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BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

LOCAL ID
AUTHOR

TITLE The Middle East.

IMPRINT [London, IC Magazines, etc.]

ISSN 0305-0734

ARTICLE AUTHOR Mark Bruzonsky

ARTICLE TITLE Forum: West bankers support PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization; interview with Nafez

FORMAT Serial

EDITION

VOLUME

NUMBER

DATE March 1978

PAGES 27-28

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WEST BANKERS SUPPORT PLO

The Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza feel that President Sadat has offered too much and has received nothing in return, Dr Nafez Youssef Nazzal told Mark Bruzonsky in a wide-ranging interview. Dr Nazzal (left in photo), who is Director of the Middle East Studies Centre at Birzeit University in the West Bank, insisted that the population of the occupied territories recognise only the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as their legitimate representative and would accept no alternative.

□ **What do people here in the West Bank think of what Sadat has done and about the possibility of a peace settlement?**

○ Most Palestinians here in the West Bank are confused about Sadat's visit . . . Most people would like to end the Israeli occupation. I think this is a priority. But as far as other issues are concerned — the establishment of a West Bank state, the establishment of a mini-Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza — there are many viewpoints . . .

What the mayors say sometimes reflects what the people think. The mayors were elected by the people because of their position with respect to the PLO. However, they are individuals and each has his own political views.

If you ask Elias Freij, the Mayor of Bethlehem, about Sadat's visit he would speak very highly of it because he's thinking in terms of a peaceful settlement which will end the occupation and which will bring about the establishment of a Pales-

tinian state. And then if you come to the north and visit Karim Khalaf, the Mayor of Ramallah, he feels that Sadat's initiative is a sell-out as far as the Palestinians are concerned. He thinks this way because he is convinced that the Israelis are not planning to withdraw from the occupied territories. Therefore, he feels that Sadat gave too much and did not get anything.

Now, if you talk to people in the West Bank about Sadat's visit, the spontaneous answer would be: "If God wills it, his initiative will bring peace." And this, I think, shows that the West Bankers want an end to the occupation and want autonomy.

But what kind of autonomy is an issue that needs to be discussed. Unfortunately, no one has done a survey of the political attitudes on the West Bank. I'm planning to do that, but I'm really scared, more or less, to do it.

Why?

○ Because I might not be permitted to do it by the Israeli authorities.

What would you find, do you think?

○ I think I'd find that it varies. I hate to predict, but I think a majority of people would want a definite end to the military occupation. I think I would find that most of the people would say that the PLO is the sole representative of the Palestinians. This, of course, would be a threat to Israeli military rule in Palestine.

I think it's understood that most Palestinians look at the PLO as the institutional framework within which things must be done. However, it will be difficult to find out to what extent the people here are willing to accept a state. What kind of state would they be willing to accept?

They have suffered a great deal. After 1948, although we were leaderless, we suddenly came under Jordanian rule. There is no doubt that 19 years of Jordanian rule have demoralised the people. We were not allowed to have our political leadership or our parties.

The Jordanians attempted to integrate the West Bank into the Hashemite Kingdom?

○ Yes, they integrated it, but they failed to consider it as part of Jordan. So if you look at the West Bank you will see that it suffered severely industrially, agriculturally and economically.

Politically, we were deprived of leadership. All parties were dismantled. And this process made it easy for the Israelis to take over and continue the process — to control the people on the West Bank.

Of course, people look upon Jordan differently from Israel. No matter how badly they were treated by Jordan they would tend to forget the past, look at their present and say they are badly treated by the Israelis because, after all, Israel is their enemy.

As far as Sadat's visit is concerned, most

Palestinians believe that Sadat's initiative is not right. They feel that he misunderstood the issue.

The people in the West Bank do not believe that the issue is to end the psychological barriers that exist between the Arabs and the Israelis. They feel that the issue is the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. True, there are psychological barriers, but they are a result of historical events.

Most Palestinians in the West Bank feel that the issue is one of dispossession. One group, the Israelis, have dispossessed the other, the Palestinians. They became enemies. As long as they are enemies, as long as one is dispossessing the other, the dispossessed, of course, are unwilling to recognise and speak to those who caused this.

The West Bankers feel that Sadat's visit to Israel gave more legitimate recognition to the Israelis, to the occupation. Of course, they felt that the visit would bring peace. It reminds me of the way we treat each other. Usually, if two individuals are in conflict the one who initiates the peace is paid double. For example, if we are in conflict and haven't been talking to each other for a long time and I initiate the conversation it is expected, according to our culture, that you double that initiative. If I move one step forward you have to respond by taking two steps forward.

So, Sadat's visit was expected to produce a miracle. We expected Israel to go all the way, sign a peace settlement and withdraw from the occupied territories. I know for a fact that many people expected the Israelis to release political prisoners — at least a few of them. When this didn't happen and Sadat went back with practically nothing they felt that Sadat had given too much.

Personally I don't feel that Sadat's intention was to take something back with him. Sadat is a politician and his initiative was aimed at ending the Israeli myth — I should have not said myth — allegation, that for the last 30 years there have been no Arabs to talk to. It is true. For the last 30 years the Arabs were unwilling to talk to the Israelis. And this is understandable. As long as Israel is occupying the land of the Palestinians, as long as we have a Palestinian issue, it is . . . was very difficult for the Arabs to talk to the Israelis.

Now the Israelis can no longer allege that there are no Arabs to talk to. Eighty per cent of the Israelis are convinced Sadat means well, that Sadat wants peace. Unfortunately, I feel, the Israelis continue to distrust the Palestinians and some of the Arab countries. This makes the situation more difficult because as far as we are concerned in the West Bank it is important for the Israelis to trust us, to recognise us. As long as they continue to mistrust us and fail to recognise us there will be no peace.

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□ **Why don't you West Bankers form a political leadership to go to the Israelis and say you want to negotiate the creation of a Palestinian state?**

○ Because most Palestinians in the West Bank don't feel that the issue is just the West Bank and Gaza. The issue is Palestine and the Palestinians. We are inseparable from the Palestinians outside. We are inseparable from the PLO which is the representative of the Palestinian people.

If we go back 14 years, to 1964 (before the creation of the PLO and the Israeli occupation), then it would have been much easier for all of us to talk about solving the problem by creating a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. But now it is many years too late because there are more nations who recognise the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinians than countries that recognise the state of Israel.

To separate the PLO from the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza is essentially an attempt to solve only part of the problem which in the long run would not succeed.

□ **But that's exactly what's happening. Brzezinski has said "bye-bye PLO". The Israelis and the Egyptians are trying to find an alternative leadership. There were West Bank Palestinians in Cairo when I was there at the end of December — arranged by Israel and invited by Egypt. So, it looks very much as if the PLO is going to be pushed out, doesn't it?**

○ I don't believe it. I don't believe that the people in the West Bank would accept this. We are just taking the position of "wait and see". Nothing is very clear about what is happening between Sadat and Israel. They are talking of an overall settlement. Sadat did say that his position is for Israel to withdraw from all the occupied territories and for a Palestinian state to be set up in the West Bank and Gaza. As far as we are concerned, this is acceptable.

But the other issue is can the problem be solved without the PLO? The people in the West Bank and Gaza are against this. We don't want peace with Israel only to be confronted with the Palestinians outside.

I think most Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza would be against the creation of a West Bank-Gaza Palestinian state if the Palestinians outside the occupied territories are not for it. We are aware that although we are 1.1 million Palestinians and we are in a Palestinian land, nevertheless, you must remember we are not armed. We are sympathetic to the PLO. The PLO is our representative.

□ **Do you just say that, or do you mean it?**

○ We mean it. We say it, and we mean it! We are under occupation, so many people will be afraid to tell you that they are for the PLO. They'll tell you that the PLO is the sole representative of the Palestinians, but if you ask them: "Are you a member of the PLO?" they will tell you "No" because

it is an offence to be a member of the PLO in the occupied territories.

□ **But the Israelis tell me that the West Bankers are afraid to say they don't support the PLO because they're afraid of what will happen if they try to assert an independent political position.**

○ We support the PLO, but our support is different from the support of the Palestinians outside the occupied territories. We support them emotionally. We support them by saying that they represent us. Beyond that we cannot do anything, while the Palestinians outside the occupied territories — those who support the PLO — can go beyond this and become members of the PLO and carry on with the struggle of liberation.

To suggest that we should form a leadership in the West Bank and Gaza to deal



"... most Palestinians in the West Bank don't feel that the issue is just the West Bank and Gaza. The issue is Palestine and the Palestinians. We are inseparable from the Palestinians outside and the PLO."

with the Israelis . . . Of course, if the issue was just the West Bank and Gaza this could very easily be done. But this is not the issue. To solve the problem of the West Bank and Gaza is to solve only part of the problem.

□ **Let me clarify this. The issue is not the creation of a secular state anymore, is it? The issue is the creation of a Palestinian state which will also solve the problem of the Palestinians not living in the West Bank and Gaza.**

○ Yes, this issue is the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza for all the Palestinians. What the Israelis are trying to do is to isolate the PLO and to solve the problem within the context of the population of the West Bank and Gaza.

□ **Not just the Israelis — the Americans, the Jordanians, maybe the Egyptians, and maybe the Saudis.**

○ Well, I don't know about the Saudis because the Saudis would have more to lose if they tried to isolate the PLO from the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. We are not a threat to the Israelis because we are not armed. And we are not a threat to the Saudis — we can't go there. But the Palestinians outside, who are armed, could be a threat to the Saudis and to the Egyptians.

This is why we don't want to be victims of a plan to separate us from those outside. The Palestinians who are outside are the ones who have been struggling, who have been carrying arms, who have sacrificed a great deal. What did the people in the West Bank lose, honestly? Look at the situation.

The Palestinians in the West Bank were adopted by Jordan. They were given passports. Many of them had opportunities, like myself, to carry a Jordanian passport to go and travel as a Jordanian, to get educated; while the Palestinians outside, the Palestinians in the other Arab countries, have been deprived of all these privileges. They have been sacrificing a great deal for the return to their homeland. We are in our homes, after all.

□ **But the people on the outside came from places like Haifa and Galilee. They didn't come from the West Bank.**

○ Exactly. So what does it mean to them — a state in the West Bank and Gaza? That's why we say it means nothing to them and it's very important they should be included as part of this solution in order to regain their identity, even if it is not in

their own homeland — Jaffa, Haifa, and what have you.

□ **So, this brings us to Menahem Begin's plan. Begin says that you can have "autonomy", you can have "self-rule", that after five years he will re-evaluate. And apparently the Egyptians and the Americans are willing to discuss this, thinking it could be the beginning of something that will solve the Palestinian problem. What do the West Bankers think?**

○ We rejected this. The Palestinians rejected this three years ago when this question was discussed. When the Israeli Government proposed this there was confusion as to what people felt, so the Israelis decided, with the assistance of the US, to have a poll. They permitted the West Bankers to have an election. The platform of most of the mayors at the time was "No home rule, yes to independence and sovereignty" and they won.

I think the Israelis are trying to keep the situation as it is. We already have "home rule". What is the "home rule" Begin is suggesting? He's suggesting that we run our own affairs. Well, to a certain extent this is what's happening. The municipalities are running their own affairs. Of course, they are checked by the military governor.

"Home Rule" does not mean anything to us because as long as there is an Israeli military presence it is not "home rule". What kind of "home rule" is it when the Israelis insist that the settlements continue to exist? You know that the settlements were not established to create goodwill

between the Arabs and Israelis. They were established for strategic purposes, and they are sited to surround the heavily populated Arab areas.

So now we are militarily, economically and politically at the mercy of the Israelis. Even if the Israelis give us "home rule", even after the Israeli army is withdrawn, we will continue to be at Israel's mercy because of the settlements. The Israelis are going mad and establishing settlements like it is going out of season. They are doing this purposely to insure their presence in the West Bank and Gaza.

I have visited most of the settlements and I don't believe that they were constructed to be deserted in the event of peace.

□ Isn't it possible that there could be peace with some settlements of Jews living in a Palestinian state?

○ Yes, I don't mind. I don't think this is the issue. There is no objection to having

○ Of course, no doubt about it. We haven't been permitted to have our own institutions. If the Israelis feel insecure about such a state then there is no reason to reject the idea of autonomy for us as Palestinians — not as Arabs of Israel — for a five-year trial period in which we can organise ourselves and establish our own institutions.

□ With the participation of Palestinians not living here?

○ Of course! This is the whole point — autonomy not as the West Bankers or the people from Gaza, which Begin refers to as Arabs of Israel, but autonomy for the Palestinians. And I don't believe that the PLO would reject this idea — a five-year trial would give us time to rethink and develop our institutions.

□ Some people would say that's what Begin is offering.

○ No. Specifically when he says "Arabs of Israel" it is not what he means.

□ Both Sadat and Carter have repeated in the last few months that they believe that the Palestinian entity must have a link with Jordan.

○ Yes, we agree to this. But we say that we would like to have our independence and then decide. Why should Begin, Sadat and Carter decide what is best for us? We are saying that we want to decide for ourselves.

We are asking the world to give us our right to self-determination. We are not against Arab unity. Our dream is to have a united Arab nation. So, no doubt the Palestinian nation would work for Arab unity. I don't think the Palestinians would be against federation with Jordan or with Lebanon or Syria or Iraq. But this has to be decided by the Palestinians and this decision must be based on self-interest. If it is in the interests of a Palestinian state to have a federation with Jordan then they will decide that.

Unfortunately the world is unwilling to realise that we are capable of deciding for ourselves and that we are people deprived of our human rights. We are asking for our human rights without attaching this to other things which might be achieved.

□ If Sadat makes an agreement with Israel which gives Egypt sovereignty over Sinai and talks vaguely about how the Palestinian problem will be solved and how the Syrian-Israeli problem will be solved, how will the West Bankers view Sadat? Will they consider him a traitor?

○ Sadat is already being viewed as a man who's bankrupt. So far he has nothing from the Israelis.

□ He has Sinai.

○ I don't think Sadat needed to come to Israel in order to get back Sinai. Sadat could have done this without any trouble. And I don't think Sadat's aim is to get back Sinai. He could have done this without risking his own life by coming here.

□ You think he's very serious, that he will hold out for a Palestinian state, that he won't compromise with Begin about self-rule.

○ This is what he said publicly. Of course, I don't know what is going on behind the scenes, but he has stated over and over again that he is not interested in a separate settlement. I think he's interested in solving the problem once and for all. However, the problem is that Israel is not responding to his initiative.

□ And he's being pushed into a corner from which he may have to make a separate accommodation — which is the feeling of many people in Cairo.

○ Why don't you look at it the other way around. Let's say that after a while Sadat may look at the situation and say: "Well, I have done enough, I came to Israel, I talked to the Israelis, and the Israelis are adamant about not letting go of the occupied territories."



"Unfortunately the world is unwilling to realise that we are capable of deciding for ourselves and that we are people deprived of our human rights. We are asking the world to give us our right for self-determination."

Jews living in a future Palestine. But this has to be decided later, because the settlements that are being constructed now are, as I said, strategic. Their function is not to enable the Jewish people here to integrate and communicate with the Palestinians. As far as the Palestinians are concerned, these settlements would have to be dismantled and afterwards, when peace is achieved, I don't think there would be any objection to Jews living anywhere in the Arab world, including Palestine.

□ There's something strange here. The whole world is talking about the Israeli plan for peace, about Begin's offer of "self-rule" for the Palestinian Arabs (the Arabs of Eretz Israel as he calls them). And you are telling me there's nothing new?

○ You see, if Begin was willing to recognise us as Palestinians, and not as Arabs of Israel, then the issue would be altogether different. I think the whole world is missing the point. We are not "the Arabs of Israel", we are Palestinians, and we want home rule as Palestinians, and as Palestinians we are inseparable from the PLO.

□ Which means inevitably an autonomous state, with UN membership . . .

○ Yes, with an army . . .

□ How big an army?

○ A symbolic army, of course.

□ There would have to be demilitarisation.

□ He says you are Arabs of Israel; you say you are Palestinians. If you have self-rule you can be Palestinians.

○ We insist that he should recognise us as Palestinians.

□ But that's just ideological.

○ No, no. It means a great deal to us because we don't want to be separated from the Palestinians outside the West Bank.

□ So what you are saying is that Begin is offering the West Bankers self-rule but he hasn't offered the Palestinian people a process by which they could develop their institutions and form a state.

○ Yes, and he's isolating us from the PLO. We believe there will be no peace without the PLO. While we would very much like to see an end to the military occupation, and would very much like to have autonomy, we don't want this to be at the price of the Palestinian cause. Whether Israel and the world like it or not, we constitute the majority in the West Bank and Gaza. So what are the Zionists trying to do? They are trying to deny the fact that we exist. Are we or aren't we the majority in the occupied territories?

□ That's why they are willing to give you self-rule.

○ But our self-rule must not be supervised by the Israelis. We should have the right to self-determination.

□ What about Jordan?

○ This is not our problem.