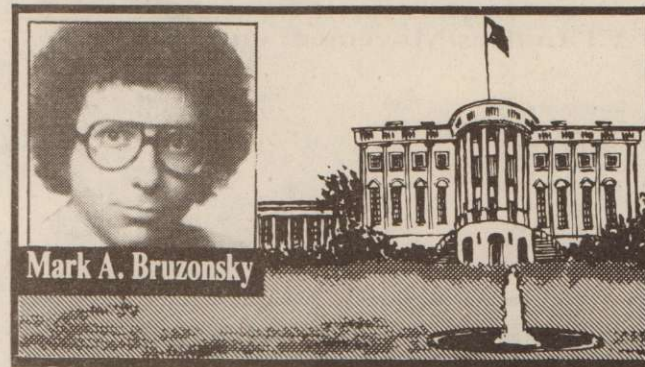


Hope and despair

From



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Washington

TALK with Palestinians in occupied Jerusalem — especially those most travelled, best educated, and most well-read — and you experience a kind of existential schizophrenia.

On the surface there is a constant attempt to maintain hope, even if wrapped in rather feeble attempts to continually squeeze such hope from admittedly long-squeezed, now shrivelled political fruits.

But deeper within, under the table if you will, the despair in their eyes rings more true than the hope in their voices.

It too, the despair, is rather feeble. For who wants to exist constantly within an atmosphere of political and psychological depression. Yet this despair, it seems to me, is in fact the deeper and growing reality here, a reality which is gradually altering the political and cultural landscape of Palestine in a variety of ways likely to have important ramifications on the future.

First, to the sources of the despair; then to the ramifications.

Most crucial — among those who have been educated abroad, who read a variety of information, and who thus have the ability to think for themselves about the Palestinian predicament — is the growing dichotomy between the "success" of the Intifada and the "failure" of the Palestinian leadership.

The eruption of long-seated popular discontent that carries the name "Intifada" has of course greatly altered, if not radically transformed, Palestinian society.

Originally, more than two years ago now, the "glorious Intifada", as it is still referred to, by Palestinians, carried within it significant hope that the Israelis would have to respond and that the world would bring significant pressures on them to do so.

It was in that context that the diaspora leadership, the PLO, primarily the Fatah core of the PLO, found itself rejuvenated on the world stage after the exile to Tunis.

This rejuvenation of course itself came in the context of the PLO's transformation from a revolutionary organisation attempting the "liberation" of Palestine through various forms of struggle to a diplomatic organisation attempting to capitalise on the worldwide concerns generated by the Intifada to achieve some kind of agreement with the Labour Zionist leadership.

Having lost any hope for serious military struggle, and being cut-off from the camps in Lebanon, Arafat's Fatah took up more and more the cause of the Intifada, of those who have lived so long under occupation. This in turn led to Arafat's initiative for a demilitarised mini-state becoming official PLO policy — an historic offer to accept Israel's legitimacy and negotiate a settlement largely to Israel's advan-

tage and under American and Egyptian sponsorship.

With pressure from the raging Intifada coupled with the PLO's unprecedented political stance and the "new" (not quite true actually) administration in the US, it was arguable that something would have to give, that some kind of diplomatic settlement was more than illusion.

So it all seemed to many back 15 or 16 months ago — or at least so it could be argued.

Today, what was arguable then (though never really likely) is much more difficult to defend today. At the Palestine National Council meeting that ratified Arafat's diplomatic initiatives various opposition speakers loudly indicated that they disagreed with his strategy but

once talks of any kind begin ... *Insha Allah*.

But among those living in the still-born, or at least severely retarded, PNC-declared Palestinian State, all these illusions of hope are giving way.

On the left, including the PFLP and the DFLP, there is more assertiveness for new policies coupled with more pushiness to direct the Intifada in new directions. There are signs that uneasiness within the Unified Leadership is growing both internally and with respect to Fatah's dominance. One indication of these developments was the need for the Unified Leadership to at the last moment cancel general strike on April 23 after local committees in a number of cities threatened to do so

state possible to those who secretly prefer some form of hyped autonomy to the expansion of the Intifada, remains powerful — but its credibility is threatened as never before. Hence the ongoing process by which Arafat's Fatah substitutes ever more amounts of money for political credibility, funds to loyalists for actual policy successes.

All throughout Palestinian society Arafat is using money as both carrot and stick. In this way hope itself is purchased and distributed ... but only at the surface-level. Below the surface, even many of those subsidised are finding the situation untenable, their credibility eroding, their own hopes being replaced by a foreboding about the future

are for the Palestinians.

For these will not be talks leading to any meaningful Palestinian-Israeli deal — that is nowhere in the foreseeable future. All the key parties involved know that the real purpose of the talks at this point is simply to have talks.

In truth, the upcoming talks, though primarily in the interests of the Americans and the Israelis, are also being manipulated by the Palestinian leadership in order to breathe new hope into Arafat's diplomatic gamble. The talks are simply to buy more time, hoping against hope for some future breakthrough that is not as yet even politically conceivable, no matter how much the academicians like to pretend and debate otherwise.

So talks there will be because those who hold the reins of political power in Washington, Tel Aviv, Cairo and Tunis each now need such talks, any talks. Furthermore, it is now beginning to appear that on the diplomatic chessboard it will be Shamir's Likud, possibly with some cooperation from a Rabin-led Labour faction, that will claim the credit (and demand substantial rewards) for what is actually in their own interests and actually of their own instigation.

So to repeat one more time. The greatest beneficiaries of the current political developments leading to Cairo are not the Palestinians, but rather the US and Israel. The upcoming Cairo talks will serve to release mounting internal pressures which the Intifada has created in both the US and Israel. They will as well ease the tension (real or theatrical) that has grown between Washington and Israel tension not so much about what kind of political settlement to push for but concerning the public relations aspects of how to handle today's situation.

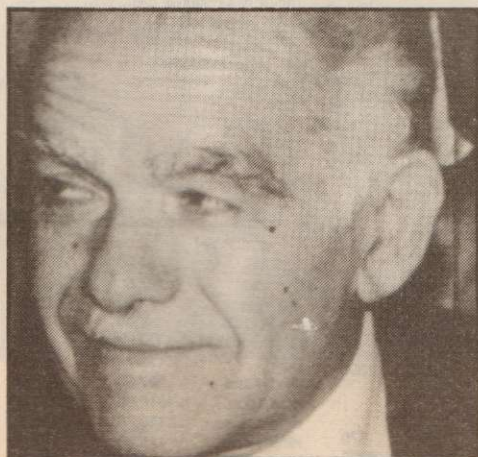
Egypt too, of course, will greatly benefit by further thrusting itself to centre stage, thus allowing it to make a further claim on the American attention.

Only the Palestinians, especially those actually suffering and dying, will loose out. For a while the Cairo dialogue drones on, parallel to that in Tunis, the Intifada will be further crushed, world opinion will become further confused, and the potential fruits of the Uprising will shrivel on the vine.

Bassam Shak'a is the long-time mayor of the largest Palestinian city, Nablus. And maybe he has summed things up best in a lengthy interview which appeared recently in the publication *News From Within* published by the Alternate Information Centre in Jerusalem.

"In our Arab history, we have bright days and dark days," Shak'a says, "and the dark days were always caused by the leaders."

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Shamir



Arafat

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would give him six months to show some progress.

Arafat's defenders argued at the time that he had a year. But in retrospect it all appears now to have been just a variant of the proverbial wishful thinking so common among so many. Over the past year or so the Arafat team has attempted to add to this mix only marginally credible pressures upon Washington by threatening that without real political steps forward Arafat could be forced to change course or even fall.

All the time-limits have now passed, of course: and there is little real progress to show. So once again the argument of the day is the need for more time because there is still hope — still hope that the new Israeli government will do something other than all the previous ones; still hope that the American government will change its real policies rather than continue its duplicity mixing rhetorical flourishes with one-sided policies; still hope that somehow something will happen

on their own.

Furthermore, in just the past few days preceding April 23 there have been five incidents of armed attacks against Israelis, contrary to Fatah's specific instructions concerning the use of arms.

And of course on the religious Right the shadow of Hamas grows ever more present here causing great anxiety among the secular, the pro-American, the Christian bourgeoisie and the aristocratic classes.

The moderate Fatah centre, all the way from those who actually think a Palestinian mini-



Basam Shaka

and a growing sense of despair.

There are few if any historical precedents for the Palestinian situation. There has never a such quasi-governmental former liberation movement with such wealth as the PLO.

Talks there will be, probably in Cairo. Its difficult to know whether the "tension" between Washington and Israel is real or faked, but in some ways that doesn't really matter. For the proposed talks, just like the boring US-PLO "dialogue" in Tunis, are far more in the interests of Israel, the US and Egypt (in that order), then they



Yitzhak Rabin

By H. D. Special to

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