestine. Starting with Yasir Arafat, the Tunisians hold most of the key PA power positions. While Arafat has the stature and history to largely protect him against personal criticism, the same cannot be said of any other outsider. Outsider domination is particularly strong in the police and security apparatuses. Indeed, of the 15 or so police and security services in Palestine (the exact number is unknown since most are illegal under Oslo), all but two are dominated by outsiders loyal to Arafat. The two armed forces in Palestine that can be understood to be predominately “insider” in their orientations are Jibril Rajub's Preventative Security Service (a recognized arm of the PA in the West Bank), and the armed militia of Fatah, the Tanzim.

The official Palestinian police and security forces played only a small role in the recent violence, and virtually none during the early clashes in October. The Palestinians doing most of the shooting instead came from the Tanzim, a ragtag militia made up of intifada veterans. The Tanzim has no rigid hierarchy and is not a disciplined—or even very effective—military force. However, given the insider credentials of most of its members, it has a popular legitimacy on the Palestinian streets unrivaled by the other repressive and generally hated security forces. Although Arafat does not control the Tanzim in a meaningful way, the Tanzim is not anti-Arafat; rather, it lacks the organizational hierarchy and discipline to be effectively either “ordered” to take to the streets or to cease and desist. Militias by their very nature have too much individual autonomy for truly effective central control. And in any case, after Camp David, Arafat had no compelling political interest to crack down on the Tanzim; indeed, drawing from the Vietnamese experience, the Palestinian leadership spoke openly about pursuing Palestinian rights both at the negotiating table and on the ground through the use of the “legitimate force” of resistance. Violence in Israel proper, however, has been explicitly condemned by Arafat and the PA.

The voice of the Tanzim has been the secretary general of Fatah in the West Bank, Marwan al-Barghouti. Barghouti is young (41), a popular and charismatic figure among Palestinians, and as much at home in Palestine's Legislative Council, where he is an elected parliamentarian, as he is in confrontations with Israel. A veteran of the intifada, Barghouti spent years in Israeli jails—institutions that have “graduated” many of Palestine's best and brightest.

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⁴See the conclusion in Ilan Peleg, ed., *The Middle East Peace Process: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

⁵For details see Glenn Robinson, “Authoritarianism with a Palestinian Face,” *Current History*, January 1998.

Because of his strong personal loyalty to Arafat, Barghouti has been able to “push the envelope” on criticism of the PA. He has been an outspoken voice for democracy in Palestine and against the corruption of the PA. Most of the large Fatah movement also remains loyal to Arafat, in part because of the privileged position it has been afforded in Palestine. Fatah cadres represent the most important “insider” pillar of PA rule. This loyalty, however, does not translate into automatic support on every issue, and certainly does not mean total control. Too many factions and cleavages exist within Fatah today for it to speak with a unified voice.

Power in Palestine is thus more complex than the microwave theory allows. The regime has clear social bases of support even beyond the “Tunisians” and the Fatah movement, including the landowning notable families from Palestine’s past and those Palestinians that benefit from the PA’s large patronage machine. The PA does not rule by repression alone—far from it. The failure of Camp David and the subsequent violence, however, may have caused a fundamental shift in the ruling coalition in Palestine.

With the exception of Arafat himself, members of the Oslo elite—the outsiders—have been conspicuous by their political absence since September. Many have virtually disappeared from the Palestinian public scene, including Mahmud Abbas, the presumptive successor to Arafat; Ahmad Qurei, the speaker of the Legislative Council; and Nabil Shath, a cabinet minister and the PA’s unofficial representative to Western donors and businesspeople. While it is still too early to say for sure, Arafat seems to be shifting

his ruling coalition away from an excessive reliance on the outsiders to more fully integrate the intifada elite from the inside, epitomized by Barghouti.

Had Arafat accepted Israel’s offer at Camp David, the violence in recent months would have been more in the form of a Palestinian civil war. Or as Arafat reportedly asked Clinton when the American president was pushing hard for him to accept Barak’s offer: “Do you want to attend my funeral?” With the exception of Arafat, the outsider elite has been discredited by its failure to deliver Palestinian rights through the Oslo framework. Arafat seems to have sensed this and is now seeking to rely much more on insider support—on the hitherto marginalized intifada elite—for his political survival.

This trend could have far-ranging consequences if it continues. The intifada elite would be less willing than the “Tunisians” to agree to a deal with Israel that does not meet basic Palestinian rights. Moreover, as the recent Tanzim activity suggests, they are also more willing to engage Israel in political violence to attain those rights than were the Oslo architects. Conversely, given their more democratic bent and grassroots popularity, the intifada elite is much better suited to make any Israeli agreement stick. In short, this apparent transition would, in the long run, create a more stable Palestine better able to live peacefully with Israel. While the logic of hegemonic peace mitigates against this scenario being realized, one cannot dismiss the possibility. As social scientist Barrington Moore noted long ago, sometimes violence is the necessary—if unfortunate—midwife to a better political future. ■