

# Living the Intifada

Andrew Rigby



**Zed Books Ltd**  
*London and New Jersey*

*Living the Intifada* was first published by Zed Books Ltd,  
57 Caledonian Road, London N1 9BU, UK, and 165 First  
Avenue, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, 07716, USA.

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Cover designed by Sophie Buchet.  
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by  
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

ISBN 1-85649-039-4 hbk  
ISBN 1-86549-040-8 pbk

US CIP is available from the Library of Congress.  
A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

Cover picture: 'Blockade' by Yazid 'Anani, aged 13,  
from *Faithful Witnesses: Palestinian Children Recreate  
Their World* by Kamal Boullata, published in 1990 by  
Windrush Press Ltd, Windrush House, Main Street,  
Adlestrop, Moreton in Marsh, Gloucestershire GL56 0YN, UK.  
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To my Gandhian parents  
Krishnammal and Jagannathan

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## **Acknowledgements**

Amongst those who have contributed in so many different ways to the research and writing of this book, I would like to thank in particular the following people: Kainat, Shareen and Sumer Abdul Hadi, Dr Nayef and Naheel Abu-Khalaf, Abu Nadir, Dr Mamdouh al-Aker, Fayez Abu Rahmeh, Khalid Al-Qidreh, Sahar Al Malki, Nafez Assaily, Mubarak Awad, Dr Hisham Awartani and his family, Nadia Bilbassy, Antonia Caccia, Howard Clark, Margaret Dalgety, Dr Uri Davis, Dr Saeb Erekat, Khamis Afiz Eltwok, Dr Gordon Feldman, Amos Gvirtz, Dr Manual Hassassian, Hani Husseini, Joost Hiltermann, John Horton, Deena Hurvitz, Dr Jad Isaac, Mahmoud Hamdi El Jammali, Ali Jiddah, Dr Edy Kaufman, Adam Keller, Khalil Mahshi, Dr Ruchama Marton, Chris McConville and the staff at the British Council in East Jerusalem, Tikva Parnas, Alex Pollock, Roland Rance, Michael Randle, Charles Richards, Mohammed Salahat, Mayson Samor, Ibrahim Shaban, Alya Shawa, Randa Siniora-Atallah, and - of course - Thoma Schik, to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude along with Marwan Darweish. Emma and Sean Rigby helped out on occasions. My partner, Carol Rank, was a key source of support and encouragement in addition to being a critical proof-reader. I would also like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Barrow and Geraldine S Cadbury Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Finally I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr Mahdi Abdul Hadi, without his support and encouragement, generosity and friendship, this research could never have been completed.

## Introduction

In early December 1987 riots broke out in the Gaza Strip, accompanied by violent confrontations between Palestinians and the occupying forces of Israel. This was the start of what became known as the Palestinian Intifada or Uprising: a sustained attempt by the inhabitants of the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip to throw off the yoke of Israeli occupation by means of mass protest and non-cooperation after more than 20 years of subjugation.

It seemed to many onlookers that this was one more manifestation of *people power* — the term coined the previous year to describe the mass nonviolent resistance in the Philippines which led to the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship. Later, of course, the collapse of authoritarian communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe came to be portrayed in similar terms, brought about by mass movements from below that generated such a pressure on established élites that the edifices of oppression were forced to crumble. Less successful were the efforts of Chinese students and workers in May and June 1989 to bring about a transformation in their own society and state. Their nonviolent protests were brought to a halt by the terrible massacres in Tiananmen Square and elsewhere and the subsequent waves of repression.

The tragedy of China in 1989 is perhaps sufficient evidence to indicate that mass nonviolent action for change is not a magic panacea that holds the key to the overthrow of all forms of oppression. Indeed, after four years of struggle the Palestinians in the occupied territories have not succeeded in ridding themselves of Israeli rule.

One of the possible reasons for this relative failure could well be the fact that the Palestinian Uprising has not been *nonviolent* enough. If nonviolence refers to a refusal to inflict, or threaten to inflict, physical harm upon an opponent in a conflict situation, then it has to be acknowledged that the Intifada has not been a nonviolent Uprising. Stones and petrol bombs have caused injury and death, as have the knives and guns to which individual Palestinians have resorted on occasions during the Uprising.

However, the Intifada can be characterised as an *unarmed* form of resistance, insofar as the tools of confrontation used by the Palestinians have not been *lethal*. Whilst the stones and Molotov cocktails have on occasion caused death, they fall into a different category from some of the weapons used by the Israeli military, notably guns that are designed to maim and to kill, — a task to which stones are not specially suited. In this sense one might compare the “democratic weapons” (in the sense that they are generally available to anyone) used by Palestinians to the tear-gas used by the Israeli forces. Tear-gas, a less democratic weapon than stones insofar as it is not so readily available, can cause serious injury and death; but like stones and Molotov cocktails, that is not the prime purpose of its use. The use of tear-gas

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cannot be called a nonviolent form of action, but nor can tear-gas canisters be described as lethal weapons unless used in particular circumstances. The same applies to the weapons employed by the Palestinians. By contrast, the use of firearms is potentially lethal in all circumstances.

Despite the image of the Uprising as consisting primarily of confrontations between stone-throwing Palestinians and armed Israeli soldiers, a more fundamental dimension of the resistance movement has been its *civilian-based* character. "*Nafada*", the Arabic verb from which the term Intifada is derived, refers to the action of "shaking off" or "shaking out". It can also mean to recover, to recuperate. As such it expresses the most fundamental characteristic of the Uprising: a revolt by Palestinians in their capacity as everyday people which has permeated through every aspect of their lives in society. Most crucially it has involved an attempt to undermine and transcend the structures of dependency which have tied Palestinians to Israeli rule: psychologically as well as in other ways.

Thus, alongside the direct face-to-face confrontations and mass actions, there has been a sustained effort by Palestinians to resist oppression by constructive action. Whilst seeking to disassociate themselves from Israeli rule by various forms of non-cooperation, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have also been engaged in serious attempts to create their own institutional structures separate from those imposed by Israel. The Intifada has involved an attempt to create new patterns of living characterised by a heightened degree of self-reliance in all spheres. Thus, in the process of trying to defend their communities against the inroads of occupation, the Palestinians have been trying to create their own autonomous civil society, as a base for continued struggle and as the infrastructure of a future Palestinian state. In this work, a particularly prominent role has been played by women. Within their own family networks and through the popular committee structure, women have been to the fore in the efforts to promote community-based health care, neighbourhood education projects, the "home economy" and other forms of constructive work.

What follows is an examination of the different dimensions of this resistance struggle during the Intifada. In particular the focus will be upon the relationship between the two main forms of resistance: the confrontations with the occupiers and the efforts to lay the foundations of an autonomous Palestinian society. The approach adopted is a thematic one — looking at different facets of the conflict as they have evolved since December 1987. It is an attempt to examine the Palestinian Intifada from the perspective of civilian-based resistance, to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the Intifada as an example of people power, the mass mobilisation of a society in an effort to overcome oppression.

To grasp the significance of some of the developments that have taken place within the occupied territories during this period it is necessary to understand a little of the historical background against which the transformations have occurred.



## The historical background

The outbreak of the Intifada took everyone by surprise. Yet it did not just *happen*. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see the Uprising as a stage in the evolution and development of the Palestinian nationalist movement, one which can be understood as emerging out of the frustrations of the population in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The frustration and resentment that became the motor force behind the revolt were not just with the occupation itself, but also with the PLO and with the outside Arab world. In this sense, the history of the Palestinians can be read as that of a subject people whose attempts to achieve the full rights of citizenship have been repeatedly thwarted by occupying powers and by their own internal conflicts and divisions.

### The revolt of 1936-39

Throughout the period prior to 1967, political power within the Palestinian community resided largely in the hands of a small oligarchic group of notable families. As Moshe Ma'oz has observed of the period when the West Bank was under Jordanian rule,<sup>1</sup>

...local politics within the West Bank were based largely on inherited group characteristics such as family, religious, and village ties... The *hamula*, the extended family, or clan, constituted the major political unit and force in West Bank politics...

Amongst the most prominent of these socially, economically and politically dominant families was the Husseinis. Thus it was Haj Amin al-Husseini, in his position as *mufi* of Jerusalem, who became pre-eminent in the 1920s and 1930s in the struggle against the Zionists. In 1936, young Muslim radicals associated with Husseinis were instrumental in starting the strike actions in the major Palestinian cities that soon blossomed into a general strike and civil disobedience campaign, and later into a full-scale armed revolt. So widespread was the revolt that, according to the Israeli historian Porath, by the summer of 1938<sup>2</sup>

the rebels were in control of most of the mountainous parts of the country. They were walking fully armed in the streets of Nablus without any hindrance... By September 1938, the situation was such that civil administration and control of the country was, to all practical purposes, non-existent.

It was during this period that Palestinians developed their own embryonic state structure, in the form of a country-wide network of "National Committees". During the general strike, Nourishment and Supply Committees were formed to provide staple items of diet and basic necessities to those who could not survive without such assistance. Women's Committees organised house to house collections of money and jewellery to provide funds for the movement, whilst a Central Relief Committee under the direction of al-Husseini distributed funds received from overseas. National Guard Units were formed to

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enforce the strike and the associated boycott of Jewish products. Special "Courts of Revolt" were established to mete out rough justice to those accused of treachery.

The direction of the armed struggle was nominally in the hands of a Central Committee located in Damascus, and attempts were made to organise the rebels in a hierarchical top-down command structure with the Central Committee at its head. These efforts met with little success. There was a chronic lack of coordination, with each regional commander jealous to maintain control over the armed bands within his domain against the intrusions of rival commanders. There were cases of commanders refusing to obey instructions from above because they considered their nominal superior to be socially inferior. Instances of extortion, corruption, intimidation, and betrayal for private ends became so common that some villages organised their own armed militia to defend themselves against the rebels. Underpinning the divisions that emerged between urban and village dwellers, radicals and moderates, Christians, Druze and Muslims, lay the bitter rivalry between the faction around the Mufti al-Husseini and the supporters of the Nashashibi family. According to a British teacher in the village of Bir Zeit, by the winter of 1939<sup>3</sup>

More and more the rebellion was tending to degenerate from a national movement into squabbles between rival rebel bands. Bir Zayt, like many other villages, was no little better than a hornets nest of long standing family feuds, stirred up afresh in the hope of getting some advantage through the help of this or that party of rebels.

Such divisions in the rebel ranks made the task of the British in subjugating the revolt, assisted by the Jewish Haganah, somewhat easier than it might have been. As Porath has commented:

The British authorities used various means to weaken the Revolt, including sowing dissension among the bands by disseminating rumours about information supplied by rebels of certain bands or areas or by sending extortionists who pretended to be true rebels. The authorities did not have to work too hard in this field in order to be successful. From the outset, but mainly since Autumn 1937, the rebel bands were torn by political, family and regional dissensions, personal jealousies and criminal abuse. The government's activity only marginally contributed to this state of affairs.

By the spring of 1939 the revolt had virtually died out. It had failed as a nationalist struggle against the British and the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, and it had failed as a social revolution, which at one stage it had threatened to become. The more radical amongst the activists had begun to question the role and position of the wealthy landowners who presumed to speak on behalf of the Palestinian people, when they shared little of their suffering and sacrifice. The embryonic social revolution and the nationalist struggle failed for similar reasons. A key factor was that Palestinians remained more divided

by regional, village, clan, and family loyalties than they were united by the appeals of nationalism or class solidarity. The price they paid was to remain as subjects of alien state structures.

### **1948-1967**

After 1948 the Egyptians established Haj Amin al-Husseini at the head of their Palestinian "entity" in the Gaza Strip. The Jordanians, for their part, used the anti-Husseini leaders associated with the Nashashabis to cement their rule over the West Bank. Whilst real power was centralised in Amman, the regional representatives of Hashemite rule were drawn from the local traditional families, who exercised control through their established networks, thereby perpetuating the fragmentation and weakness of internal Palestinian organisation and leadership.

A number of Palestinians, albeit a minority based on the urban intelligentsia, became increasingly frustrated by the failure of the traditional leaders to criticise or counter the Jordanian exploitation and domination of the West Bank. They found an outlet in various Jordanian oppositional parties which began to operate in the West Bank in the early 1950s.

At this stage only the Muslim Brothers advocated Palestinian self-reliance and armed struggle by West Bankers in their struggle to achieve their national goals. However, in late 1959 Fatah was formed on the basis that the liberation of Palestine was primarily a Palestinian affair that could not be entrusted to the Arab states, and in 1964 the PLO was established. Whilst Jordan extended token support to the new organisation, it resented the threat it posed to its rule in the West Bank and strict measures were enacted to control its activities. Such restrictions served only to foster nationalist feeling, aspirations which received a further blow in the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

### **1967-87**

A major concern of the new occupying power was, of course, to frustrate the formation of any independent all-Palestine political organisation that could act as a vehicle for nationalist resistance. Within the first year of the occupation several members of the newly formed Higher Muslim Council were deported for daring to protest against the annexation of East Jerusalem. Israel also sought to cultivate an indigenous conservative leadership with which she might negotiate a long-term settlement. No Palestinian leader, however, dared to conclude any agreement without the endorsement of either Jordan or the PLO. Meantime, the continued occupation and the harsh measures that accompanied it helped to radicalise wider sections of the Palestinian community, particularly among the young and educated. One consequence was the emergence of a new, more militantly nationalist political tendency and the further erosion of the leadership position of the traditional pro-Jordanian élite.

However, the formation of any kind of unified leadership and organisational infrastructure within the occupied territories was severely obstructed not just by the repressive counter-measures of the Israelis, but also by the

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internal conflicts and dissensions within the PLO. Indeed, it is questionable whether the mainstream within the PLO actually desired to establish a coherent political organisation in the occupied territories, for fear that it might ultimately threaten the paramount role of the leadership outside.

The most advanced underground political organisation was the Jordanian Communist Party, with whom the PLO was reluctant to cooperate. As early as 1968 the communists had established National Guidance Committees, but in 1973 it was the PLO that was instrumental in establishing the Palestinian National Front (PNF) as an attempt to coordinate nationalist activities in the occupied territories within a PLO framework. The Front was led by an eight member committee representing the communists and various PLO organisations. Although most of its activities were carried out clandestinely, its work was severely curtailed by the Israelis, and it was eventually outlawed in October 1979.

Denied the opportunity to express themselves openly in any overtly political organisation, the young nationalists established other vehicles for education and mobilisation. Student and professional associations, trade unions, women's societies, social and cultural associations, and other grass-roots organisations became the main agencies for promoting the struggle against the occupation. The activists received encouragement in this work from the outside leadership after the PLO, in 1974, had agreed upon an intermediate goal of establishing a "national authority" on any part of Palestine from which the Israelis might withdraw.

In anticipating the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, the leadership of the PLO were concerned to create the institutional infrastructure for such a state as early as possible. In fact, the grass-roots organisations that were established during the 1970s were seen as having a dual role. On the one hand, they were to serve as agencies for the political organisation and mobilisation of the people. On the other hand, they also existed to establish basic personal and community services that were not provided by the military occupation. Thus, in a somewhat paradoxical manner, the absence of certain state services created the institutional space for the development of alternative, Palestinian "quasi-state" organisations and agencies. Through the provision of much-needed services and facilities, such grass-roots organisations gained the allegiance of the majority of the Palestinian population, and as such constituted the nucleus of an alternative structure of authority and power to rival that of Israeli military government. Indeed, according to Salim Tamari,<sup>5</sup>

this strategy of informal resistance ... or institutional resistance was actually far more successful than even its own designers envisioned. By the late 1970s, it had established the complete political hegemony of Palestinian nationalism and the PLO as the single articulator of Palestinian aspirations.

This growth in nationalist sentiment and commitment amongst the inhabitants of the occupied territories was not due solely to the influence of the political

activists amongst their number. It also reflected the enhanced prestige of the PLO following the October 1973 War and the 1974 Arab Summit at Rabat. Primarily, however, it was due to the growth in anti-Israeli sentiment aroused by the burgeoning settlements and the harsh treatment of protesters meted out by Israeli troops. The spread of nationalist feeling was illustrated most graphically in the 1976 municipal elections, which the Israelis allowed to be held. Most of the councillors and mayors elected were part of the "National Bloc", openly identified with the PLO. Although the bulk of the new mayors were young members of old established families, the 1976 elections nonetheless marked the political ascendancy of a newer, more radical, nationalist constituency.

Whilst the PLO was heartened by the 1976 results, its organisers were worried that the newly elected representatives would be cultivated by the Israelis as an alternative Palestinian leadership. The dominance of Fatah within the PLO outside the occupied territories was not reflected to the same degree inside. The central leadership continued to harbour distrust of the communists and suspicions of the more radical of the new mayors who were aligned with the more militant PLO groups and factions.

Following the election of the Likud government in 1977 and the subsequent Camp David Accords, the new mayors were instrumental in establishing the National Guidance Committee. Formed in October 1978, the Committee consisted of 23 or more members, reflecting a very wide spectrum of Palestinian nationalist political orientations, and including the nationalist mayors and representatives of trade unions, societies and associations. The aim was to organise and coordinate an open political struggle against the occupation in general and the autonomy proposals of Camp David in particular. However, its non-clandestine form and the fact that many of its members were public figures made the Committee particularly vulnerable to Israeli counter-measures. Its effectiveness was greatly reduced by the imposition of restriction orders, arrests and the deportation of leading figures in the Committee, including the mayors of Hebron and Halhoul. In June 1980, the mayors of Nablus and Ramallah were severely maimed by car bombs. In March 1982, the remaining mayors were dismissed and the Committee outlawed by the Israeli Defence Minister, Ariel Sharon.

Whilst they attempted to suppress this embryonic Palestinian government in the occupied territories and uproot the influence of the PLO, the Israelis continued to pursue their second track, the creation of a more pliant leadership amongst the Palestinians through the promotion of the so-called "Village Leagues". The Israelis attempted to invest these "organisational puppets", largely drawn from conservative rural figures, with the powers of the disbanded municipalities, as part of a vain attempt to play upon the traditional tension between urban and rural dwellers in Palestine, and wean significant sections of the population away from its identification with the PLO. In this they were singularly unsuccessful, with most Palestinians considering the members of the Village Leagues as little more than criminals and collaborators.

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During the period following the destruction of the PLO's infrastructure in Beirut in 1982, morale within the occupied territories was low. The PLO appeared to have little alternative other than to pursue the diplomatic path to some kind of settlement as a subordinate partner to King Hussein. The Arab world was in disarray as a consequence of the Iran-Iraq war, and the inhabitants of the occupied territories were left feeling isolated and alone. Even the effectiveness of the National Guidance Committee had been debilitated before its final demise by factional splits and personal rivalries. In part this was due to the on-going distrust of the communists by the Fatah leadership of the PLO. As members of the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) were influential in popular organisations and trade unions in the occupied territories, the suspicion extended to all those structures within which the communists played a key role. It even reached the point when the leadership outside precipitated a split in the trade union movement, and directed the flow of "steadfastness" funds to "reliable people".<sup>6</sup>

According to Sarah Graham-Brown, by 1983 Fatah had become the strongest political current in the occupied territories, followed by the Communist Party, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and lastly the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).<sup>7</sup> Unable to organise openly, these different political factions used the trade unions, professional associations, student union groups and the different grass-roots organisations as arenas for political competition. Even in the 1970s there had always been considerable rivalry between the different political organisations, with a consequent duplication of service-provision agencies in some areas, each run by a different political wing of the PLO. In the first half of the 1980s relationships between the different nationalist factions deteriorated considerably.

Such political and organisational rivalries served as a fertile ground for mutual suspicion and rumour, with allegations of corruption relating to the receipt and use of funds from outside rampant. They also facilitated the task of the Israelis in trying to prevent the emergence of an all-Palestine political authority that could command allegiance and coordinate the collective resistance of the inhabitants throughout the occupied territories. They attempted to encourage the fragmentation process by trying to promote Islamic groups as rivals to the secular nationalists. Indeed, clashes did take place on a number of university campuses between secular and religious groups. In the Gaza Strip, where the Islamic tendency was particularly strong, the military government allowed the establishment of the Islamic University and the construction of many new mosques.

The level of disunity and factional rivalry within the nationalist camp in the occupied territories was a reflection of the condition of the PLO itself during the years after 1982. Arafat's courtship of Hussein, and his seeming preparedness to consider some kind of Jordanian-Israeli condominium over the occupied territories, helped to provoke a rebellion from within the ranks of Fatah itself. This was undoubtedly fomented by Syria, who also sponsored the formation of a National Salvation Front in opposition to Arafat, consisting

of the rebel Fatah factions, the PFLP, the PFLP-General Command, and Saiqa.

However, in February 1986, negotiations between Hussein and Arafat finally broke down, whilst the pressure for the reunification of the PLO grew as Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon were besieged by Syria's clients, the militia forces of Amal. Increasingly urgent demands were also coming from the inhabitants of the occupied territories, who were calling for some political initiative before it was too late and all their land was expropriated for the use of Israeli settlers. The USSR also played a key role as mediator helping to bring about a reconciliation between the different groupings. All this came to fruition at the 18th Palestine National Council (PNC) meeting of April 1987 in Algiers. It was at this meeting also that the PCP was welcomed as a full member of the PLO for the first time. This unprecedented display of unity provided a necessary basis for coordination and cooperation between the different nationalist factions within the occupied territories.

Just how far such declarations of unity would be translated into practice remained to be seen, but of one thing all were convinced: if the Palestinians were ever to witness the liberation of any part of their homeland, then they must rely upon their own struggle rather than upon the Arab states. If they had ever had any doubts on this matter, the Arab summit meeting in Amman in November 1987 dispelled them. The Iran-Iraq War had become the main priority for the Arab world, Egypt had been welcomed back into the fold despite her peace treaty with Israel, and Arafat was snubbed by the host, King Hussein. The Palestinians could delude themselves no longer about just how low a priority the Israeli occupation was for the Arab leaders who met in Amman, their eyes directed towards the Gulf and away from Palestine.

Palestinians in the occupied territories felt they had reached an impasse. As conditions under the Israeli occupation worsened, where could they look for help? The Arab states had lost interest. Europe and the USSR seemed happy enough to stay on the margins, and the United States remained as committed to Israel as it had ever been. This was the world into which the Intifada erupted — a mass civilian-based unarmed resistance movement initiated by youths who knew no other existence beyond that of living under occupation.

## **The Peace Process**

If the timing of the revolt that started in the Gaza Strip in December 1987 caught people by surprise, so did the intensity of the confrontations with the Israeli security forces that became a daily feature of life in the occupied territories. But while this real-life (and death) drama has been taking place, a slower-moving process has also been underway. This was the game of diplomatic manoeuvring around peace proposals that constituted the backdrop to the Intifada itself. The vicissitudes of this "external" process has impacted upon the internal dynamics of the Uprising in several ways, particularly with regard to morale: progress has helped sustain hope for the future, stalemate

has intensified frustrations and encouraged descent into lassitude and violence. More generally it can be claimed that the political fate of civilian-based uprisings such as the Intifada depends crucially upon the role played by third parties and "external" state and non-state actors.

It was the violence of Israel's reaction to the Uprising that made it an initial target of renewed international criticism, with a spate of UN resolutions deploring the violations of human rights being passed within weeks of the outbreak of the clashes. Concern also began to mount within the United States. Washington could not remain indifferent to the implications of the Uprising with regard to wider US interests in the Middle East. Thus it was that in late February 1988 Secretary of State George Schultz returned to the region in an effort to gain consent from the key players to a revival of the limited "Palestinian autonomy" concept agreed at Camp David in 1978. These accords, signed by Egypt and Israel, had called for a five-year period of limited Palestinian self-rule prior to a decision concerning the final status of the occupied territories. Schultz was hoping to get the parties to agree to a shortening of the time-span, with talks on the final status of the occupied territories to commence between Israel and a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation by May 1988. His proposals were rejected on all sides. Prime Minister Shamir refused to "surrender" to US pressure. Neither Egypt nor Jordan were interested in the revival of the autonomy idea unless it was part of an overall settlement of the problem. The Palestinians were convinced that Schultz's real concern was not so much to promote some putative peace process as to contain and defuse the Uprising, by side-tracking them down a dead-end of diplomatic dialogue, trying to get them off the streets and into the salon. Moreover, the leading spokespersons in the occupied territories refused to meet with him, insisting that their address was care of the PLO in Tunis to whom he should direct any proposals.

Notions of joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegations negotiating the future of the West Bank and Gaza Strip suffered a further blow at the end of July 1988, when King Hussein relinquished his claim to the West Bank. Throughout the year he had become increasingly concerned at the threats to his regime posed by two possible developments: first, that the rebellious mood of the West Bankers might spread across the river to the Palestinians living on the East Bank; second, that Israel might begin to deport Palestinians in large numbers over the river into Jordan, which Ariel Sharon claimed was the Palestinian homeland. Eventually he decided he needed to sever the bond between Jordan and the West Bank, in order to save the Hashemite kingdom from the Uprising. Jordan was not Palestine, and the so-called "Jordanian option" upon which the United States and the Israeli Labour Party had pinned their hopes appeared to be dead. Washington and Tel Aviv would have to find someone else with whom to determine the future of the occupied territories.

The scene was thus set for the PLO to take a decisive step of its own, one which the leaders of the Uprising had been urging for some time: the Declaration of Independence proclaimed in Algiers in November 1988. At



its historic 19th meeting the PNC also issued a political programme calling for a solution of the conflict on the basis of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, both of which recognise Israel's right to exist within secure borders. It declared a willingness to negotiate with Israel on the basis of the 1947 UN partition plan in the context of an acceptance of the Palestinians' "legitimate national rights", and rejected the use of violence in the occupied territories.

During the weeks following the meeting in Algiers the United States came under increasing international and domestic pressure to end its diplomatic boycott of the PLO, but Washington insisted on further clarification from Arafat on a number of points which remained ambiguous: the rejection of terrorism, the recognition of Israel's right to exist, and the acceptance of resolutions 242 and 338. By mid-December, after further elaborations and clarifications by Arafat at the UN General Assembly in Geneva and at a meeting with prominent American Jews in Stockholm, George Schultz announced that he was satisfied and that Washington was prepared to open a diplomatic dialogue with the PLO via its ambassador in Tunisia.

This about-turn in US policy was a result of both international and domestic pressure, combined with an appreciation of the PLO's new stance and a growing exasperation with Prime Minister Shamir's refusal to respond to the PLO's peace overtures. It represented another political victory for the Intifada, and within the occupied territories morale was sky-high, although few shared Arafat's apparent belief that a Palestinian state might be in existence within two years.<sup>8</sup>

The onus was now upon Israel to make a move. The continuing erosion of international support, particularly amongst the crucial American Jewish community, was a cause of special concern. If nothing else, a public relations effort was needed to counter the image of intransigence. By April 1989 Defence Minister Rabin and Prime Minister Shamir had managed to reach a tactical understanding that allowed Shamir to go to Washington with Israel's "peace proposals". They fell far short of President Bush's hope that Israel would agree to direct negotiations with the PLO. Instead Shamir offered "free democratic elections" in the occupied territories with the aim of producing a delegation of Palestinians "to negotiate an interim period of self-governing administration". The holding of these elections was made conditional upon a radical de-escalation in the level of unrest in the territories, so that they could take place "free from an atmosphere of PLO violence, terror, and intimidation".<sup>9</sup> No mention was made of UN resolution 242, there was no reference to the principle of exchanging land for peace, and it remained unspecified as to how the elections would be carried out, whether or not the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem (which Israel had annexed in 1967) would be eligible to stand and to vote, or whether members of the PLO would be permitted on the delegation. "Everything is negotiable", Shamir announced in Washington, but it was clear that certain things were not negotiable, and most crucially these included Israel's refusal to engage in talks with the PLO and the refusal to countenance the creation of an

independent Palestinian state. By May, Shamir had obtained cabinet approval of his peace plan which had been fleshed out to a 20-point initiative, the substance of which was that the 1978 Camp David Accords should be the cornerstone of a regional peace. Along with the proposals for elections, the plan called for an end to the Arab boycott of Israel and the launching of an international effort to solve the "Arab refugee problem".

Whatever their substance, suspicions that these proposals were primarily a public relations exercise were strengthened when Shamir confessed to the Likud Party's Central Committee in June 1989 that his conditions for holding elections in the territories were such that no Palestinian could possibly accept them, declaring that "The elections have more importance from a public relations point of view than in a practical sense".<sup>10</sup> Under pressure from his political rivals within the party, Shamir agreed that Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem would not be allowed to vote, that Jewish settlements would continue, and that no elections would take place until the Uprising had ended.

While Shamir was desperately trying to satisfy the demands of the Americans and fend off the challenges from within his own party, the Palestinians made it clear that the election proposals were unacceptable as they stood and that they were neither in the mood nor the position to make any further concessions. So the stalemate continued through the autumn of 1989 and into 1990. President Mubarak of Egypt came forward with a set of ten proposals to break the deadlock, involving an Israeli-Palestinian meeting in Cairo to discuss the modalities of the elections. This floundered on Shamir's veto of any meeting with the PLO and the PLO's insistence on its right to determine the composition of the proposed Palestinian delegation, as its concern mounted about Israel's intentions of driving a wedge between the leadership outside and that inside the occupied territories. Secretary of State Baker then came up with his own five-point attempt to sidestep this fundamental problem: Shamir's refusal to sit down with a PLO delegation and the PLO's refusal to give up its right to choose the Palestinian delegation. There was talk of compromise deals involving the inclusion of deportees from the occupied territories in the Palestinian delegation. There was a lot of talk about talks, but there was not a lot of substantive movement. As Donald Neff described the situation in November 1989:<sup>11</sup>

All the time since Shamir's Spring proposals for his election plan for the occupied territories, or parts of the territories, has been consumed on procedural issues. First the Egyptians put forward ten points to try to get talks started and then Baker put forward five points on how to get talks started on Egypt's proposal to get talks started. Now the Israelis have come back with demands for six "assurances" about Baker's five suggestions on Egypt's ten points on Shamir's original proposal - and not a word of all this has to do with the core issue, which is supposed to be the fate of Palestinians living under military occupation ... Not even Molière could have crafted such a farce.

By 1990, with the Intifada into its third year, it seemed as if the frustrations

of all the players with the endless round of talks about talks had reached their limit. Shamir was under mounting pressure from his own right-wingers, led by Ariel Sharon. Labour, his coalition partners, were becoming more insistent that he make some concessions. Moreover, at a time when Israel was casting around for additional resources to fund the immigration of Soviet Jews, there was growing speculation that the United States was finally prepared to use the "aid lever" to pressure Israel to the negotiating table. Shamir's intransigence meantime allowed Arafat to delay facing up to the divisions within his own movement about Palestinian participation in a dialogue with the Israelis that promised so little movement towards any final settlement.

In February 1990 the rebellion within Likud ranks reached new heights with the resignation of Ariel Sharon from his cabinet post, threatening to challenge for the party leadership in an effort to prevent Shamir submitting to American proposals that East Jerusalemites and deportees could be part of the Palestinian delegation to the proposed talks in Cairo. The following month the coalition government itself collapsed under the pressure. Labour tried to form a new government and failed, and it was not until the beginning of June, after many weeks of political horse-trading, that Shamir succeeded in obtaining the necessary parliamentary support to form a new right-wing coalition government without the participation of the Labour Party.

During the hiatus caused by the government crisis in Israel, Arafat began to move closer to Iraq as a number of factors came into play to cause him to consider a different approach to the peace process. Israeli intransigence, the failure of the United States to deliver any political gains, the loss of an important source of support in Eastern and Central Europe following the political transformations of 1989, and the growing criticism of his policy of moderation and concession within the PLO led to this new move. Instead of trying to woo the United States, perhaps a united Arab front might open up other options, particularly in the light of Iraq's undoubted military might?

The week before Shamir announced his new government a sea-borne assault on a Tel Aviv beach was launched by the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF). The leader of the PLF, Abu al-Abbas, was a member of the PLO Executive Committee. Although severely embarrassed, Arafat refused to give way to American demands that he unreservedly condemn the attack, and on 20 June 1990 the United States broke off its dialogue with the PLO, claiming that Arafat could no longer live up to his promise to renounce terrorism.

The prospects for peace had never seemed bleaker. The only slight ray of light came from Europe, where the European Community (EC) was beginning to display a determination to use its undoubted economic weight and diplomatic influence to bring pressure to bear upon Israel to get her to the negotiating table. But then, in August 1990, Iraqi forces occupied Kuwait and the Arab world was torn asunder. All the major actors in the Middle East were called upon to take sides, and Egypt and Syria agreed to send troops in support of the Saudis and the United States as they squared up to Saddam Hussein's troops in the Gulf.

Arafat was faced with an impossible dilemma. He had always sought to

avoid taking sides in inter-Arab disputes, seeking to preserve his freedom of manoeuvre. But now he could not fly in the face of Palestinian public opinion which, from the depths of frustration, had come out so strongly in favour of Saddam Hussein as their new champion and possible saviour. Neither did Arafat feel able to come out against Iraq and thereby risk the vengeance of Saddam if he was eventually to triumph. It seemed to many observers that by not breaking with Iraq, Arafat severely imperiled a number of the Palestinians' key assets. He damaged the moral basis of the Palestinian cause — the right of a people to resist occupation. He undermined the chances of ever resuming dialogue with the United States and he threatened the major supply of funds to the PLO which had come from the oil-rich Gulf.

There can be little doubt that the occupation of Kuwait and the subsequent defeat of Iraq by the US-led coalition forces set in motion a process of transformation in the Middle East, the final reverberations of which remain to be played out. For President Bush, the coalition victory over Iraqi forces on the battlefield augured well for a similar US-led victory in the diplomatic arena, with the establishment of a new security order in the region made possible by the new balance of forces in the region. Iraq, the only regional power that had been capable of challenging Israel in any meaningful military manner, had been emasculated. Furthermore, the war left the PLO weak, isolated and discredited. As far as many members of the international community were concerned, Arafat's stance vis-à-vis Saddam Hussein disqualified the PLO from participating in the construction of this new regional order. By contrast, Israel emerged from the war bolstered by a wave of international sympathy and with domestic public opinion solidly behind Shamir.

Although the permanent members of the UN Security Council had rejected Saddam Hussein's attempts to link Iraqi withdrawal to a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, it was widely accepted that the liberation of Kuwait needed to be followed by an intensified search for a wider peace. President Bush underlined his personal commitment to this venture in his speech to Congress on 6 March 1991, when he observed:<sup>12</sup>

Peacemaking in the Middle East requires compromise ... A comprehensive peace must be grounded in UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and the principle of territory for peace. This must provide for Israel's security and recognition, and at the same time for legitimate Palestinian political rights. Anything else would fall short of fairness and security.

There then followed a flurry of diplomatic activity, with Secretary of State James Baker making a series of diplomatic missions to the region for discussions with the major parties in the hopes of convening some form of peace conference. His efforts seemed to be presaged on the assumption that if he could just get representatives to sit down together, then *something* would emerge. Unfortunately for Baker, and the prestige of the United States, the parties could not agree as to how long they would sit down together, nor with

whom they would sit. Supported by the prestige gained during the war and backed by a solidly right-wing cabinet, with his parliamentary majority increased by bringing into the cabinet Rehavam Ze'evi, the leader of the extremist Moledet (Homeland) Party, Shamir was able to continue with his policy of inactivity which had stood him in such good stead during the war. Whilst he appeared to endorse Baker's strategy of a twin-track approach to the peace process embracing peace negotiations between Israel and the Arab states on the one hand, and an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue on the other, it became increasingly clear in the months following the Gulf War that Shamir's true agenda was to avoid any movement on the Palestinian track. He refused to countenance any UN involvement in the putative peace process. He insisted that any peace conference should consist of a one-off ceremonial opening session, to be followed by separate bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Arab states. He refused to accept that the conference should be re-convened at six-monthly intervals to check on the progress of the bilateral negotiations, and he categorically rejected any notion that the conference would have the authority to impose decisions. With regard to dialogue with the Palestinians, he insisted that their representatives be vetted by Israel and be included as part of a Jordanian delegation. Furthermore, he repeated his refusal to countenance relinquishing territory for peace at a speech made to a gathering assembled to commemorate Israel's capture of East Jerusalem in 1967, when he proclaimed<sup>13</sup>

There is no land of Israel other than a totally united land ... We will never tire, even if it takes all the time in the world, of defending our rights in every part of the area which is the heritage of our fathers.

James Baker had more success with Syria's President Assad, who agreed to soften his demand for an international conference held under the auspices of the UN, with a wide negotiating framework and the power to enforce sanctions on Israel if she failed to comply with agreements regarding her withdrawal from the occupied territories. As far as Baker and Bush were concerned, the greatest obstacle to peace remained Israel's intransigence, as evidenced by the heightened settlement-building activity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Indeed, so frustrated did President Bush become that in June 1991 he let it be known to the Israelis that their request for \$10 billion loan guarantees to facilitate the housing and absorption of Soviet immigrants would not be met so long as they continued to be settled in the occupied territories. One can only assume that Prime Minister Shamir was prepared to live with such a rebuff, in the confident expectation that Bush's resolve would weaken as the Presidential election campaign began to get under way in 1992.

Anyone who writes a book about the Middle East can be fairly confident that events will have overtaken the manuscript by the time it gets published, but at the time of writing (July 1991) it would appear that whatever window of opportunity existed for peace-making in the region after the liberation of Kuwait has virtually closed. Months of procedural wrangling about the format within which the Palestinians, the Arab states, and Israel might meet

together to work out a joint future have resulted in nothing but an intensification of frustration and a diminution of hope for the future.

Nowhere was this erosion of confidence about the foreseeable future more pronounced than within the occupied territories themselves. By the summer of 1991 the internal sense of strength and faith in the ultimate success of the Intifada that had been so pronounced amongst the Palestinian community during the height of the Uprising had begun to wane as their sufferings increased. In the aftermath to the Gulf War they found their leadership outside discredited and marginalised within the international community. Inside, having endured weeks of blanket curfew during the war itself, their suffering intensified with unprecedented economic hardship brought about by a combination of burgeoning unemployment, due to Israel's radical restriction of Palestinian access to her labour market in favour of the Soviet immigrants, and the loss of remittances and funding from the Gulf States upon which so many Palestinian families and institutions had relied. Accompanying the economic hardship was a growth in crimes of violence and theft within the occupied territories. Whilst the economic situation could explain a part of the increasing lawlessness, it was also linked to the declining ability of the leadership of the Uprising to enforce its rulings and control the wilder acts of the gangs of masked youths. This erosion of authority was linked in turn to the factionalism that had permeated the popular committees, the very bodies which had constituted the organisational infrastructure of the Uprising during the highpoint of the Intifada in the years up to 1990. By the early summer of 1991 there were figures to indicate that more Palestinians were being killed by their own people than by the Israeli security forces and settlers.<sup>14</sup> The situation had deteriorated to such an extent that on 2 June 1991 there were armed clashes in Nablus between supporters of the Islamic Hamas movement and the mainstream Fatah organisation, with one of those shot being attacked with knives by Hamas supporters as he lay in the operating theatre.

This was the context within which leading figures within the Palestinian community began to raise questions about the future direction of the Intifada. It was recognised that the Gulf War represented something of a watershed in the life of the civilian uprising. Hard questions began to be asked, in public rather than in private. What was the point in continuing to impose general strikes upon the population, when such actions so patently hurt the Palestinians more than the Israeli occupiers? Should there not be more emphasis upon strengthening the local economy and indigenous institutions rather than street confrontations with Israeli troops? Should there not be a more sustained effort to generate democratic processes within Palestinian institutions both inside the occupied territories and outside, in order to counteract the authoritarian tendencies of the street gangs and their allies? There emerged a significant strand of opinion that supported the acceptance of Israel's autonomy scheme of 1989 as providing a necessary, albeit transitional, breathing space, a period of respite during which the Palestinians

might struggle to reconstruct the infrastructure of their own autonomous society.

Against this trend, who advocated the development of the struggle along the horizontal axis of increased nonviolent and constructive resistance activity, there persisted a trend of opinion that remained equally convinced that the only way to end the occupation was by means of vertical escalation — in the direction of increased violence. If the stone had failed, then perhaps the bomb and the grenade might succeed.

Such were the debates and the fissures within the Palestinian political community in the wake of the Gulf War. Quite which school of thought and action will prevail cannot be predicted. What can be forecast with absolute certainty, however, is that there will be no lasting peace or stability in the Middle East without a settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In this sense the wider peace process in the region cannot be separated from the dynamic of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians as it takes place each day in the occupied territories. It is the purpose of the remainder of this book to examine the nature of this dynamic as it has unfolded in the years since the outbreak of the Intifada in December 1987.

## Notes

1. Moshe Ma'oz, *Palestinian Leadership on the West Bank*, London: Frank Cass, 1984, p 49.
2. Y Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement 1929-1939: From Riots to Rebellion*, London: Frank Cass, 1977, p 236.
3. H M Wilson, quoted in Porath, *ibid.*, p 254.
4. *Ibid.*, p 249.
5. S Tamari, "What the Uprising means", *Middle East Report*, May-June 1988, p 26.
6. See Alain Gresh, *The PLO: The Struggle Within*, London: Zed Books, 1988, p 222.
7. Sarah Graham-Brown, "Report from the occupied territories", *MERIP Reports*, no 115, June 1983, p 5.
8. Arafat expressed this hope in an interview in Belgrade 21 December 1988. See *The Guardian (G)*, 22 December 1988.
9. Quoted in *The Independent (I)*, 7 April 1989.
10. Quoted in *G*, 27 June 1989. See also Z Schiff and E Ya'ari, *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising - Israel's Third Front*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989, p 320.
11. D Neff, *Middle East International (MEI)*, 17 November 1989, p 7.
12. Quoted by Hella Pick, *G*, 8 March 1991.
13. Quoted by Ian Black, *G*, 13 May, 1991
14. According to figures quoted by Ian Black, *G*, 10 June 1991, in the months of April and May 1991 20 Palestinians were killed by Israelis, 50 by other Palestinians.