Twenty Years since the Intifada:
The Palestinian Arena, Then and Now

Michael Milstein

The twentieth anniversary of the outbreak of the first intifada provides a good opportunity to examine the dramatic developments in the Palestinian arena over the past two decades. Chief among these developments are the transfer of the center of activity from the Palestinian diaspora to the territories, and the displacement of the Fatah national leadership by Hamas. Perhaps ironically, these changes have emerged from an unchanging feature of the Palestinian milieu – the ongoing vacillation between the willingness to work toward achieving a state and the unrelenting embrace of long term national goals ("the right of return" and the complete liberation of Palestine). Continuation of this pendulum is likely to confront Israel with difficult future scenarios, especially a decline into the reality of a bi-national state on the one hand, and creation of an independent, hostile, and aggressive Palestinian entity controlled by Hamas on the other.

On December 9, 2007, the Palestinians marked two decades to the outbreak of what in retrospect is called the first intifada. This twentieth anniversary provides a good opportunity to review events in the Palestinian arena and consider what changes have occurred over this period of close to one generation. The comparative analysis of "then and now" provides a clearer perspective for understanding the underlying processes currently taking place in the Palestinian arena and offers important tools for sketching future scenarios.

There is little – if any – disagreement among either the Palestinians or other circles that the intifada constituted an immensely important event in the history of the Palestinian national movement. In the broader strategic context, and particularly from an international perspective, the uprising sharpened awareness of the Palestinian issue to an unprecedented degree, and put the need for a political solution on the agenda (an insight that has also fully penetrated internal Israeli discourse). This paved the way for the beginning of the diplomatic process some years later, in part under the umbrella of the American attempt to utilize the favorable climate created by the 1991 Gulf War to redesign the Middle East.

The intifada also represented an important turning point in the internal Palestinian context. It was the first key national event engineered from "inside" (the territories), an

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arena that was overshadowed for decades by the "outside" (the diaspora), where the modern Palestinian national movement began in the late 1950s. In addition, the twentieth anniversary of the uprising parallels the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Hamas: the movement celebrates December 14, 1987, less than one week after the outbreak of the uprising, as the day of its founding. This event marked the breakthrough of the movement – the leading representative of the "inside" – to the front of the national stage, and the completion of the metamorphosis that it underwent from a Muslim Brotherhood branch, which focuses on social problems, to a movement leading an armed struggle (jihad) and aspiring to entrench its standing within the Palestinian national leadership. It is therefore understandable why the uprising is regarded as the opening shot in a battle between the Islamic current and the PLO and Fatah for hegemony in the Palestinian national movement. This contest has continued until the present time.

There is no centralized government in the Palestinian arena, and so public unrest has sometimes constituted the main thrust underlying profound processes and historical events.

Years of Change

Over the past twenty years, the Palestinian arena has experienced several dramatic upheavals and turnarounds. Within these two decades, three main time periods, almost equal in duration, can be distinguished:

1. The years of struggle, from 1987 to September 1993, when the Oslo accords were signed. During this period, the struggle turned into an armed confrontation, losing its popular character in the process.

2. The state-building period, from September 1993 to September 2000, when the al-Aqsa intifada erupted. During this period, the Palestinians concentrated on nation-building and establishing sovereignty.

3. The return to the armed struggle, from 2000 until the present time, a period that includes, beyond the renewal of the violence against Israel, an accelerated collapse of the regime formed in 1994 and a swift shift in leadership from the nationalist current to the Islamic movement.

A comparison between the current Palestinian arena and its situation in 1987 highlights a number of transformations that have occurred. The first is the rise of the "inside," and the decline of the "outside." The intifada is the outstanding symbol of the shift in the focus of action and decision making in the Palestinian arena from the Palestinian diaspora, the cradle of the modern Palestinian national movement, to the territories. Arafat obstructed the "inside" leadership's comprehensive takeover of the Palestinian arena when, together with the "Tunis group," he took control of the Palestinian Authority (PA), but time and accompanying biological processes inevitably prevailed. Today, except for a few survivors of the "outside" group (including those who are quite dominant, such as Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas [Abu Mazen] and Ahmad Qurei [Abu Ala], head of the Palestinian negotiating team in the talks with Israel), most action in the territories is controlled by a younger home-grown group that led the first intifada. This is certainly reflected among the leadership in the street and in internal politics, albeit less so at the administrative and "high" political action level, including contacts in the framework of diplomatic negotiations. On the other hand, the Palestinians outside the territories have been left without leadership, influence, or purpose. This is highlight-

ed by the loss of status of PLO institutions and their absorption in the PA rubric, and by the general elections in the Palestinian arena, particularly for the presidency and parliament, which are decided by residents of the "inside."[1]

A second transformation has occurred vis-à-vis the national elite. A brief glance at the spokesmen for Palestinian actions then and now highlights most of the differences in style, age, and origin of the "inside" national leaders. Faisal al-Husseini, Hanan Ashrawi, Sari Nusseibeh, Hanna Siniora, and Haidar Abd al-Shafi – all public leaders who were particularly prominent in the diplomatic-propaganda-media sphere – have been replaced by Hamas spokesmen, both in the political and military echelons, together with a number of leaders who still represent the political-diplomatic channel (some of whom originated from the "outside"), headed by Abu Mazen. In addition, other parties purport to represent the "street" or the "people": most of them command terrorist squads, such as al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, affiliated with Fatah, and the Popular Resistance Committees. The intifada has greatly facilitated a deeper socio-political process in the Palestinian arena of passing the leadership baton from the veteran leadership, especially representatives of respected urban families in the West Bank and Fatah leaders, to a young and activist generation identified with the street and representing the social periphery – mostly refugee camps and the rural sector. This generation, which emerged from the uprising and led its various phases, is particularly prominent in the Hamas leadership but is evident in the young leadership of Fatah as well,[2] and in effect now dominates the "inside" arena.

In addition, the past two decades have witnessed a changed social portrait. Palestinian society has never been secular, at least not according to the West's accepted cultural definition. However, the level of religious devoutness and its social characteristics as currently reflected in the Palestinian street were not present to the same degree in 1987. To be sure, the Islamicizing process in Palestinian society over the past twenty years is common to all societies in the region, including the Arab sector in Israel, and reflects profound internal cultural and ideological transformations. As such, attributing the strengthening of Hamas solely to social and economic problems, or to a loss of hope in the diplomatic process, would be overly superficial. Similarly, the severe crisis that has engulfed Fatah is not exclusively the result of these problems. It is comparable to the crisis affecting other non-religious national movements in the region (the Baath in Syria, the FLN in Algeria, and the National Democratic Party in Egypt), and testifies to their inability to provide an answer to questions of identity and purpose, as well as many years of frustration in all matters relating to the West.

This cultural development directly affects the status of those in the Palestinian arena supporting a political settlement. The latter camp consists mostly of people whose priority is nonreligious national ideology and principles that are not based on Islamic foundations. In this context, the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which is currently being celebrated in much understated fashion, constitutes the exception that proves the rule.[3] The modest scale of this celebration indicates on the one hand the disappearance of the prominent Palestinian left wing, but it also illustrates the crisis pervading the general nonreligious Palestinian national ideal,

traditionally represented most prominently by the leftist fronts (the Popular Front was once one of the most influential organizations in the Palestinian arena, and during certain periods even competed against Fatah for leadership).

Over two decades the Palestinians have witnessed the failure of their statehood aspirations. In the intervening years between the two intifadas, the Palestinian national movement experienced a period of rejuvenation, reflected in the unprecedented establishment of a semi-sovereign political entity in the territories. During this period the Palestinian enterprise embodied the efforts to establish an independent political system and operate institutions of government. However, the years of confrontation since 2000 have seen a gradual erosion of this national endeavor, accompanied by a widespread return to maximalist concepts of Palestinian nationalism, including the total implementation of the right of return and the liberation of "all of Palestine" – even among elements in Fatah, the ruling party, which had stood at the helm of nation-building and the diplomatic process with Israel. As part of the collapse of the central government, many Palestinians attest to a weakening of the already elusive and chameleon-like concept of "national identity." In place of a primary loyalty to the nation, most prominently represented by state institutions, a trend is now emerging towards strengthening the identity that provides Palestinians with both an ideological and material focus, from the *hamula* (clan) to the home town to the tribe, and extending to various Islamic ideologies.

The national divide: Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the two separate regions under occupation comprising the "inside" arena acted in fairly synchronized fashion as they engaged in the struggle against a common external enemy. The inhabitants felt that their fate lay in unity. During the "state period," however, the situation degenerated to a virtually official split between two entities controlled by mutually hostile governments, movements, and distinct ideologies (the situation amounted to a "cold civil war," i.e., a split in the state between two regimes, which likewise occurred in other cases of civil war, such as in Spain, the US, Russia, and China).[4] In this context the actions by Hamas over the past two decades as it advanced from the margins of the Palestinian arena to the leadership helm are particularly significant. The movement has instituted a new order in "half of Palestine" (the Gaza Strip), and has turned a change of government into a change of regime. Furthermore, Hamas has achieved an unprecedented status for the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which succeeded in winning democratic elections, forcefully overthrowing the existing government, and most importantly, simultaneously governing and conducting a jihad[5] (even if the current situation is far from ideal from the perspective of Hamas, and certainly so from that of the Palestinian public).

There has also been a marked change regarding the perception of a political process and the resistance ideal. Until the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada, support for a diplomatic settlement with Israel along the lines of "two states for two peoples" grew increasingly, and gradually overcame the more natural tendency toward resistance (i.e., the armed struggle as part of the unyielding war against Israel). It appears that as long as the Palestinians were far from having to deal directly with the core issues of a permanent settlement and the painful national concessions that it entailed, broad support existed

for the principle of a settlement. When, however, progress in diplomatic negotiations with Israel required a trenchant internal debate on the core issues (especially the refugees and Jerusalem), the profound cognitive dilemma among the Palestinians surfaced. What emerged was the unwillingness of most Palestinians to commit to an historic if controversial decision, combined with the inability of the leadership to force a painful national decision on the public. This phenomenon was fully exposed during and after the 2000 Camp David talks, but its signs are also discernable in the diplomatic negotiations taking place today.

Years of Continuity
Along with the transformations over the two decades are points of resemblance between the past and the present, which to a large extent testify to deeply rooted phenomena, in particular those long typical of Palestinians' political and social behavior. Perhaps the foremost of these is a destructive dynamic between the leadership and the street. In contrast to many Arab arenas in which a sovereign state has been established and means of enforcement and public control (including force) have been developed, there is no centralized government in the Palestinian arena, and so public unrest has sometimes constituted the main thrust underlying profound processes and historical events. The Palestinian leadership frequently regards this dynamic as a "means" or an "asset" to be channeled against external entities (including Israel). In practice, however, the leadership loses control of events at the initial stages, and eventually is itself damaged by the resulting anarchy. That is what happened in 1936-39,[6] in the first and second intifada, and also to a large extent during the Hamas take-over of the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2007 (an event led mostly by the movement's military elements). The "street," which connotes a public without direction, or armed gangs and elements operating solely at their own discretion, is what determines the "national direction," where consequently the leadership's sphere of influence is quite limited. The exception in this context was the state-building period, which forged enforcement mechanisms that wielded some degree of influence on the public. This period ended, however, in part due to Arafat's desire to incite the public against Israel after September 2000, an action that signaled the onset of a deterioration that has not yet ended.

The fluctuation between revolution and statehood is the most basic formula for understanding the dynamic of the modern Palestinian arena. For the past sixty years, the Palestinians have faced the ongoing dilemma: willingness to accept a state – albeit with limited territory (part of the historical Palestine) – and establish a sovereign regime there; versus a continued attempt to realize long term, non-truncated national goals through an ongoing struggle against Israel without establishing full sovereignty. Even after the initial experience of statehood, large sections of the Palestinian arena still refuse to make a decision to end this dilemma. This historical paradox is starkly reflected in the leadership of the Palestinian arena over the past few decades: Arafat was a leader who might have been able to impose solutions on the ground, but he consistently refrained from doing so. In contrast, Abu Mazen may prove to be a leader willing to make decisions, but is probably incapable of implementing them. For its part, Hamas rules out any dialogue on the matter, and no leader in the nationalist camp (PLO/Fatah) is emerging (at least

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at the moment) of a caliber willing or able to steer the arena – actually, only the West Bank – towards painful national decisions.

Hamas has been the main beneficiary of the internal collapse. The vacillation in the Palestinian arena between revolution and statehood has created a political entity with many contradictions: a split between two hostile governments; partial international recognition and partially governing institutions; partial continuation of an armed confrontation with Israel; and partial pursuit of a long term political settlement. This state of affairs is especially convenient for parties striving to preserve a theater of perpetual conflict with Israel and avoid painful national decisions. Hamas reaped the most benefits from the first intifada, an event that gave it a platform to promote itself as simultaneously constituting a socio-political leadership and a military faction. The first intifada created a theater of ongoing conflict, which died down somewhat when the PA was formed, but was constantly fanned by Hamas (and other terrorist elements) through the continuation of terrorist attacks. The al-Aqsa intifada created a hybrid situation, which Hamas exploited in order to strengthen itself, as reflected in its victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections and the movement's takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, without ever having to abandon the armed struggle or choose between the sharply contradictory paths of ideology and practical necessity. It appears that this dim state of affairs is particularly convenient for a "network organization" like Hamas, whose

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modus operandi rules out institutionalization and a defined hierarchy, the establishment of clear internal and external boundaries, and orderly decision making processes. It has therefore succeeded in maintaining itself as both a combat movement and a governing party, while benefiting from a lack of pressure to decide between two antipodes (a lesson that to a great extent it learned from Fatah, its predecessor as leader of the arena).

What Next?
Twenty years after the outbreak of the intifada, the Palestinian agenda is far from achieving most of the national goals championed by the leaders of 1987 (at least among the nationalist camp), chief among them the formation of a state. The state-like rubric built through great effort is crumbling, the principle of national unity has been undermined, no progress has been made in the internal dialogue concerning core issues in the diplomatic process, and the future of the talks with Israel on a political settlement is uncertain. A comparison between the two periods indicates some improvement in the status of the Palestinian question (albeit a very modest one): the foundation of some kind of state has been established and has won widespread international recognition, and leading international parties, headed by the US, are deeply involved.

None of this is sufficient to improve the questionable balance in the current Palestinian situation, but it may perhaps constitute a point of departure for a new Palestinian leadership, based on "inside" elements in the nationalist faction from the generation that led the intifada with a solid popular foundation (headed by Marwan Barghouti). Even though there is no guarantee that this will occur, the possibility exists that such a leadership will

be willing and able to improve the negative strategic position of the PA, at least in the West Bank (it is not likely that such a change can be achieved in the Gaza Strip in the foreseeable future). In the event that this scenario also fails to materialize (its likelihood in any case ranges from unclear to slight, owing in part to the fact that no such defined group exists), Israel is likely in a number of years to face two grave scenarios: a decline into the reality of a bi-national state, and the formation of an independent, hostile, and aggressive Palestinian entity on the other side of the Green Line, probably under the leadership of Hamas.

From a broad regional perspective, the course of the Palestinian issue over the past two decades reflects the situation of the greater Middle East. A number of severe fundamental problems common to the entire theater are manifested in the Palestinian arena: an increased crippling of the institution of the state as a result of both internal and external pressure; great difficulty in establishing an "era of diplomatic agreements" in the region; and the strengthening of non-state elements (particularly extreme Islamists), which are fomenting ideologies of resistance and hostility to Israel and the US. Notable in this context are Iraq and Lebanon, in addition to the Palestinian arena. The split in the Palestinian entity between a government of "agreement" and a government of "resistance" therefore constitutes a reflection of the greater region's internal bi-polar struggle. No conclusion to this struggle is on the horizon.

Notes

1   Two parliamentary elections were held in the PA: in January 1996 and January 2006.

2   Prominent representatives of this group in Fatah include Marwan al-Barghouti, Muhammad Dahlan, Jibril al-Rajoub, and Hassayn al-Sheikh.

3   George Habash founded the Popular Front on December 11, 1967, and served as its secretary general for many years. He died in January 2008.

4   There is nevertheless a key difference between these precedents and the Palestinian case. In previous examples, the two governments formed following the civil wars were in geographically adjacent areas. This situation also made it possible for one of the sides to conquer the other. Such a situation does not exist in the Palestinian arena, where the two existing governments are geographically separated, with no direct contact through which any military confrontation could take place, let alone the conquest of one side by the other.

5   For the sake of comparison, the Muslim Brotherhood takes part in elections in Egypt and Jordan, but the local governments limit its power (by forging election results, among other methods). In Algeria, the Islamic movement won the initial rounds of the parliamentary elections (1991-92), but the state military canceled the elections, thereby preventing the Muslim Brotherhood from taking control over the country. In Turkey, the local Islamic movement managed to rise to power through democratic elections, but its power has consistently been blocked by the military. In Sudan, the Islamic movement succeeded in gaining power for a few years, but through a military coup and not democratic elections.

6   The events began as an initiative of the Palestinian urban elite to promote protest against the British Mandate and the Jewish communities. The national leadership rapidly lost its ability to control events, which were taken over by armed gangs subject to no authority and composed almost exclusively of villagers or immigrants from villages to cities. These gangs greatly damaged the standing of the national leadership, in part by assassinating a large proportion of its representatives.