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## The Intifada: An Unlikely Catalyst For Peace

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The period from late 1987 to 1993 was a time of unrest in Israel and the territories it occupied. Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank had grown tired of two decades of Israeli occupation, and of increasingly harsh policies towards them. Hungry for national independence, the Palestinians quickly turned what had begun as skirmishes surrounding a traffic accident in Gaza into a popular revolt. This uprising, which would come to be known as the intifada, was responsible for a paradigm shift in Israel. Israeli public opinion became highly polarized and, to be certain, a far-right challenge emerged; however, by the end of the intifada Israeli popular thinking had come to rest solidly on the side of the land-for-peace framework favored by the Labor party. Similarly, the Palestinians became more divided as a community, but also generally supported peace and reconciliation with Israel.

The transformations Israeli and Palestinian elites underwent as a result of the intifada were every bit as substantial as those their constituent populations experienced. The attitudinal change that the Israeli elite, particularly the military leadership, underwent was critical in order to achieve a political settlement of the issues that came to a head in the intifada. Similarly, there evolved a moderate and influential PLO-aligned umbrella organization during the intifada that supported limited accommodation of Israeli interests, increasing the chance for a political solution. Other political developments in the Palestinian elite threatened to place peace in jeopardy.

### A CALL FOR PEACEFUL UPRISING

One development that increased the prospects for a settlement was the birth of the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU), an organization that was "broadly representative and inclusive [of a high number of Palestinian parties]..." Its widely-circulated leaflets called for, *inter alia*, nonviolent strikes and protests to demonstrate Palestinian disapproval of Israeli occupation policy. The fact that the UNLU wielded a substantial amount of influence makes it remarkable that the organization did not use its power to call for violent confrontation with Israel when it was most fashionable to do so. In fact, less than five percent of the directives it issued called for the employment of violence to advance the goals of the uprising.<sup>2</sup> The objective of the UNLU was to end the occupation, not to destroy Israel.

The popularity of the UNLU signaled a shift not just towards accommodation with Israel but also towards a new level of organized resistance to occupation. These two developments were vital ingredients in the intifada mix: The first was necessary in order to get the Israelis to agree to territorial concessions at the table; the second was important to challenge the legitimacy and effectiveness of the occupation on the ground. The UNLU merits the respect of intifada apologists and detractors alike for its pursuit of nonviolent and pragmatic policies.

### THE ISLAMIC REACTION

By contrast, the programs followed by Hamas and Islamic Jihad—the Islamic reaction to the PLO's moderate, secular policies—were neither nonviolent nor pragmatic. The two groups openly advocated violence against Israelis and opposed the peace process. Hamas did not recognize Israel's right to exist in the first instance, regarding the establishment of a Jewish state in the Orient, and Jewish sovereignty over Muslims as violations of Islamic law. In the classic pattern, the most depressed areas of the territories, especially Gaza, were hotbeds of religious extremism; it was in these areas that Hamas found most of its support. After the UNLU's, Hamas' was the most influential voice of the uprising.<sup>3</sup>

Many Palestinian youths who had not experienced the humiliation of the 1967 war believed they could win a war against Israel. This belief, coupled with simmering anger at Israeli occupation policy and the powerful draw of martyrdom in Islam, no doubt informed the decisions of countless teenagers who joined Hamas and were either jailed or killed in clashes with Israelis. Israel's harsh policy towards the territories in general, and its often brutal response to the intifada in particular, ensured that groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad would find support. These groups constituted a serious challenge to the PLO, which could not co-opt their extremist platforms without jeopardizing its march to legitimacy.

In addition to a new Islamic extremist opposition, the PLO faced grassroots challenges. A number of political parties sprung up in the intifada, each broadening its base of support by providing basic services that the Israelis denied the Palestinians. This was a monumental development, one Glenn Robinson has characterized as nothing less than a "reorganization of authority in Palestinian society by the mobilization efforts of [a] new elite."<sup>4</sup> Yet the ascent of a new elite, an epiphenomenon of the uprising, was not instrumental in bringing about the current Palestinian-Israeli rapprochement formalized in the Oslo Accords. This was primarily the case because Israel did not recognize the new elite.

## PLO, PALESTINIANS ACCEPT ISRAEL

Indeed, despite the fact that a new counterelite had sprung up, the PLO and groups aligned with the UNLU were able to establish their hegemony in the territories, as has been discussed. This consolidation of power was apparent in terms of both wealth and popularity, and is a phenomenon that can be attributed to the adoption of pragmatism by the PLO as a governing principle, among other developments. This policy revolution was manifest in the November 1988 meeting of the Palestine National Council (PNC). In this session, formally titled "Intifada Meeting," the PLO implicitly recognized Israel, accepted UN General Assembly resolutions 181 (partition), 242 and 338, and renounced terror as a bargaining tool. Partition was a policy that elements of the PLO had come to embrace unofficially a decade or so earlier, but this was the first time the "sole legitimate spokesman of the Palestinian people" had publicly accepted it as an article of faith. This vote, a watershed, is reflective of a realization on the part of the PLO and the Palestinians at large that they were not going to be able to replace Israel with Palestine. Instead, they reasoned, they might persuade the Israelis to withdraw their troops and let them establish a state in the West Bank and Gaza. Forty years after their spokesmen rejected the UN's partition plan, the Palestinians—a large number of them, anyway—had resigned themselves to the creation of a smaller entity in part of Palestine, alongside Israel.

## ISRAELIS ACCEPT PLO

The PNC's decision served as a moderating force at a time when the Israeli government, led by Likud Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, faced considerable pressure from security hawks and the ultra-orthodox to intensify its crackdown. Predictably, the 1988 PNC resolutions, by conveying the image of a more reasonable PLO, made it easier for the Israeli government and people to support a two-state solution. It is likely that the PNC's vote also softened Israeli attitudes on the question of negotiation with the PLO; indeed, the most concrete proof of an emerging Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement was the Israeli decision to negotiate with an organization the Israeli government and people had previously branded "terrorist." By March 1989, fully 58 percent of Israelis in a *New York Times* poll said Israel should negotiate with the PLO if the organization recognized Israel and halted its terrorist activity.<sup>5</sup> This was truly a monumental development: Whereas the PLO had never before enjoyed any substantial measure of respect among

Israelis, now Israelis chose not simply to negotiate with the PLO but to recognize them (not the parties that sprung up in the territories during the intifada, and certainly not the Islamic extremist groups) as the legitimate spokesman for the Palestinians.

While newfound trust of the Palestinians and their spokesman had been inspired in part by the PNC's "Intifada" vote, the uprising itself led an increasing number of Israelis to recognize the legitimacy of Palestinian rights to self-determination.

## THE ADVENT OF THE "SECURITY DOVE"

Recognition of a Palestinian right to statehood was among some Israelis' motivations when they encouraged their government to go to the table. At the same time, however, many in both the Israeli elite and general population did not care about Palestinians' rights. Nonetheless, many on the Israeli right calculated that it was in their own interest to cede a sizable chunk of the territories to the Palestinians. Occupation was considered too great a burden for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to shoulder, given that it was supposed to be an army and not a police force, and that as such it had obligations beyond chasing stone-throwing youths. Suppressing the intifada was expensive in financial as well as in strategic terms, as the IDF was forced to commit personnel and equipment to situations it was neither prepared to handle nor desirous of handling.

In addition to reaching this conclusion, the Israeli military elite made another, equally important calculation: that the creation of a demilitarized Palestinian state "within the context of a broad Israeli-Arab détente would probably result in a significantly less tense and dangerous environment for Israel."<sup>6</sup> The military establishment also sought to shatter the myth that holding on to the territories meant ensuring the security of Israel—said Amos Lapidot, former Israeli air force commander, "from the standpoint of Israel's defense, the territories have no value."<sup>7</sup>

These revelations on the part of military leaders precipitated a transformation of many members of the Israeli military elite, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin among them. As a direct result of the intifada, Rabin underwent a conversion, from "security hawk" to "security dove": he came to support conciliatory policies in the name of security. Rabin's experience is not unique; it is in fact emblematic of the transformation that marked much of the IDF establishment in the late 1980s.

As a veteran of several wars, Rabin was rarely accused of being "soft" on the Palestinians. Although some on the far right criticized his handling of the intifada as not sufficiently harsh, most Israelis found his policies towards the uprising acceptable—his newfound security dove position

found resonance in the Israeli public, and, in the wake of the intifada, had quickly become mainstream. Indeed, many in the Israeli rank-and-file had come to believe that it was in Israel's security interests to allow the establishment of a Palestinian state. One eminent study notes the intifada "convinced most Israelis that the status quo of occupation was untenable."<sup>8</sup> These Israelis joined those who felt the Palestinians had an inherent right to self-determination in voting for Rabin. They also supported recognition of the PLO and ratification of the Oslo Accords.

While these Israelis moved to the left as a result of the intifada, many reacted to the uprising conversely, embracing such hard-line and previously taboo solutions as transfer. But those who favored the remedies promoted by the right were outnumbered by those who identified with the solutions of the left. One indication of this paradigm shift—towards talks with the PLO, withdrawal from the territories and other Labor proposals—was the election of Rabin in 1992 as the intifada was drawing to a close.

#### CONCLUSION

Although the intifada contributed to greater political polarization in both Israel and the territories, it also resulted in more dovish Israeli sentiments and in Rabin's electoral mandate for the land-for-peace formula embodied in Oslo. The PLO's decision to accept Israel and a two-state solution provided a peaceful backdrop to the intifada, and permitted Israel to recognize and negotiate with it as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This was an enormous victory for the organization and the Palestinians at large, for it led to the negotiation of Oslo, whose terms continue to be implemented sluggishly but surely. But the intifada's success in bringing about Oslo cannot be explained by its achievement of PLO de-radicalization alone. It lay the foundation for Oslo because it "succeeded in putting Israel on the political, diplomatic, and moral defensive..."<sup>9</sup> The intifada fundamentally altered the Jewish state's cost-benefit equation and thus made it desirable for Israel, the status quo power, to negotiate.<sup>10</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) 689.

<sup>2</sup>Tessler 692.

<sup>3</sup>Tessler 695.

<sup>4</sup>Glenn E. Robinson, *Building a Palestinian State: the Incomplete Revolution* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) xi.

<sup>5</sup>Tessler 724.

<sup>6</sup>Tessler 710.

<sup>7</sup>Jore Gold, "The Generals and the Areas," *Jerusalem Post* 10 June 1988.

<sup>8</sup>Myron J. Aronoff and Yael S. Aronoff, "Domestic Determinants of Israeli Foreign Policy," *The Middle East and the Peace Process: the Impact of the Oslo Accords*, Ed. Robert O. Freedman (Tampa: University Press of Florida, 1998) 12.

<sup>9</sup>Ian S. Lustick, "Writing the Intifada," *World Politics* 45 (1993): 560-594.

<sup>10</sup>Naomi Weinberger, "Intifada," Columbia University, New York, 19 October 1998.

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Said, Edward W. "Arafat's Agenda." *New Statesman and Society* 2 December 1988: 26-27.