

THE PALESTINIAN BESIEGED--I

By MARK A. BRUZONSKY

Arab let-down

With the Arab defeat in 1948, the conflict was transformed, at least for most observers in the West, into that between Israel and "the Arabs"—for the Palestinians were demoralised, scattered, and helpless. This was the period of the culmination of the first defeat of Palestine: Zionism had triumphed against many odds and in a larger part of Palestine than specified in the UN partition plan, and the Hashemite throne annexed the West Bank, while Egypt took control of the Gaza Strip.

SECOND DEFEAT

Today, we are probably living through the second historic defeat of Palestine—the end to hopes for true mutual recognition and an honest two-state solution, though a faint and fading glimmer of hope remains. We are today living as witnesses to a crossroads in history; the end of one chapter and the quandary of how to begin another. And pregnant in the final death of the partition approach is the possibility, actually the likelihood, that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will yet evolve in new, potentially cataclysmic directions.

As British journalist Alan Hart concludes in his recent book *Arafat: Terrorist or Peacemaker?*

What is likely to happen if and when the Palestinians are forced to conclude that politics and compromise do not get results? My guess is that Arafat will be swept aside by Palestinian radicals who, with the growing support of Palestinian and then Arab masses, will commit themselves to the first real Arab revolution... which will have as its objective the overthrow of the existing Arab order and its replacement by revolutionary Arab leaders who will be prepared to confront the West and Israel by all means, no matter what the cost. Such a struggle would probably not end until the region and possibly the world had been devastated by a nuclear holocaust.

Even in the 1950s, under the leadership of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir, Egypt showed signs of wanting to find a way to make a deal with Israel, so long as something reason-

able for the Palestinian people could be arranged. At that time, a deal struck by Egypt, even one without Palestinian participation or consent, might have taken root. But new developments intervened and the struggle became more deeply embedded in the fabric of regional politics and history.

LEGITIMACY

With the advent of the PLO in 1964 there was something new—a Palestinian component with real Palestinian players of the next generation emerging, though still taking their cues from Arab leaders. It was Nasir's Egypt that breathed life into the PLO, and it was Egypt's foreign minister, Ismail Fahmi, at the 1974 Rabat summit who proposed the PLO as the "sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people".

Nevertheless, the PLO and the Palestinian revolution have always been highly suspect for the conservative Arab regimes, which cling to power and privilege with decreasing legitimacy and thus through increasing surveillance, repression, and, whenever possible, co-optation. Then, as now Jordan and other Arab states stood in opposition to a truly independent Palestinian movement and competitively did what they could—while paying lip service to Palestinian nationalism—to force the movement under their wing.

The PLO first became a symbol of the Palestinian struggle against Israel, and then of the Palestinian quest for self-determination in part of Palestine; but it also became a weapon in the inter-Arab struggle for dominance. The PLO was never a serious military, or even terrorist, threat to Israel. Rather, the PLO became the embodiment of an historic wrong, a moral weight threatening Zionism's ethical foundations, a unique claimant on world society which had midwifed Israel's birth in partial atonement for the Nazi slaughter. When Yasir Arafat appeared before the United Nations General Assembly in the fall of 1974, he did so as a protégé of world society. He was accorded the stature of a head of state. He symbolised the third world's quest for dignity, assertiveness, and justice.

Even the Israeli establishment took note and—still then in the aftermath of the shock of the October 1973 war—openly began debating the serious issues involved in a real compromise with the Palestinian nationalists.

But virulent public opposition to the PLO increasingly became Israel's course, and the opposition heightened with the Likud's ascent to power. The basic issue was never the PLO as such, nor terrorism, for that matter. Rather, Israel had to decide whether to reopen the central questions of Palestinian nationalism and the basic historical debate over partition. And, except for a very marginal humanistic movement within Zionism, the answer in recent years has always been in the negative, even though liberal Zionists sometimes continue to masquerade as if they were in favour of partition in an attempt to assuage their own guilty consciences.

For the Arabs, meanwhile, behind-the-scenes intrigue continued, with constant manoeuvring to make sure that neither Palestinian secularism nor democracy actually took root without Arab establishment control—in the West Bank or anywhere else. For if either of these potent forces were actually unleashed in a free Palestine, what could the kings and potentates of Arab-dom expect in their own realms?

King Hussein had hardly forgotten the lessons of his own civil war; nor was he about to share power honestly with a truly independent PLO. Public words did not indicate real policies; and Hussein, with Israel's acquiescence, kept as much control of those on the West Bank as he could, while carefully circumscribing Palestinian activity within his own kingdom.

Palestinian nationalism, in the eyes of those holding power throughout the Arab world, threatened to become a virulent cancer and had to be both used and controlled, a reality which partly explains why the Palestinians stood alone against the full might of Israel in the summer of 1982.

MOVEMENT

By that time, however, the die had been cast. The Palestinian revolution had been tamed into a movement begging for a small piece of Palestine. The PLO's leaders had been nurtured into the prevailing Arab state system and thus placed in competition with the other Arab power centres, most notably in Amman and Damascus, but also in Cairo and Riyadh. Moreover, the movement was itself to come to reflect the Arab state system—symbolised by the largely ceremonial and impotent Arab League—of which it had become a part. In turn, such developments led the PLO to incompetent representation, nepotism, corruption, and cult worship of the leader. Such a PLO was fit to take its place

at the negotiating table and in the corridors of Arab power, but it was no longer fit actually to fight for Palestine.

The determined Zionists knew this all along however much they chanted against terrorism and occasionally smiled at the notion of negotiations. The PLO had neither the might nor the political sophistication to achieve its new goal of a Palestinian state carved out of the occupied territories to exist alongside and in connection with both Israel and Jordan.

COLLAPSE

Meanwhile, Israel worked overtime and effectively to discredit any Arab initiatives which threatened to reopen the subject of a comprehensive peace and which might have gained significant world support.

And so, by the mid-1980s, we are witness to what seems in all probability to be the second major defeat of Palestine—the collapse of mutual recognition as a Palestinian strategy for dealing with the reality of Israel, and the resurgence of Arab state actors—most importantly Jordan (with the help of Saudi Arabia) and Syria—in competition to control Palestinian politics and to check independent Palestinian political power. Indeed, by January 1986, King Hussein had finally taken the cautious step of sending to the Jordanian Parliament, in the words of the *New York Times*, "a new electoral law that reasserts Jordan's responsibility for the Israeli-occupied West Bank and provides representation for Palestinian refugees in Jordan."

Consequently, the basic vision of mutual accommodation and peaceful coexistence is now being kept alive through American-sponsored, Israeli-nurtured, and Arab-promoted diplomatic artificial resuscitation.

Whether the sheer act of beginning some form of negotiations can hold back the rage and dissatisfaction that has been building in the Arab world is difficult to predict. Suffice it to say that there is serious fear and escalating concern in Washington, Jerusalem, Cairo, Riyadh, and Amman; and the fear is such that the public presentation of the bleak situation has been increasingly sugar-coated and diplomatic circles are busy manufacturing multiple forms of camouflage to disguise political reality. (To be concluded)

[The writer is Washington based journalist who specialises in Middle East affairs]

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Little hope for children of poverty

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