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Palastine

Reflections on the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian Authority and the future of the national movement

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On October 3, Mahmoud Abbas, de facto Palestinian President (his term of office was officially completed in January 2009), stated that he would reject all dialogue with Israel if the settlement freeze on the West Bank was not renewed. The same day, outgoing Israeli chief of staff Gaby Ashkenazi was “visiting” Bethlehem, where he met officials of the Palestinian security forces. The coincidence of these two apparently contradictory events illustrates the increasingly flagrant lack of synch between, on the one hand, diplomatic posturing to revive a “peace process” which is long dead and buried and, on the other, the reality on the ground, the continuation of Israeli expansionist policies and the ever stronger integration of the Palestinian Authority in the apparatus of colonial oppression.

I intend here to try to identify the major coordinates of the situation in the Palestinian territories even if I do not aspire to give a complete picture. It amounts however to redefining current events in their context and their historicity, by advancing an analysis of the underlying trends and realities on the ground, then identifying the logic at work on the Palestinian side by focusing on the PA in Ramallah and on the left. The latter, in particular the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), is indeed taking a critical review of the Oslo years, conscious of the tragic course followed by the forces originating from the PLO. Consequently, the PFLP recently announced it was suspending its participation in the meetings of the PLO leadership as a sign of protest against the resumption of direct talks by Abbas. This is not the first time that the PFLP has taken such a decision, but it is still significant.

But it is the meaning of recent and current developments that I wish to emphasize, first reviewing the legacy of 17 years of the “peace process”. I will then attempt to establish the specificities of the policy of Salam Fayyad, the de facto Prime Minister (the list headed by Fayyad won only 2.4% of the votes in the general election of 2006 and the government he has led since June 2007 has never won the necessary vote of confidence of the Palestinian Legislative Council), and then, finally, examine the current dynamics of the rest of the “non-Islamic” Palestinian national movement (this is not to minimize the importance of Hamas but a study of the internal dynamics of the Islamic movement deserves a full article).

I. 17 years of the “peace process”

The fiction of the “peace process”

Since words have a meaning, it is appropriate to question the concept of a “peace process”, which returns as a refrain in Middle Eastern reality. In its most common sense, the “Israeli-Palestinian peace process” opened in the early 1990s, and was embodied in the signing of the Oslo Accords (1993-1994), which promised, in the view of a number of commentators and diplomats, “the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict”. This “peace process” has been repeatedly “interrupted”, but it still exists, suspended over events, waiting to be “revived”.

The reality is very different, as the Palestinians have reminded us on at least two occasions during the last ten years - in September 2000, when the population of Gaza and West Bank revolted to express its anger against the continuation of Israeli occupation, colonization and repression, and in January 2006, when Palestinians, in parliamentary elections, elected a parliament largely dominated by Hamas, a political organisation openly hostile to the negotiated process and advocating the continuation of resistance, including military resistance, against Israel.

Had the Palestinians gone mad? No. The Palestinians, unlike diplomats, live in Palestine. They saw the number of settlers in the West Bank and Jerusalem double between 1993 and 2000. They saw hundreds of Israeli roadblocks and dozens of reserved roads for settlers, subordinating the slightest movement to the goodwill of the Israeli authorities. They saw Jerusalem cut off from the rest of the West Bank. They saw the Gaza Strip cut off from the rest of the world. They saw, from September 2000 onwards, unprecedented Israeli repression, thousands of houses destroyed, tens of thousands of arrests, thousands of dead and tens of thousands wounded. They saw a wall, which encloses them in ghettos. They have seen neither peace nor its process.

The Oslo Accords: occupation by other means

“Since the beginning, we can identify two underlying conceptions in the Oslo process. The first is that the process should reduce the cost of the occupation through a Palestinian puppet regime with Arafat in the role of Chief Constable responsible for Israel security. The other is that the process should lead to the collapse of Arafat and the PLO. The humiliation of Arafat, his ever more flagrant capitulation will gradually lead to the loss of popular support. The PLO is going to collapse or succumb to internal strife. (...). And it will be easier to justify the worst oppression when the enemy is a fanatical Islamic organization” (translated from T. Reinhart, “Détruire la Palestine”, éditions La Fabrique, 2002, p. 42).

These lines, written in February 1994 by the Israeli academic Tanya Reinhart, appear, a posteriori, prophetic. But Reinhart was not psychic - she understood, before others, what the Oslo process really was. Almost anyone who reads the texts signed from 1993 realizes very well that they amount to quite another matter to “peace agreements”. Critical issues such as the future of Jerusalem, the plight of Palestinian refugees, Israeli settlements and so on are absent from the agreements and are put back to hypothetical “negotiations on final status”. There is no mention of “withdrawal” of the Israeli army from the occupied territories, but only its “redeployment”.

Whatever the intentions or the illusions of Palestinian negotiators as to the formation of a hypothetical “Palestinian State”, the truth of Oslo is elsewhere: Israel, which then occupied the whole of Palestine, undertook to withdraw gradually from the largest Palestinian towns and to entrust the management of them to an administrative entity designed for the occasion, the Palestinian Authority (PA). The PA was to take over the management of these areas and to demonstrate that it was able to maintain calm, by means of a “strong police force”, “progress” in the negotiated process was subject to the “good results” of the PA in the security area. Continued occupation and settlement, with the PA responsible for maintaining order in Palestinian society. The colonial order therefore.

The contradictions of Israel and Zionism

The Oslo Accords were, in their logic, a rehash of an old Israeli project known as the “Allon Plan” (see Gilbert Achcar, “Zionism and peace – from the Allon Plan to the Washington Accords in Achcar, “The Eastern Cauldron”, Monthly Review, 2004). From the name of a Labour Party General, the plan, submitted to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol in July 1967, was intended to respond to the new situation created by the war of June 1967, through which Israel had conquered, among other things, all Palestine. Yigal Allon had identified, before many others, the contradictions which Israel and the Zionist project would sooner or later face and proposed to resolve them as pragmatically as possible.

When, at the end of the 19th century the early Zionist movement fixed as its objective the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine, 95% of the inhabitants of this land were non-Jews. Convinced that European anti-Semitism revealed the impossibility of Jews living with European nations, the Zionists advocated their departure to Palestine so that they could become a majority and establish their own state. The first Zionist Congress (1897) therefore endorsed the principle of “systematic colonization of Palestine”, in an era where nationalism on an ethnic basis and colonialism had the wind in their sails.

In November 1947 the United Nations adopted the principle of “sharing of Palestine” between a Jewish State (55% of the territory) and an Arab State (45%). Jews then represented approximately 1/3 of the population. The armed forces of the new state of Israel conquered militarily a number of regions notionally allocated to the Arab State: by 1949 Israel controlled 78% of Palestine. So as to preserve the Jewish character of the State, non-Jews were systematically expelled: 80% of the Palestinians, or 800,000 of them were forced into exile. They have never been able to return to their lands.

The war of 1967 was less successful than that of 1948. If the Israeli military victory was undeniable and Israel now controlled 100% of Palestine, this time the Palestinians did not leave. Israel purports to be a “Jewish and democratic” state: to assign rights to the Palestinians is to renounce the Jewish character of the state; not to assign them means abandoning its democratic pretensions. Allon proposed to abandon the most densely populated Palestinian areas assigning them a semblance of autonomy while retaining control over the bulk of the conquered territories: Palestinian islands in the midst of an Israeli ocean.

From the war of stones to electoral intifada

It was the philosophy of the Allon Plan that guided Israeli governments in the 1970s and 1980s, even if they put off for as long as possible the time when they would provide some rights to the Palestinians. The first Intifada (which occurred in late 1987) - a massive and prolonged uprising of the population of the West Bank and Gaza – changed the situation. At the turn of the 1990s the Palestinian issue was a factor of instability in the Middle East, a strategic area in which the United States wanted to ensure their grip after the fall of the Soviet Union. The US administration forced Israel to negotiate the Oslo Accords, which “provide” the Palestinians with a semblance of autonomy in the most densely populated areas.

Yitzhak Rabin, often described as “someone through whom peace could have happened”, was very clear: “The state of Israel will incorporate most of the land of Israel at the time of the British mandate with beside it a Palestinian entity which will be a home for the majority of Palestinians living in the West Bank and in Gaza. We wish that this entity is less than a state and that it administers independently the lives of the Palestinians who are under its authority. (...) The borders of the state of Israel will be beyond the lines that existed before the Six Day War. We will not return to the June 4, 1967 lines” (address to the Knesset by Prime Minister Rabin on the Israel - Palestinian Interim Agreement, October 5, 1995 available on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs). He added that Israel would annex the majority of the settlements and retain sovereignty over Jerusalem, its “one and indivisible capital”, and the Jordan Valley.

The Palestinian population quickly noted that Israel did not intend to give up control of virtually all of Palestine: settlement was accelerating, evictions multiplied and Palestinians were increasingly confined to areas surrounded by the army and the settlements. Whereas the situation of the population was deteriorating, a privileged minority, members of or relatives of the leadership of the new Palestinian Authority, considerably enriched themselves and cooperated with Israel in a conspicuous manner in the security and economic fields: in September 2000, the Palestinians rose again.

The “second Intifada” was crushed by Israel, which further marginalized Yasser Arafat, considered too reluctant to sign a final surrender agreement. Israel and the United States favoured the rise of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) who participated, for example, in a summit with Bush and Sharon, in June 2003, when Arafat was locked in Ramallah. At the death of the old leader, Abu Mazen was elected President of the Palestinian Authority in January 2005 (with a relatively low participation, and no Hamas candidate). Since Abu Mazen needed parliamentary legitimacy to accept an agreement with Israel, parliamentary elections were held in January 2006. The victory of Hamas was indubitable: by their vote the people had clearly signified their rejection of any surrender, and their willingness to continue to struggle.

The end of the Oslo parenthesis

The victory of Hamas revealed the totally unrealistic character of the “Oslo project”, understood as the possibility of settling the Palestinian question by the establishment of cantons administered by a native government that would be both conciliatory with Israel, legitimate and stable. But the “international community” did not wish to hear it: there was a boycott of the Hamas government, support for the Israeli blockade on Gaza, recognition of the “emergency government” appointed by Abu Mazen in the West Bank and so on. The United States and the European Union continue to act as if a “return to Oslo” was possible and desirable.

However, as has been seen, it was precisely the “peace process” which led to the “second Intifada” and the takeover by Hamas, then the only organisation capable of combining both material support for the people, criticism of the negotiated process and further resistance to Israel. When some talk of a vital “return to the situation before September 2000”, one would like to ask them if it was not precisely the “situation before September 2000” that provoked the September 2000 uprising!

The dithering and diplomatic posturing at work actually reflected a note of failure. All progressively became aware of the end of the Oslo parenthesis, and while some are blindly struggling to resurrect a corpse, others seek alternatives: the proclamation of a Palestinian State without borders, a Jordanian administration of Palestinian cantons, the deployment of UN troops to Gaza, the ideas keep coming, ever more fanciful. This willingness to “find a solution” is actually an understanding, even if a partial one, of the two logics really at work on the ground: the strengthening the Israeli grip on the West Bank and Jerusalem, notably through the increasingly strong integration of the Palestinian Authority in the apparatus of colonial oppression; the remobilization of the Palestinian population and the development of the international solidarity movement.

The strengthening of the Israeli grip

Let's talk about Jerusalem, firstly. Attention has been focused for a few days on a tender for the construction of 238 new housing units. So what? Have we forgotten the 200,000 settlers living in Jerusalem and its suburbs? Or the dozens of evictions and demolitions of Palestinian homes in recent months? The 238 new housing units are not an accident, they fit into a logic consistent since 1967: the Judaization of Jerusalem and its isolation from the rest of the Palestinian territories, to counter any claim to Palestinian sovereignty over the city.

Let's talk, then, about the West Bank, including its vaunted “economic development”. If the influx of international aid allows the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah to pay officials, it is very daring to speak of a real economic recovery and substantial and sustainable improved living conditions for the population. Palestinian GDP increased overall in 2009 but is 35% lower than in 1999. In addition, this overall increase conceals gross disparities: the building sector certainly grew by 24%, but agricultural production dropped by 17%.

In addition Israeli control over the West Bank has not been called into question: “the apparatus of control has become increasingly sophisticated and effective in its ability to affect all aspects of Palestinian life (...). The apparatus of control includes a system of permits, physical barriers (...) prohibited entry into large parts of the West Bank (...). The West Bank has been turned into a fragmented set of economic and social enclaves isolated from each other” (“Checkpoints and Barriers: Searching for Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza”, available on the site of the World Bank). These are the words of the World Bank, in a report of February 2010.

In addition, during the ten months of the “temporary freeze” on settlement last November, Israel allowed the establishment of 3,600 dwellings, pursuing a policy that last year saw the number of settlers in the West Bank increase by 4.9% while the Israeli population as a whole grew by 1.8%. Last but not least, on March 3 of this year

Netanyahu stated that even in the case of agreement with the Palestinians, Israel would not waive its control over the Jordan Valley.

Let's talk about Gaza, finally. Under blockade, Gazans are living through an unprecedented economic and social disaster. In the space of two years, 95% of companies have closed and 98% of jobs in the private sector have been destroyed. The list of products that have been or are still prohibited from importation includes books, tea, coffee, matches, candles, semolina, pencils, shoes, mattress, sheets, cups, and musical instruments. Prohibition on the importation of cement and chemicals prevents the reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed during the bombings of 2008-2009, whether of housing or sewage facilities, with health consequences that we can imagine.

In such conditions, it is not surprising that the Palestinian mobilization has resumed, with the development of "popular resistance" structures in many villages, protests against the wall and settlements, and that the majority of Palestinians have no illusions in the "resumption of negotiations".

II. The Palestinian Authority "Fayyad version"

A "silence against food" plan

The strengthening of the Israeli grip on Palestinian territories cannot be understood without considering the role played by the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, led by President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. In June 2007, following the failed coup in Gaza by Fatah's Muhammad Dahlan, MP President Abu Mazen decreed a state of emergency and appointed a new cabinet headed by Salam Fayyad, in place of a government dominated by Hamas. Fayyad's list had obtained only 2 seats out of 132 in the parliamentary elections of January 2006. But Fayyad, a former senior official at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, was the Prime Minister wanted by the United States and the European Union. The blackmail of financial aid, suspended since the election of Hamas, limited the reserves of Abu Mazen as to this "choice".

Fayyad therefore took office in mid-June 2007 and undertook to conduct a series of reforms in the Palestinian territories on the West Bank. Three years later, it is quite easy to understand the role assigned to Fayyad: to disarm resistance and move the centre of gravity of Palestine politics to economics, normalizing relations with Israel. He acted to impose what I call a "silence against food" plan, whose objective is to stabilize the territories of West Bank, trying to significantly improve the life of a portion of the population and repressing opponents without however meeting Palestinian national claims.

"Economic peace"?

The year 2007 seems to have marked a change in the management of the Palestinian question. The rhetoric of "economic peace" between Israel and the Palestinians dominated, whether from Tony Blair (special envoy for the "Quartet"), Salam Fayyad (the Palestinian Prime Minister) or his Israeli counterparts (Ehud Olmert then Benjamin Netanyahu).

The general philosophy of the doctrine of "economic peace" is as follows: the precondition for any negotiated settlement of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is a significant improvement of the economic conditions in which the latter evolve. Priority should therefore be put on Israeli measures allowing better economic development in the Palestinian territories and a strengthening of the support of donor countries to the Palestinian economy.

The doctrine of “economic peace” is a paradigm shift in the management of the Palestinian question: it considers the Palestinians as individuals seeking to meet needs and not as a people claiming collective national rights. For Fayyad and his foreign supporters, it amounted not so much to breaking with the PA's “economic policy” during the Oslo years as to advance and promote it as the key to any settlement of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Breaking with certain past practices, the Fayyad government has evidently “clarified” the PA's accounts and put an end to some clientelist practices. But the logic at work since Oslo nevertheless continued. Fayyad's “new economic policy” resembles that of the PA in the 1990s: favours granted to foreign investors at the expense of local entrepreneurs (such as tax exemptions), development of the most profitable sectors (shops, apartments and hotels in Ramallah, new mobile telephony lines) and enhanced priority in the PA budget for the “security sector”, which has a budget equivalent to the cumulative budgets of the “Access to education” and “Improving the quality of health services” programmes (in gross figures, from December 2008 to June 2009, 1,325 posts were created in security and 94 posts suppressed in health and safety) (“Palestinian Reform and Development Plan”, available at http://www.mop-gov.ps/web_files/issues_file/PRDP-en.pdf and Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS)).

The Palestinian economic growth announced in 2009 is, according to available data, a sham. Behind the apparently impressive figures (+ 6.8%) lurk many disparities related to the logic outlined above: the sectors boosting growth are construction (+ 22%) and employment services (+ 11%), while industrial production increased slightly and agricultural production is down; the amount invested in projects for economic development (\$400 million) is far less than what had been planned by the Fayyad government (\$1.2 billion); disparities between economic enclaves are important, especially between the West Bank and Gaza, as well as between some dynamic cities (Ramallah, Bethlehem) and the rest of the West Bank; Israel still severely controls Palestinian imports and exports. Furthermore, the budget deficit is significant (\$1.59 billion, or 26% of GDP) and maintains the PA in total economic dependence on the donor countries; finally, even if unemployment is declining in the West Bank between one-half and two-thirds of Palestinian households now live below the poverty line (according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and IMF figures).

The current apparent prosperity does not correspond to a real economic empowerment in relation to Israel or donor countries. The Palestinian economy remains a subordinate economy dependent on Israeli decisions, the requirements of donors and investors who, taking literally the slogan of the Palestine Investment Conference organized in 2008 with the support of the Fayyad government – “You can do business in Palestine” – are developing a form of casino economy: little concerned with real, local and long term development they hope to rapidly recoup far more than they have put in, while knowing that the risk of losing everything is very high. Everything currently indicates that the “economic peace” acolytes will learn sooner or later, at their own expense, that the population of the occupied territories is not ready to monetize its rights against a relative, temporary and structurally artificial “economic upturn”, which in reality benefits only a minority of the population. Hence the second part of Fayyad's policy: repression.

The reconstruction of the security apparatus

During the Arafat era, the security forces (law enforcement and cooperation with Israel on the one hand, participation, from September 2000 in armed operations against Israel on the other) had an ambiguous role which was one of the basic contradictions of the Oslo process: “Since the Oslo Accords and the emergence of the Palestinian Authority (...), the fundamental Palestinian strategic dilemma was that of reconciliation between the claims of national liberation, resistance to the occupation and the prerequisites of state-building (...). The Palestinian Authority faces two conflicting requirements. It is expected to impose the force of law, and prevent any unofficial armed demonstration. But at the same time (...) it is supposed to support the Palestinian national cause, including the right to resistance” (Hussein Agha and Ahmad S. Khalidi, “A Framework for A Palestinian National Security Doctrine”, Chatham House, London, 2006, pp. 84-86). With the Abbas-Fayyad tandem the ambiguities are lifted. The two programmatic documents prepared by the Palestinian Authority from June 2007 are very compelling in this respect.

The first of them, the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP), was presented to the Paris Conference of Donor Countries in December 2007. It obviously pleased the Western countries who promised Fayyad 7.7 billion dollars, when the PA had "only" claimed 5.6. Or an increase of 37.5%. Rather rare. In its final version, the PRDP contains 148 pages. The word "resistance" does not appear once. The word "security" appears 155 times.

The second programmatic document dates from August 2009 and is entitled "Ending the occupation, Establishing the State" (available at http://www.mop-gov.ps/issues_main.php?id=13). It is better known as the "Fayyad Plan". The Prime Minister sets out his vision for the construction of a Palestinian state via a policy of "Facts on the ground": it amounts to building the infrastructure of the future state despite occupation, with the perspective of a declaration of independence in 2011. Fayyad has therefore made a major reversal: it is the process of state-building which will put an end to the occupation and not the end of the occupation which will help build a state. If we carry out the same word count in this document as in the PRDP, the result is practically the same: 37 pages, with 38 occurrences of the term "security", while the word "resistance" appears once, in a sentence indicating that the Government will support non-violent initiatives against the construction of the wall.

The general balance of both documents is in line with these quantitative elements: Fayyad assumes and claims the status of "technocrat", since he does not originate from the seraglio of the PLO; alongside "economic development", the recasting of the security services is one of his priorities. "The Government will complete the restructuring of the security (...) agencies." It will provide sustainable training, equipment and infrastructure to enable the security sector to improve their performance. "In order to achieve the highest professional standards, the government will make the security agencies responsible by promoting the separation of powers and developing mechanisms and supervisory bodies". (ibid, p.16).

The reconstruction of the security apparatus takes place according to 4 guidelines:

- Reform of the security services, including retirement and replacement of several of their leaders by individuals thought close to the United States (for example, in 2008, Hazem Atallah was appointed head of police in the West Bank, instead of Kamal Sheikh, a member of Fatah, but judged too conciliatory with respect to Hamas).
- A strengthening of these services, through the training, in camps in Jordan, of thousands of new recruits, under US supervision.
- Spectacular operations "re-establishing order" in 2008, involving a large number of police officers and soldiers, notably in Nablus, Jenin and Hebron.
- The multiplication of arrests of members or supporters of Hamas, and, to a lesser extent, those of left organisations and the popular committees.

It is the articulation of these four points which gives consistency to the security policy of Abu Mazen and Salam Fayyad. Most of the new leaders (national and local) of the security services have no past as leaders of the intifada or Fatah's armed groups. They are "security professionals", especially zealous, who carry little political baggage. Similarly, the new recruits trained in Jordan were chosen primarily from among the poorer, less educated and less politicized Palestinian population, not from the Fatah activist layers. They are more likely to obey orders, including when acting to disarm members of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah's al-Aqsa Brigades, with whom they have no common militant past.

The Palestinian Authority has exploited the situation of security chaos in some cities in the West Bank since the dismantling of the Palestinian security forces in 2002-2003 by Israel. In Nablus and Jenin, armed gangs multiplied,

kidnapping traders, stealing cars and offering their services to whoever needed mercenaries to perform any kind of dirty work. The PA has stated that it was only to put an end to this chaotic situation that “restoration of order” operations were carried out. The massive deployment of hundreds of armed men effectively put an end to gang activities.

But the disarmament of the last resistance groups, the second objective of these operations coordinated with Israel and US advisers, led to a series of incidents: in Nablus and Jenin, there were violent clashes between security forces and militants of the al-Aqsa Brigades or Islamic Jihad. There were dead and wounded, including bystanders who came under fire from recruits who had obviously been poorly trained by the Jordanians.

These events marked the end of the period, opened in October 2000, of armed resistance in the West Bank. They were the last sign of refusal by the fighters themselves of the disarmament policy initiated by the PA, which has led hundreds of members of the al-Aqsa Brigades (including, in 2008, 250 in the Nablus district alone) to publicly renounce the armed struggle in exchange for an amnesty from Israel and hundreds of members of Hamas to lay down their arms under the pressure of the security forces. It is difficult to obtain reliable estimates as figures vary according to the sources, but it can be established that almost 2,000 members or supporters of Hamas have gone through PA prisons in the past two years.

It is also important to note here that there have been relatively few armed incidents during arrests of Hamas militants, unlike what has happened with Islamic Jihad and sometimes even the Brigades, which appears to confirm that Hamas has decided to avoid a confrontation with the PA in the West Bank and an unnecessary battle for “autonomous zones” actually controlled by Israel. Hamas seems content in reality to “manage” the Gaza Strip (Hamas is in a relatively contradictory position, as a political current built and developed in the 1990s and 2000s around rejection of the PA and Oslo, it is today in a position of managing the PA apparatus in Gaza in a manner which resembles Fatah's previous management with a monopoly over the security services, repression of opposition, development of clientelism and so on. See Yezid Sayigh, “Hamas Rule in Gaza: 3 Years on” at <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb41.html>).

In summary, the reconstruction of the security apparatus under the Fayyad government is the expression of a new “phase” of the Palestinian Authority: the ambiguities that existed under Arafat have been definitively lifted: as real back-up troops for the Israeli occupation forces the Palestinian security services have obtained the recognition of the colonial authorities. US general Keith Dayton, the architect of the recasting of the Palestinian security services has said: “I don't know how many of you know, but in the course of the past year and a half, the Palestinians have committed to (...) what they call offensive security throughout the West Bank, surprisingly well coordinated with the Israeli army in a serious and sustained effort to return law and order (...) and restore the authority of the Palestinian Authority. First in Nablus and then Jenin, Hebron and Bethlehem, they have drawn the attention of the Israeli military establishment thanks to their dedication, their discipline, their motivation and their results” (Speech by General Dayton to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 7 May 2009, available at www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/DaytonKeynote.pdf).

It is by taking into account all these elements that it is possible to speculate on the future of the national movement. In the following section, I will advance hypotheses, while taking into account the instability and uncertainty that characterize the current period.

III. What future for the national movement?

Fatah

The Oslo Accords and the constitution of the PA have been a major rupture for the Palestinian national movement, reducing the Palestinian question to that of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and fixing as Fatah's main tasks the construction of a state apparatus without a state and cooperation, sometimes at a forced march, with Israel to get more in the negotiated process, to the detriment of the daily struggle against the occupation and for the return of refugees.

These were the dynamics recorded during the last Fatah Congress (August 2009), which played a revelatory role rather than giving the signal for a new beginning. Fatah militants who are actors in the struggle for liberation are very much in the minority in the new leadership. The majority of the Central Committee of the movement, elected in 2009, now consists of pure products of the "Oslo years" and the PA apparatus even if they have an activist past: ministers, former ministers, and former advisors of Arafat or Abu Mazen, former security force chiefs, "negotiators", senior officials and so on. The whole panel of "Oslo political personnel" is here. In addition, the strong presence of representatives of the economic and security sectors embodies PA policy since its takeover by the Abbas-Fayyad duo.

Other elements confirm this trend: the virtual disappearance from the CC of representatives of the Palestinian people in exile, over which the PA has no jurisdiction (a single representative, Sultan Abu al-Aynayn, leader of Fatah in Lebanon) and Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, who the PA "lost" in June 2007; the non-election of Hussam Khadr, a respected figure in Fatah, known for his militant activities and criticism of PA policy; a "recount" at the last minute which allowed at-Tayyib Abdul Rahim, President Abbas's deputy, to "win" 26 votes and thus be finally elected to the CC after initially being defeated, and so on.

Passing from national liberation movement to main actor in the construction of a state apparatus under occupation, Fatah is henceforth no longer a political organization that can claim to represent the Palestinian people in a coherent way. The Bethlehem Congress in August 2009 sanctioned this state of affairs, even if the organization still has a number of honest and sincere militants and cadre in its ranks: Fatah is a conglomerate of local baronies and clientelist networks of a quasi-mafia type, under the control of an unelected regime which has not hesitated to censor information, or to track down, imprison, or even kill its opponents when it has not delivered them to Israel in joint operations.

The left in the Oslo years

With the Oslo accords, the Israelis and Americans managed to marginalize the PLO to the benefit of the PA. Thus the PLO, which represented Palestinians living in the occupied territories and the Palestinian diaspora, became a reference point without a political and decision-making role, the latter having been confiscated by Arafat and the small group of adepts originating or not from the PLO who formed the Palestinian Authority.

The PA political agenda was fixed by the Oslo accords: negotiate with Israel (and it promised the Palestinian people that this would lead to an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital), ensure the security of the state of Israel against any attack of Palestinian origin and assume the responsibilities of the management of the daily life of the Palestinian autonomous areas.

The Palestinian left political groups opposed to the Oslo process quickly saw that Oslo "was a fact that had to be dealt with." They belonged to the PLO and justified their attitude by their desire not to cut themselves off from the process led by the PA. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Palestinian People's Party (PPP, the former Palestinian Communist Party) [\[1\]](#) were quick

to reintegrate into the political game structured by the PA. Even today, DFLP and PPP members participate in the Fayyad government, which the PFLP has refused to join.

The weakness of the Palestinian left organizations is recognized in all polls and elections and this chimes in with the observations which can be made on the ground: weakness of organized demonstrations, lack of public profile (with the notable exception of the annual PFLP festival in Gaza), absence of distribution of an activist press. Sad to say, hard to believe: these parties now exist mainly, especially in the West Bank, through the diffusion of press releases and their websites.

How can we explain this deteriorating situation for organizations that had experienced a real boom during the first Intifada? The Palestinian people's expectations were not modified by Oslo. To their previous demands were added those for an improvement of the performance of the PA in the autonomous areas, marked by corruption and incompetence. Putting an end to this situation has become critical. But these problems have not really concerned the left political currents. A few personalities tried to speak out, but they were cut off from any collective organisation and easily countered by the PA, such as those who have signed the appeal of the 20 (against corruption and the capitulations of the PA), at the end of 1999, including several who were then arrested on the orders of Arafat.

By the admission of their leaders themselves, a considerable gap opened between the Palestinian people and the Palestinian left political organizations. The leaderships of the political parties have acted in fact only in response to the PA and Arafat initiatives. One can measure this distancing of links with popular concerns through the practice that these organizations have shared with the PA in the bureaucratic construction and administration of mass movements.

“Mass” movements

Take the case of the trade unions of which the most important is the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). It is a unified trade union. After Oslo unification came about by imposing quotas of representation for the four major national political currents: Fatah, the PFLP, DFLP and PPP. From the national level to that of the professional branches and territorial districts the distribution of roles was in line with these quotas. At all levels general secretaries belong to Fatah, while others must confine themselves to participation in the designated leadership bodies. Fatah was in a dominant position while other currents, and in particular the PPP, which had a tradition of trade unionism, have seen their influence considerably decrease since the “unification” at the top.

The PGFTU is therefore entirely under the influence of Fatah. By their presence originating from a bureaucratic compromise, the others condone it. Remember that the PA is the largest employer in the West Bank and Gaza! The democratic process in the union is non-existent, as are elections or programs likely to increase the participation of workers. Moreover the activity of the union is generally limited to settling individual situations of conflict between workers and bosses.

The situation of the women's rights movement is also instructive. The Palestinian Women General Federation was formed after Oslo. It is the result of co-optation of women's committees belonging to different political organizations with few ties to Palestinian women facing inequalities in all areas of society. Other women's organizations have been converted by NGOs, thus agreeing to become organizations rendering services to women in the Palestinian community. This is done in accordance with programmes decided by foreign funders who have transformed the organisations into service providers and women into passive beneficiaries, increasing the gap between the mass of women and the co-opted leadership of the movement.

Also the role of the student movement has considerably weakened. While it was a real nursery of political cadres in

the 1980s in particular, which weighed on the policies of different parties because it played an important role in the struggle against occupation, it now only reflects the balance of forces between the different political factions.

This is the reality of the “mass organizations” in Palestine, due on the one hand to their dependence on the political parties as co-opted structures and on the other their reliance on the PA and foreign donors who pay millions of dollars in subsidies to create a passive set of beneficiaries dependent on benefits approved and not a movement of actors in struggle for their rights.

Because of the lack of development of real mass organizations the political forces have reduced their action to social activism striving to respond to requests for assistance in the problems of everyday life, abandoning the field of political struggle and leaving a corrupt Authority to lock the national struggle into the impasse of endless negotiations with Israel

This is obviously not the place to make value judgments on the political paths of the left organizations. Most of the reflections above stem from discussions with the activists and leaders of these organizations, who are increasingly likely to take a critical view of the Oslo years, even if these criticisms have not yet had any organisational translation.

Ongoing reconstruction?

The isolation of the Gaza Strip and the fragmentation of the West Bank into dozens of territorial entities separated from each other by Israeli checkpoints have greatly reduced all economic, social and political activity. This confronts all those who wish, in one way or another, to continue resistance, with a major difficulty: not only do the situations vary depending on the autonomous areas, but above all it is more difficult in these conditions to develop a “national” political project. Difficulty in moving, coming together to carry out common activities across the territory - all factors which considerably hamper anyone who attempts to organize united resistance across the Palestinian territories.

The Israeli repression continues: raids, bombings, extra-judicial assassinations are legion. There are now also 12,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, and despite some media releases this number is steadily increasing. By way of comparison, proportional to the number of inhabitants, it is as if there were 200,000 political prisoners in France.

Economic asphyxiation has led almost all of the inhabitants of the Palestinian territories to worry more about their survival than the struggle for emancipation: rampant unemployment and rising prices (the price of basic necessities has doubled in the space of a year) affect the whole of Palestinian society and have led to an increasingly significant dichotomy between everyday problems and the struggle for national liberation, as well as an increase in individualist ideologies and behaviour.

This situation causes major psychological damage. Everyday prisoners, prisoners in their “autonomous zone”, the Palestinians find it increasingly difficult to project in time and space, which has two major consequences: a turning back to the town, village, camp, family... and an inability to think about medium or long term projects. Conditions which greatly penalize those who attempt to rethink a collective liberation project which necessarily implies a vision free of contingencies on a daily basis and any form of local and/or family retreat.

The “second Intifada” is very much over, and marked by a major defeat on the military, political and ideological levels. A number of questions are openly posed, which underpin, in fact, the Palestinian national question in the light of 1948 and all that has happened since, in society and among activists and political forces. One might summarize these queries in five generic questions even if the discussion is not organised and clearly formulated, but rather diffuse across the Palestinian territories:

- What is the meaning today of the claim for an independent Palestinian State alongside Israel, even on a transitional basis? The West Bank has been integrated into Israel, economically, politically, demographically. Under these conditions what relevance does the claim for an independent state which, for Israel, never meant anything other than a few isolated cantons, surrounded by walls, without any viability, have?
- What linkage is there between popular resistance, involving the whole of Palestinian society, the trade union and associative movement, political force, and armed resistance?
- How is it possible to reunite all of the Palestinian people? The Palestinian population is in fact severely divided: Palestinians within Israel (today 1.1 million), Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (nearly 4 million), Jerusalem Palestinians (250,000) and exiled Palestinians (over 6 million).
- What political framework should the national liberation movement have? The division of the movement weakens the struggle considerably and the establishment of a common framework, beyond the old PLO, posing the question of resistance and the struggle for emancipation, and not that of the management of autonomous areas allocated by Israel is, if as yet only relatively, openly posed.
- What links should be developed with the international solidarity movement so that this solidarity is political and non-charitable, effective, and not just symbolic? And how, inter alia, should we revitalise the solidarity movement as a whole with the most consensual slogan in the associative, trade union and Palestinian political movement, that of the total boycott (economic, political, diplomatic, academic, cultural) of Israel, which has proven its worth in the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa?

In June 2009, a number of left activists and officials organized an international conference in Ramallah, with the intention of, beyond the traditional divisions between left-wing organizations, establishing the bases of a new Palestinian nationalist, democratic, progressive left. The initiative has received a significant echo, and hundreds of people, from various left currents and “non-corrupt” NGOs participated in the debates, raising the questions that I have just set out. The front which should be formed, Tayyar, has not yet emerged, due to lack of financial resources, local implementation and a number of ideological clarifications. But this initiative shows the potential of the situation and the availability of many sincere Palestinian militants for the reconstruction of an authentic left, drawing the balance sheet of past failures.

The Zionist project involves the denial and the destruction of Palestinian society and identity. The defeat of the “second Intifada”, the bankruptcy of the PA, the course followed by the Hamas, all significantly reduce the margins of manoeuvre for those who still want to resist. However, in particular among former activists of PFLP or Fatah militants, many initiatives are nevertheless taken, especially in the refugee camps, where those who have nothing to gain from a “truce” leading to a partial agreement are located.

Their goal is twofold:

- to maintain, at all costs, the essential demands of the Palestinian people, in particular those of the right of return of refugees. That involves the organization of exhibitions, meetings between the young and the old, once expelled by Zionist militias, street demonstrations, and every kind of event aimed at transmitting the heritage and continuing to raise the demand.
- Beyond that, it is simply about resisting the Zionist enterprise of sociocide, restoring meaning to collective action, combating individualistic responses, maintaining and reconstructing the spirit of resistance in a period of downturn: women’s associations, agricultural cooperatives, trade unions independent of the PA, committees of prisoners’

families, village committees, cultural centres in the refugee camps and so on.

Beyond political cleavages, it is about dealing with the inadequacies of the PA and political parties, saving what remains to be saved of Palestinian society and reconstructing, gradually, the spirit of resistance, but also preparing future generations for the fight. Everyone knows that in a society where more than 50% of the population is aged less than 15, a new generation will rise up against its oppressors, Israeli, but also, where appropriate, Palestinian. When will this happen? Nobody can say exactly. But it is certain that the people will not wait for the remaking of the national movement, its program and its strategy or an agreement between the Palestinian forces to revolt again. It is on the other hand the latter factors, as well as the success of the initiatives described above, that will determine the character and outcome of this uprising.

[1] The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), originating from the Arab nationalist movement, was founded in 1967 and joined the PLO in 1968, where it was the second group in importance after Fatah, having an armed wing (Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades). It advocates a Palestine where Jews and Arabs live in equality, integrated into the "Arab nation". Its General Secretary, Ahmed Saadat, first arrested and sentenced by the PA in 2001 (under pressure from the United States and United Kingdom) for the assassination of the Israeli tourism minister claimed by the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, in a trial found to be unconstitutional by the Palestinian Supreme Court, was captured by the Israeli army from the Palestinian prison in Jericho on March 14, 2006 and sentenced to 30 years in prison by an Israeli military court in 2008. He is an elected member (since 2006) of the Palestinian Legislative Council. In the municipal elections of 2005 the PFLP candidate, Janette Khoury, was elected mayor of Ramallah. In the Palestinian parliamentary elections of 2006, the PFLP won 4.2% and three seats, with scores of 9.4% in Ramallah, 6.6% in Bethlehem and 6.5% in the north of Gaza. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) grew out of a split of the PFLP in 1969 and has played an important role in the perspective of a bi-national State. It opposed the Oslo process. At the presidential election for the PA in 2005 its candidate, Tayshir Khalid, won 3.35%. In the elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council in 2006 the front al-Badeel (Alternative) consisting of the DFLP, Palestinian Democratic Union, the PPP and independents won 2.8% of votes cast and two (out of a total of 132) deputies. The Palestinian People's Party (Palestinian Communist Party until 1991) was founded in 1982 by Palestinian Communist militants, who had previously been in the Jordanian CP and has played an important role in Palestinian trade unions. It joined the PLO in 1987 and initially supported the Oslo process. In the PA presidential election in 2005 its candidate, Bassam Salhi won 2.67% of the votes