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The Question of Palestine: The International Responsibility 50 Years Later

Recent Political Developments in the Peace Process
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The "peace process" is a new term that entered the political dictionary of the Arab-Israeli conflict at the end of three events: internationally, the "fall" of the Soviet Union as the second superpower, regionally, the US leading an international alliance to end the Iraqi invasion in Kuwait, and domestically, the Palestinian Intifada in the OPT. Meanwhile, the region witnessed the rise of fundamentalism and the possibility of a religious conflict emerging. These together led to the convening of the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in October 1991, based on UN Resolution 242 and 338 and the acceptance by all parties of the principle of "land for peace".

From Madrid, two tracks of negotiations took place, bilateral in Washington from 1991 to 1993 and multilateral, starting in Moscow in 1992. The bilateral talks came to a halt after 22 months at the tenth round of talks when the Israeli side proposed autonomy while the Palestinian side demanded an interim self-government authority. The multilateral talks moved to various world capitals covering issues of mutual concern, such as arms control, regional economic development, refugees, and water and environment.

The Washington talks revealed the gap between the two sides and the reluctance of the US administration to exercise any pressure on Israel. Facing such a dead end, several secret channels were opened between the PLO and Israeli Government, one of them was Oslo and led to the Declaration of Principles (DoP), which was signed at the White House on 13 September 1993 and followed by various subsequent agreements.

The significance of this political breakthrough was mutual recognition, putting the two sides at a crossroads. Whether the agenda of what is since considered the "peace process" would lead to a historical reconciliation with a political settlement or only a temporary "truce" with limited progress remained to be seen.

The "test phase" began with 1994, where much attention was focused on the continuing negotiations that took place in Taba and elsewhere, while back home, violence sparked throughout the Palestinian Territories, the culmination of which came on 25 February, when 29 Muslim worshippers at prayer in the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron, were gunned down by Baruch Goldstein, a settler from nearby Kiryat Arba. Revenge attacks were soon carried out in a series of bomb attacks.

Nevertheless, negotiations continued and at the end of April, the Palestinian-Israeli Protocol on Economic Relations was signed in Paris, followed, on 4 May, by the Gaza-Jericho Self-Rule or Cairo Agreement. Soon after, the first Palestinian police forces entered the autonomous areas of Gaza and Jericho and began to set up a national, preventive, public, and presidential security system. On 1 July, Chairman Yasser Arafat returned home and swore in PNA ministers.

Since the agreed deadline for Palestinian elections passed (13 July), the next major event was the August signing of the Early Empowerment Agreement on the transfer of five civilian authorities (education, health, social affairs, tourism and taxation) from the Israeli administration to the PNA. In September, Jordan surrendered to the PNA the Waqf and religious courts in the West Bank, and the Gulf Cooperation Council ended its economic boycott of Israel, and in October, Arafat, Rabin and Peres were announced the winners of the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize.

Whereas the year had not been to the fullest satisfaction of the Palestinians, there was some progress evident that made them rather optimistic.

1995 gave little reason to joy: fruitless negotiations with Israel, further land confiscation and human rights abuses. Palestinian and Israeli officials held numerous meetings but failed to achieve any result on the second stage of the process, i.e., extending self rule in the West Bank. After various deadlines had passed it came almost as a surprise when the "Oslo II"-Agreement was finally signed in Washington on 28 September. The agreement divided the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem, into Area A (comprising major towns, excluding Hebron, from which Israel redeployed, administrative control for the PNA, and Israeli security duties), Area B (Palestinian villages, PNA civil authority, but Israel retaining overall "security responsibility"); and Area C (Jewish settlements and "militarily sensitive" areas, where Israel remains in full control). In sum, the PNA gained some limited administrative control over 27% of the West Bank, with the Israelis retaining effective control over the entire area.

The complexity and difficulties in the implementation of the agreements were made apparent in October, when the Israelis presented redeployment maps differing from those agreed on at Taba, while Israeli President Weizmann refused to free women prisoners whose unconditional release had been agreed.

Following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish extremist on 4 November, caretaker Shimon Peres seemed to take advantage of the disarray in the Israeli right to accelerate the process: The army redeployed from Jenin (13 November), Tulkarm (10 December), Nablus (11 December), Qalqilya (16 December), Bethlehem (21 December) and Ramallah (27 December).

The conduct of the Israeli government and security forces continued to call their commitment to peace into question during 1995. By the end of the year, some 91 Palestinians, including seven police officers, had been killed by Israelis, and the Mossad killed Islamic Jihad leader Fathi Shiqaqi in Malta.

The sense of optimism which followed the long awaited Israeli redeployment from West Bank towns at the end of 1995, was abruptly diminished by the first painful event of 1996: the assassination of Hamas activist Yahya Ayyash ("The Engineer"), murdered by Israeli agents in Gaza on 5 January. On 16 January, the Knesset passed the Oslo II bill with a thin majority vote (48:44).

In February and March, a series of suicide bomb attacks on Israeli targets, widely regarded as revenge for the killing of Ayyash, left dozens of Israelis dead. Israel completely sealed off the Palestinian Territories, conducted massive arrest campaigns, closed down Islamic institutes, and destroyed the houses of the families of those involved in the bombings. Shimon Peres declared a war on Hamas and announced a halt in the peace talks with the PLO. The urgently convened international summit on combatting terrorism held in Sharm Al-Sheikh was not able to ease the tension and, by the end of March, just another deadline for Israeli withdrawal from Hebron had passed.

In April, President Arafat and PM Peres resumed their talks and confirmed the commencement of the final status talks in May. A few days later, the PNC met for the first time since 1964 on Palestinian soil and voted to amend the PLO Covenant in accordance with the Oslo stipulations.

Despite negotiations on the future of Jerusalem being due to begin in May 1996, Israeli politicians made repeated statements that the issue was closed. East Jerusalem remains under the closure imposed since March 1993, settlement activity continued apace, and the Israeli Municipality began a campaign to destroy 'unlicensed' Palestinian homes, harass Palestinian national institutions in the city, and confiscate ID cards of Palestinian Jerusalemites.

Palestinian concerns frustration came to a peak when the extreme nationalist half of the Israeli electorate - openly opposing the Oslo process - returned Likud to power on 29 May, although by a very tiny margin, and announced Benyamin Netanyahu as the new Prime Minister. The Arab world shared the concern about the new right wing government, and a series of inter-Arab meetings convened to discuss the Arab peace strategy in the light of the Israeli election results.

Already in August the fears were confirmed when the Israeli cabinet voted unanimously to cancel restrictions on settlement development in the West Bank and Gaza, in a blunt disregard of the spirit of the Oslo agreements. This was followed by the opening of a tunnel under the Al-Haram Al-Sharif compound on 24 September that provoked Palestinians and led to harsh

clashes between Palestinian protestors and Israeli forces, during which 62 Palestinians were killed and over 1,600 injured (with 14 Israeli soldiers killed and 50 wounded).

The year 1997 began also violently when on 1 January, Israeli soldier Noam Friedmann opened fire on Palestinians in Hebron's Arab market, injuring six. Despite this attempt to "prevent redeployment from Hebron," Israel finally withdrew from 80% of the city on 17 January, following the issuing of EU and US letters of assurance regarding negotiations on outstanding interim issues and a timetable for 'further redeployments' from unspecified West Bank areas.

The next crisis erupted with the Israeli announcement on 26 February to construct a new settlement ("Har Homa") at Jabal Abu Ghneim. This led to fierce confrontations throughout March, during which over 400 Palestinians were injured. As a result, the PLO/PNA refused to attend the first final status negotiations, rejected Netanyahu's proposal that all final status issues be settled in 1997, and, following Israeli cabinet approval of 'further redeployments' that would leave the PNA with control (Area A) of some 10% of the West Bank, decided to suspend talks with Israel.

Tension increased at the beginning of April with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy's rejection of an EU demand to freeze settlements. Throughout the month, several Palestinians were killed and hundreds wounded in fierce West Bank clashes with Israeli soldiers and settlers. The May 28 summit conference between Egypt and Israel in Sharm Al-Sheikh ended also with no results, and the day, a new crisis evolved in the wake of reports that Israel was planning to withdraw from less than 40% of the West Bank.

Notwithstanding, US support for Israel was confirmed yet again on 10 June when the House of Representatives voted by an overwhelming majority to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, allocating US\$100 million for transferring the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The political situation continued to deteriorate when Israel responded to a 30 July double suicide bombing in Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market in which 13 Israelis were killed with a total sealing of the Palestinian Territories and a widespread arrest campaign, during which the army was authorized to operate "if necessary" inside Palestinian-controlled territory.

US diplomatic efforts to revive Israel-PLO talks continued with US envoy Dennis Ross' shuttle missions and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit in September, but in vain. In the wake of the 4 September suicide bombing in Jerusalem, the Israeli cabinet decided to reestablish its intelligence network in the Palestinian Territories, including Area A.

Israeli President Ezer Weizman's 7 October suggestion that Israeli and Palestinian leaders gather in the US for a Camp David style summit was vehemently rejected by the Palestinians who insisted that Israel first implement its commitments to the interim agreements, as they have continued to do so ever since.

1998 began as the old year ended – with increased Israeli settlement activity and a stalemate in the peace talks. The PNA turned down proposals to override the third phase for redeployment, while Washington repeatedly asked Israel for carrying out serious further withdrawal. In mid-January Israeli army and Palestinian police exchange gunfire in a two-hour standoff in Gush Katif during a protest by about 300 Palestinians against the Israeli government's expansion of Jewish settlements on occupied land and its hard line in peace negotiations. On 17 January the EU issued a statement calling for a more effective and serious role in the peace process in accordance with its share in the financial aid to the peace process. President Arafat, meanwhile, kept busy calling on the US to strongly and directly intervene into pressuring the Israeli government to implementing all the signed agreements.

Throughout the first quarter of the year, clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli army occurred frequently: in Bethlehem following the death of a Palestinian youth in Israeli police custody, in Qalandia refugee camp after the army arrested overnight six Arabs suspected of "violent actions", and in Hebron, after the murder of three workers.

Attempts to resume the Palestinian-Israeli talks were manifold but fruitless. In February, President Arafat and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright held talks in Ramallah, with the Palestinian side insisting that the three phases of withdrawal as stipulated by the Hebron Agreement be implemented. Meanwhile, a new US proposal contains lesser percentage of

withdrawal contingent to Israeli conditions. In the wake of the UN mediation success in Iraq, the Arab League urged the US to re-examine its policies towards the deadlocked Arab-Israeli peace process and put pressure on Israel to make it implement UN resolutions. While Washington admitted that the peace process is facing a critical situation after the failed Ross mission, the Palestinians praised the efforts exerted by the EU in advancing the peace talks, expressing their support for a direct EU involvement, and put their hope on the EU-endorsed British initiative to revive the peace process

The DoP, which has governed the relations between Palestinians and Israelis for the past five years, provides for an interim phase that will be ended by 4 May 1999. The options before the parties involved are not many. For the Palestinians, President Arafat is expected to work towards a national program of building the Palestinian civil society and its institutions, to maintain the unity of his people, and to secure the financial and political support of the international community in preparation of the declaration of the independent Palestinian state in May 1999. He does not need to mark the borders of the Palestinian state not only because Israel has no declared borders but also because the 1967 territory is still under Israeli military occupation and the sovereignty of the future state will be limited.

The Israeli options have been to maintain the status quo as long as they can for annexing more territory and expanding settlements as well as reaching a new agreement with the Palestinians in which they will force new conditions to contain and limit the shape as well as the authority of the new emerging, recognized entity.

The third option is the one of the mediators and facilitators, whether European or American. In the coming meeting in London on 4 May 1998 a new chapter of the DoP may be brought, in which there will be a second stage of Israeli redeployment, a freeze on settlement activities and commencement of the final status talks leaving all options open towards either self-determination or a confederation with Jordan.

The common dominator in the above three options is that public opinion in the region, including Israeli, as well as the world is saying that it is time for justice, and a Palestinian state is a must.