

Begin's 'self-rule' plan is a mockery

Q: 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 to them if they try to assert their own independent political position.

A: Support them how? We support them, 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. But beyond that we cannot do anything.

While the Palestinians outside of 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.

We cannot do this.

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

A: Yes, the issue is the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza not for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza but for all of the Palestinians. And what the Israelis are trying to do is to isolate the PLO and to solve the problem within the context of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

Sacrifice

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?

We are in our homes, after all. The people in the West Bank and Gaza, the majority of them, are in their homes.

Q: But the people on the outside they came from places like Haifa and the Galilee, they didn't come from the West Bank.

A: Exactly. So what does this 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 be included and be permitted to be 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.

Q: So, this brings us to Menachem Begin's plan. Begin says that you can have "autonomy," you can have "self-rule," that after five years he will re-evaluate. What do the West Bankers and what do you think?

A: We rejected this. The Palestinians rejected this three years ago when this question was discussed. When the Israeli government proposed this then there was confusion as to what people felt. Then the Israelis decided, with the assistance of the U.S., to have a census. They permitted the West Bankers to have an election. And the platform of the mayors of

MARK A. Bruzonsky, right, continues his interview with Nafez Yousef Nazzal, left, Director of Middle East Studies at Birzeit University in the occupied West Bank.



the time was "No home rule, yes for independence and sovereignty."

The Mayors who won were the ones against home rule in the West Bank and Gaza.

I think that what the Israelis are trying to do is to keep the situation as it is. You know, we have "home rule" now.

What is "home rule" as Begin is suggesting? He's suggesting that we will run our own affairs. Well, to a certain extent this is what's happening now. 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 in the West Bank it is not "home rule." What kind of "home rule" is it as long as the Israelis insist that the settlements continue to exist? You know that the settlements were not established to create good will between the Arabs and Israelis. They were established for strategic purposes. And they are constructed in such a way as to surround the heavily-populated Arab areas.

So now we are militarily, economically and politically at the mercy of the Israelis. And even after the Israelis decide to give us "home rule" we would continue — even, even after the Israeli army is withdrawn — we will continue to be at Israel's mercy militarily, economically and politically as a result of the presence of the settlements. And nowadays, as you see, the Israelis are going mad concerning the settlements. They are establishing settlements like it is going out of season. They are doing this purposefully to insure their presence in the West Bank and Gaza.

I have visited most of the settlements and I don't believe that these settlements were constructed to be deserted in case of peace. I think these settlements were constructed to stay. They are there to stay, even after peace is established.

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

A: Yes, I don't mind. I don't think this is the issue. There is no objection to having Jews living in a future Palestine. But this has to be decided later on, because the kind of settlements that are being constructed now are, as I said, strategic.

They are not meant to be settlements so that there

will be 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 reached, I don't think there is any objection for Jews wanting to live anywhere in the Arab countries including Palestine.

Q: 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 that there's nothing new here at all, that it was rejected three years ago, and that Begin has in fact not offered anything that could be the beginning for a negotiating process. So, either the whole world just simply doesn't understand what's going on or the West Bankers are missing something that is new.

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

Inseparable

And as Palestinians, home rule would have to be inseparable from the PLO. But what they are offering us is home rule only as Arabs of Israel. We say, we must have home rule, autonomy, as Palestinians, meaning with the PLO. This is what the whole world is missing.

Q: Which means inevitably an autonomous state, with UN membership

A: Yes, with an army

Q: How big an army?

A: We don't

Q: A symbolic army?

A: A symbolic army, of course.

Q: There would have to be demilitarisation.

A: Of course, no doubt about it. We haven't been permitted to have our own institutions. OK. If the Israelis feel insecure about such a state then there is no reason to reject the idea of having an autonomy for us as Palestinians — not as Arabs of Israel — and to be given a five-year trial in order for us to organise ourselves — meaning to establish our own institutions.

Q: With the partition of Palestinians not living here?

A: Of course! This is the whole issue — autonomy not as West Bankers or 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 — to be given a five-year trial

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

A: No, specifically when he says Arabs of Israel it is not what he means.

Q: He's saying autonomy, he's saying self-rule and five-years from now re-evaluation. So why can't you during those five years develop your institutions?

A: As Arabs of Israel or as Palestinians?

Q: He says you are Arabs of Israel, you say you are Palestinians. If you have self-rule you can be Palestinians.

A: We insist that he recognise us as individuals, as Palestinians.

Q: But that's just ideological.

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

Q: So what you're saying is Begin's offering the West Bankers self-rule but he hasn't offered the Palestinian people a process where they could develop their institutions and become a state?

A: Yes, and he's isolating us from the PLO. We believe there will not be peace without the PLO. We say, and will continue to say, that while we would very much like to have an end to the military occupation, and would like very much to have autonomy, we don't want this to be at the price of the Palestinian cause, the Palestinian issue.

The issue is not the West Bank and Gaza, please. Whether Israel likes it or not, whether the whole world likes 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. And we or aren't we the majority in the occupied territories?

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

A: But our self-rule is not to be supervised by the Israelis. We should have the right for self-determination.