

The intifadeh and change: growing schism in Israeli politics

By Mark Bruzonsky
Special to Sada Alwatan

WASHINGTON, D.C. — (Bethlehem, occupied Palestine - 25 February 1989) It's become a bit cliché and simplistic, of course, to say that the intifadeh has changed everything here in the Occupied Territories. But it has indeed changed far more than I had realized from afar.

COMMENTARY

Previously I had last been to the West Bank a few weeks after the intifadeh began. But now the entire situation has become far more dramatic, far more encompassing, far more dangerous, and far more hopeful.

But before writing more about the intifadeh itself — in my column next week — there's also much to be said about what has happened on the other side of the green line, among the Jews of Israel.

A few days ago in West Jerusalem I dropped in on a "peace conference" sponsored by an organization which calls itself The International Center For Peace In The Middle East. It's a marginal group of establishment activists who have somehow managed to spend nearly 20 million dollars since coming into existence 7 years ago by holding a few meetings and publishing a few papers.

Quickly taken over by the left-wing of the Labor Party establishment, this front group has followed Labor in losing its political soul, only to be partially resurrected through the media last December. That's when the opportunistic Republican lawyer in New York who is associated with the American Friends of the Israeli International Center, Rita Hauser, finally decided that the Palestinians were represented by the PLO and found her way to Stockholm to urge Yasser Arafat to sign a joint statement with her.

Just a few weeks before that Stockholm encounter, Ms. Hauser had written very publicly, in the *New York Times* that the Palestinians must settle for autonomy — her long-held position. But offered the spotlight of publicity she apparently couldn't refuse the Stockholm opportunity. In that sense she is a perfect representative of the International Center.

This little bit of background is needed because throughout its existence those affiliated with the International Center were quite shy of the PLO. They in fact tried to hold their inaugural meeting in the French Senate Chambers in 1982. But the PLO's representative in Paris, the late Isam Sartawi, finally got so exasperated with them that he withdrew all PLO support, even though he was personally quite desperate for contact with Israelis. Then, when the 1982 war began, the organizers of the Center canceled the Paris meeting at the very time it was needed the most — too many of those involved felt they had to rally around the flag and show Israeli unity in wartime.

Anyway, things have changed on the Israeli "peace side." Credit the intifadeh even more than the PLO peace offensive.

First of all, the Peace Now movement has been badly split, with the side that retains the name moving fairly far toward explicit support for the two-state solution and negotiating with the PLO.

And what has happened to Peace Now is being

paralleled in some ways with goings-on inside the Labor Party itself. While Defense Minister Rabin continues to act and speak more like a full-fledged Likud tough-guy, the other wing of the party is having late evening meetings with PLO supporters like Faisal Hussein, looking for ways to stop the intifadeh. Don't misunderstand about the Labor Party though. Even the "peace" wing still wants to make a deal with Hussein or arrange some kind of fig-leaf "autonomy" for the Palestinians. But those in this camp understand that the intifadeh is hemorrhaging Israel's moral, political and financial standing and, true to Labor's history of duplicity, they give the impression of concern for the Palestinians while trying to undermine the Palestinian situation.

Furthermore, though sounding like a real peacenik now that his own Labor Party has denied him his long-held Knesset seat, Abba Eban is busy speaking to Jews worldwide with melodious-sounding words that seem to imply an eventual willingness to make a deal with the Palestinian nationalists (though he can't quite bring himself to say PLO).

And still another faction in Labor, this one headed by former party Secretary-General Lova Eliav, has another theme. Now rejoined with his old party after more than a decade of opposition since the time he was number two to Golda Meir and broke with her specifically over the Palestinian issue, Eliav is leading a crusade to pull the Labor Party out of the government. Eliav's stated goal is to position "the peace forces," minus Labor's current leaders Rabin and Peres if possible, as a serious political alternative that can make peace with the Palestinians. If he can't achieve that, at least he can promote his own political philosophy once again, having gotten the crumbling Labor party not only to take him back but to give him some renewed prominence.

Knesset member Eliav was in fact one of those most prominently featured at the International Center conference that I decided at the last moment to attend. It took place at the Moriah Hotel in West Jerusalem, not far from the much more famous King David Hotel which Shamir's "terrorists" blew up in 1947.

There were three main theatrical political events worthy of note at the conference.

First and most important was the videotaped message that came from no less than Yasser Arafat's deputy, Abu Iyad. It was a message of surprisingly moderate content — a message which I would bet reflected the helping hand of some of the PLO's newly supportive Jewish American and Israeli friends.

"In the past," Abu Iyad stated, "we believed that this land is ours alone, and we did not believe in the idea of coexistence between two states. Although we used to believe in the idea of coexistence as religions, or rather as people belonging to different religions. This kind of coexistence, that is, the coexistence between Moslems, Christians, and Jews, has been practised by our people in this land. However, the idea of coexistence between two states was one that in the past was remote."

Whatever one's view of the political message, it was clear to all that the PLO was finally talking a language the Israelis could at least begin to comprehend.

More important than content though was the locale. Israel's escalating political civil war has finally legitimized the PLO among many who just a year ago wouldn't have considered having a PLO man in the room — even on video tape. Now Peace Now, the



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International Center, and Knesset members from various parties including Labor, Ratz, and Shinui, were all at the podium responding in kind to the PLO's deputy leader.

Actually the growing schism in Israeli politics has caused a new kind of competition among Israeli peace groups, a competition of legitimization which requires publicly showing that contact has been made with the Palestinian leadership. The Stockholm meeting was one manifestation; and now the Abu Iyad video coming just three weeks before the *New Outlook* and Peace Now conference in New York on March 11. Part of the motivation that led to the Abu Iyad effort was to upstage some of the competitors of the International Center, among them *New Outlook* magazine and Peace Now. Important PLO personalities have been invited to New York, but their participation is uncertain.

The second bit of political theater at the International Center's conference was the participation of a Russian academic. An articulate and responsive person, everyone understood that the Russians are coming back to the Middle East and looking for chances to show themselves. That they did; and rather well.

And third was the evening appearance of Faisal Hussein — another attempt to suggest that at least some in the Israeli establishment have decided either to try to

open a dialogue with pro-PLO Palestinians or, if they have to, to go all the way and talk to the PLO itself. For many, of course, as I previously suggested, talks with "local" Palestinians is a subterfuge. But for others this is but a step toward reaching all the way across the divide to the PLO.

So what does this all mean?

In short, the intifadeh has accomplished one of its main goals. Israeli society is in the early phases of a political civil war that will have far-reaching repercussions. The PLO's intensified peace offensive launched at the Algiers Palestine National Council session has significantly heightened this situation.

Yet, as the legitimacy of Palestinian nationalism and the PLO continue to grow, even in Israel itself, we have entered an immensely dangerous historical time. The other side in Israel's political civil war, with Yitzhak Shamir leading one faction and Ariel Sharon another, can be expected to counterattack against both their opposition in Israel and the PLO — and to do so ferociously.

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