



PALESTINE IN CRISIS

The Struggle for Peace and
Political Independence after Oslo

GRAHAM USHER



A TNI/MERIP BOOK



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Political Independence after Oslo**

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Needless to say – and to the immense relief of all of the above – the conclusions drawn from this study of the post-Oslo Palestinian experience are entirely my own.

Foreword

In the preamble to the Declaration of Principles signed on 13 September 1993, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation 'agree[d] that it is time to put an end to decades of confrontation and conflict'. It was immediately apparent that the documents negotiated secretly in Oslo had changed the environment and the parameters of that conflict. But as we approach the second anniversary of that carefully choreographed first handshake of Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat on the White House lawn, it is equally clear that a fairly-negotiated just peace and comprehensive reconciliation is not at hand.

In October 1993, a few weeks after the much-hyped handshake, Jochen Hippler and Mariano Aguirre of the Transnational Institute (TNI) approached me to write a short critical account of the circumstances that produced the Oslo Accords and the implications for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I agreed with their assessment that such a project was important. There was a need to query and challenge the self-serving consensus of the political elites and media – American, European, Israeli and also now Arab governments and the PLO – that the conflict had been consigned to history. Groups and individuals in Europe and North America who had aligned themselves in solidarity with Palestinian and Israeli peace forces were looking for analysis and perspective that avoided both the euphoric self-congratulations of the various governments and their media on the one hand, and the reflexive condemnation of some Palestinian opposition groups on the other.

I expressed my view that the author should not be someone following developments from North America or Europe but rather someone close to the ground, as it were, someone deeply familiar with the situation in Gaza and the West Bank, yet detached from Palestinian factional politics. I suggested that the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) be given a contract to produce such a text, and TNI agreed.

Graham Usher was our first choice for this assignment. He had been living in Gaza for a number of years and had done several excellent interviews for Middle East Report. We had long admired his biweekly reports from Gaza and the West Bank for the London-based *Middle East International*. Graham agreed to accept the assignment and the result is this book.

Usher provides here the best available account we have seen of the conditions and circumstances in the West Bank and Gaza, and in the PLO, leading up to the Declaration of Principles. The main strength of his text, though, is his fully integrated analysis of the different dimensions – political, socioeconomic and cultural – of the Palestinian experience in the post-Oslo period. He discusses key sectors of Palestinian political society, including the working classes, the women's movement and the Islamists. Much of his account draws on his unparalleled access to activists and militants from across the Palestinian political spectrum, from Hamas and the secular opposition to representatives of Arafat's Fatah organisation. Usher's treatment of Hamas and the phenomenon of political Islam in Palestinian politics, in particular, will usefully offset the simplistic reporting and commentary and the political misreadings that prevail in the West on this topic.¹

The result is a convincing, and profoundly disquieting, articulation of the political character of the Palestinian Authority that has emerged under Arafat's direction. This book thus addresses an important and complicated aspect of a long-standing confrontation that, despite all grand pronouncements to the contrary, is still very much alive. Other aspects – Israeli political and socioeconomic circumstances, for instance, and the impact of the post-Oslo negotiations on Israeli electoral dynamics – deserve a comparably detailed, nuanced and engaged treatment. At another level, whatever its effect on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Oslo has almost certainly spelt the end of the broader confrontation between Israel and the Arab states, and an analysis of the regional dynamics surrounding Oslo is sorely needed.

This book necessarily addresses a particular moment, namely, the period leading up to and following the Declaration of Principles. That agreement resolved certain long-standing contradictions, but at the price of creating new ones and making more acute many that remain. The key issues in the conflict – land and water rights, Jerusalem, Israeli settlements, Palestinian rights of return – will be negotiated, perhaps, only after September 1996. In any event, the dynamic of occupation and resistance continues, transformed but not replaced by anything that remotely can be termed 'peace'.²

Finally, the events and dynamics that Usher persuasively analyses here have unfolded against a backdrop of unstinting US government support for Israeli intransigence, and for the most authoritarian aspects of Arafat's rule, such as the establishment of so-called state security courts, complete with secret trials, and mass arrests directed exclusively at Palestinian political opponents of Oslo.

The term 'peace process', after Oslo as before, is a mantra invoked by those in power to refer exclusively to terms of American-Israeli imposition. This 'peace process' today is, by all accounts, in deep trouble. The spin-meisters of Washington and Tel Aviv attribute this trouble to 'the enemies

of peace', a roster presently headed by Iran, Hamas and the Lebanese Islamist party Hizballah, 'Islamic terrorists' all.³

In fact, as Usher's text demonstrates, this trouble derives from readily observable facts of life on the ground. One is the increasing pauperisation of much of the Palestinian population, especially in Gaza. Another is the accelerated confiscation of Palestinian land by the Israeli army, both for settlement expansion and for some 15 new highways that will connect the settlements with Israel proper, and with each other, bypassing and in effect segmenting Palestinian towns and villages into isolated cantons and facilitating Israeli military control from the 'outside'.⁴

A third is the closure of all of occupied East Jerusalem for much of the two years since the signing of the Declaration of Principles. Jerusalem's significance is not only, or even primarily, symbolic or religious. 'Greater Jerusalem' comprises the 2.5 square miles of the city that had been under Jordanian occupation and a further 24.5 square miles of annexed West Bank lands.⁵ Its administrative, economic and social, as well as political and communications, functions have been put off-limits to most Palestinians. The closure also has effectively divided the residents of the northern and southern parts of the West Bank from each other. Workers, proprietors and professionals cannot reach their shops and offices; patients cannot see their doctors. These are some of the everyday implications of Israel's defining of Jerusalem, with US support, as separate and non-negotiable.

With Oslo and particularly with the subsequent Cairo Accord of May 1994, the 'peace process' has shifted to some extent, with the important exception of Jerusalem, from an imposition of occupation to an imposition of separation – not in the form of two states, Israeli and Palestinian, but in a manner resembling that of South Africa's structuring of apartheid.⁶ What all this may mean for the future of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation is difficult say. The negative features of this transformation have become quite apparent in the two years since Arafat and Rabin met on the White House lawn. In the longer term, this revised dynamic of oppression may unlock new political forces and leaderships among both Palestinians and Israelis. One indication of this can be seen in the strategic debates of Palestinian Islamists. The Palestinian leadership furthermore includes in its cadre articulate exponents of a democratic society based on the rule of law.⁷ In the view of Palestinian political philosopher and activist Azmy Bishara, a critic of the PLO, 'the new political conditions formed in the wake of the Oslo Accords' dictate a programme of political resistance oriented not towards an independent Palestinian state but bi-nationalism, endorsing civic and political equality and rejecting separation.⁸ The May 1995 role of the Palestinian Israeli members of parliament in forcing the Rabin government to suspend its confiscation of some 134 acres in East Jerusalem for settler housing may come to be seen as a harbinger of such a bi-national strategy.

The future of the Palestinian struggle for political rights remains uncertain. How that struggle has come to its present dilemma is the subject of Graham Usher's excellent book.

Joe Stork
July 1995

Joe Stork is a co-founder of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) and editor of its bi-monthly magazine, *Middle East Report*.



Palestinian Autonomous Area - Jericho 1994

West Bank
(Israeli occupied - status to be determined)

Annexed East Jerusalem

Jericho autonomous area

Israeli settlement (triangle symbol)

Palestinian town (circle symbol)

Ring Road (Jericho Bypass) to be constructed

Dead Sea

Jordan River

Abdullah Bridge

Allenby Bridge

Naaran

Yelitav

Al Anja

Zori

Naama

Elisha

Alon

Vered Jericho

Mitzpe Jericho

Almog

Kalya

Bet HaArava

Abdullah Bridge

Ma'ale Adumim

Mishor Adumim

Kfar Adumim

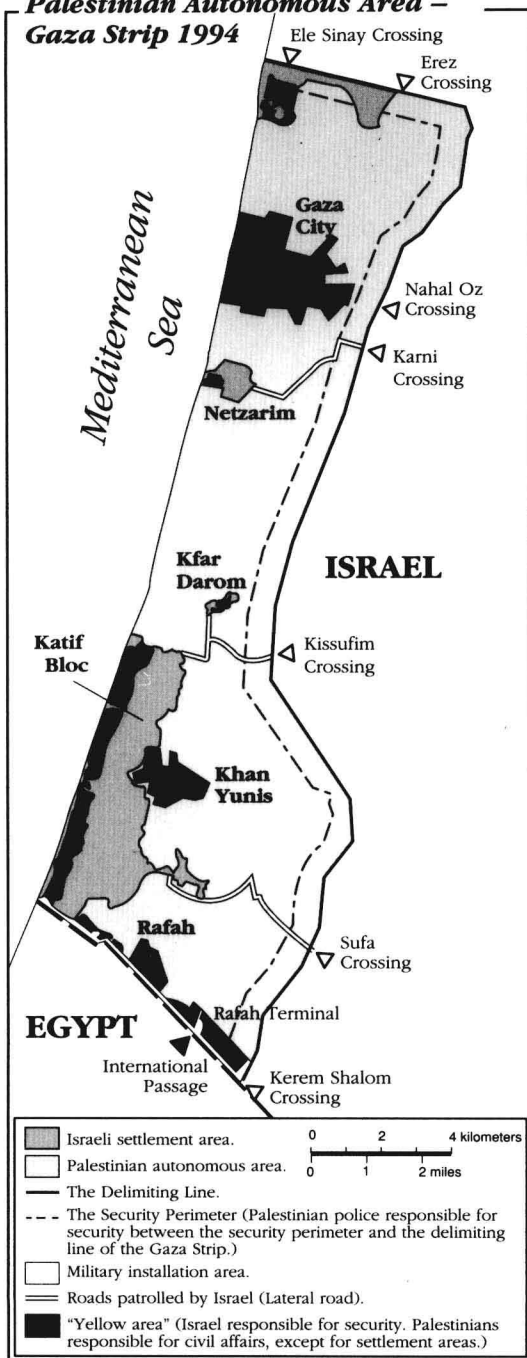
Anata

Abu Dis

Scale:
0 2 4 6 8 kilometers
0 5 miles

Source: Foundation for Middle East Peace

Palestinian Autonomous Area – Gaza Strip 1994



Source: Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area.

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Behind the Oslo Agreement

In the PLO's letter of 'mutual recognition' to the Israeli government signed on 9 September 1993 – one of the four documents that constitute the Oslo accords – PLO Chairman, Yasir Arafat, expressed his 'firm conviction' that the 'PLO considers the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DOP) ... a historic event, inaugurating a new epoch of peaceful coexistence, free from violence and all other acts which endanger peace and stability'.¹ On 13 September, Arafat duly shook Yitzak Rabin's hand and signed the Declaration on the White House lawn.

Nine months later, Arafat returned to Palestine, ready to install his fledgeling Palestinian National Authority (PNA) first in the 'autonomous enclaves' of Gaza and Jericho and subsequently throughout the West Bank. On 2 July, he addressed a rally in Gaza's Jabalya refugee camp. With more than 70,000 Palestinian refugees crammed into a living area of 1.5 square kilometres, Jabalya is the largest refugee camp in the occupied territories and an enduring emblem of Israel's 27-year military rule. Jabalya was also the birthplace of the intifada, the mass Palestinian revolt against Israel's rule that erupted in December 1987. 'I know many of you here think Oslo is a bad agreement', Arafat said to a packed schoolyard. 'It is a bad agreement. But it's the best we can get in the worst situation.'

What accounts for the fall from the optimism redolent in Arafat's first declaration to the pessimism conceded in the second? The answer lies in the comprehension of the 'worst situation' to which Arafat referred. This 'worst situation' was not only the precondition for the Oslo accords but also their political significance.

At the time of the Washington ceremony, the PLO was gripped by the worst crisis of its 29-year history. Regionally, Arafat's decision to stand by Baghdad in the wake of the second Gulf war of 1990–91 estranged the PLO from Egypt and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and cost the organisation \$120 million in annual donations from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq. Confiscations of Palestinian deposits in Kuwaiti banks, plus the loss of other revenues, brought PLO forfeits from the Gulf states in the years 1991–93 to around \$10 billion.²

Internationally, the collapse of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe, and of the Soviet Union in particular, removed what for the PLO had been a historic counterweight to the imperial and pro-Israeli designs of the United States in the region. The Soviet collapse also prompted massive Soviet Jewish emigration to Israel with 390,682 settling there and in the territories in the years 1990–92.³

These factors were compounded by the PLO's rapidly diminishing manoeuvring room in its previous spheres of influence. Lebanon had already imposed draconian restrictions on its Palestinian residents. This was aggravated by a Syrian-sponsored siege waged by the Amal movement against Palestinian refugee camps in the late 1980s. In August 1990, the Gulf countries, as punishment for Arafat's solidarity with Saddam Hussein, summarily expelled nearly 400,000 Palestinians who worked there. There was no possibility of any PLO mobilisation in Syria given the frigid relations between Arafat and Asad. Finally, relations between the PLO and its constituency in Jordan – the largest concentration of Palestinians outside the West Bank and Gaza – were increasingly tense. King Hussein was historically suspicious of any PLO activity on his turf and his 1988 decision to renounce all claims to the West Bank had worked to strain Palestinian allegiances.

All of this dramatically affected the PLO, in both the occupied territories and the diaspora. The cut-off of Gulf state funds triggered a dynamic of disintegration throughout the organisation. Thousands of functionaries were laid off, missions abroad closed and, crucially, educational, welfare and social services for Palestinian refugees suspended. In August 1993, the very eve of Oslo, the PLO in Tunis simply closed down the organisation's information, culture, social affairs and 'returnee' departments for want of funds.

Madrid

The only thing the PLO had going for it in the period before Oslo was the 'peace process' that followed from the Madrid Conference of October 1991. Madrid was the fruit of then-US President George Bush's new dispensation for the region, part of the 'new world order' he proclaimed after the fall of communism. The ostensible reason behind Bush's call was to end 'the painful and intractable ... dispute between Israel and its neighbours', but the real imperative driving it was somewhat different.⁴ The Gulf war had thrown together a coalition of Arab states more susceptible to US hegemony than at any point in the last 40 years. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the defeat of Saddam's degenerate but independent brand of Arab

nationalism, Egypt, Syria and the Arabian Peninsula countries needed to shore up their authoritarian and discredited regimes with some gesture of US concern for Arab grievances.

These grievances focused on Israel's ongoing occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and South Lebanon. No Arab leader could dare endorse a post-Gulf war settlement that left blatantly unresolved the question of the Palestinians. Bush's Gulf war victory statement before the US Congress on 6 March 1991 therefore referred to the need for a 'comprehensive peace [which] must be grounded in United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and the principle of territory for peace'. This rhetorical accommodation to those Arab states that had backed the anti-Saddam alliance also appeared to mark the possibility of the PLO's international rehabilitation after the catastrophe of the war.

This position on Washington's part, coupled with the Bush administration's letter of assurances to the Palestinian side in October 1991 committing the administration to 'oppose settlement activity in the territories occupied in 1967', enabled Arafat to marshal a PLO Executive Committee majority in favour of the 'Madrid formula'. But the concessions the PLO was forced to make simply to sit down at the table with the Israelis were to leave their imprint on Oslo.

To begin with, the PLO had to give up any formal role in the peace process. In its stead was a delegation of Palestinians from the territories, excluding Jerusalem, approved by the Shamir government and functioning ostensibly as part of a combined delegation with Jordan. The bilateral format of the negotiations – with the Israelis holding separate talks with Lebanon, Syria and Palestine/Jordan – also allowed Israel to play off one against the other.

There were ten laboured rounds of negotiations between 1991 and 1993. The bases of these post-Madrid negotiations rent the delicate PLO unity so carefully stitched together after the October 1988 Palestinian National Council (PNC) meeting in Algiers, where the movement had formally opted for a two-state solution to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Israeli negotiators continually focused on the specifics of Palestinian self-government – such as the nature of an 'autonomous' authority, its structure and legislative power – while avoiding any discussion of substantive issues such as the applicability of UN Security Council Resolution 242 to the process or the idea of transition from the 'interim period of Palestinian self-government' to a final status settlement.⁵

Many Palestinians, including those initially supportive of Madrid, began to view Israel's stonewalling as a cover for escalating land confiscation and military repression in the territories. In 1991, the year