

1996 DIPLOMATIC

3 October

Meeting with a Delegation from the Royal College for Defense Studies (RCDS), London

Topic: Current Situation in Palestine

Participants: Col. D.R. Wilson, British Army; GP N.J. Day, Royal Air Force; Surg. Capt. C.W. Evans, Royal Navy; Eileen Roach Smith, US Department of Defense; Col. Petr Voznika, Army of the Czech Republic; Col. Jan Broedersen, Royal Netherlands Air Force; Timothy Daniels, Civil Servant, UK Ministry of Defense; Maj Gen. AJG Pollard, RCDS; Col. Guenther Schwarz, German Army; Col. Crichton Wakelin, Defense/Military Attaché, Tel Aviv; Ryutaro Matsumoto, Japan Defense Agency; Sgt. Antony Fyson, Defense Attaché's Office; Lt. Col. D. Mackaness, British Army, RCDS; Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Head of PASSIA; Dr. Bernard Sabella, Bethlehem University; Sheikh Jamil Hamami, Director, Islamic Cultural and Scientific Society, Jerusalem; Mary Pring, British Consulate Jerusalem; and Dr. Zakaria Al-Qaq, IPCRI, Jerusalem.

SUMMARY

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi began by saying that there are two main interpretations of why and how things developed to the confrontations of the past week [angry outburst in September]. The Israeli version says that the Palestinian economic conditions of the past two years have been bad which has, together with an elected PLC that functioned below expectations, culminated in the recent outburst. The Palestinian version suggests that Netanyahu's 100 days in office were like the 90 days of siege the PLO faced in Beirut. This, along with provocative Israeli settlement policies, the non-redeployment from Hebron, the Israeli 'playing-games' policy with the PNA, the continuing Judaization of Jerusalem and lastly, the opening of the tunnel in the heart of Jerusalem have unavoidably led to the outbreak of protests.

Dr. Abdul Hadi said that the past week was comparable to the Six-Day War, or the Intifada which was also a spontaneous reaction of the masses to unbearable occupation policies. After having reached Oslo, the Palestinian leadership finds itself once again at a crossroads and its credibility is in question. Nobody could know what height the outburst would reach but the frustration in the Palestinian street is obvious. The Palestinians realized that Israel is no partner and that even after 29 years they had reached only 50% of the Israeli people who are ready to deal with Palestine: the other 50% is not interested. Likud and Netanyahu say they will not share the West Bank or Jerusalem, and Israel will not leave Hebron. Before going to Cairo, Netanyahu said he would redeploy from Hebron. He did not, and President Mubarak lost face with Israel as a result. During the first days of the confrontations, and while on the European tour, Netanyahu called President Mubarak and King Hussein to encourage them to intervene and calm the situation. They told him to go to Chairman Arafat. The Palestinian leader for his part cannot be seen as unable to deliver.

Three times during the first 100 days of his office, Netanyahu visited Washington. The US has not put pressure on Israel but involves itself in crisis management rather than trying to resolve issues.

Chairman Arafat did not go to Washington alone or weak. He went with the '100- day war' which he had to bear, and with the backing of the Arab world. During Arafat's stopover in Egypt, President Mubarak confirmed his support but said he could not join him in Washington because he could not see Netanyahu after the latter had lied to his face.

Although King Hussein and Netanyahu have developed a good chemistry, the King's presence in Washington was to assure Arafat that no one in the Arab world is interested in taking his seat. He advised Chairman Arafat to press issues by himself and Arafat stood firm. The Arab message was that Netanyahu has to sit and negotiate with Arafat.

The provocative agenda Netanyahu presented in Washington was not to close the tunnel, not to redeploy, and not to compromise on settlements - all under the pretext of not giving Palestinians fruits for their revolt. Everybody expected Clinton to pressure Netanyahu since the US paid US\$2 billion to Israel compared with US\$10 million to the PNA. Europe played a much more distinct role and supported the Palestinian position.

Chairman Arafat knows his platform very well while Netanyahu is "swimming," facing a divided Israeli society and army. The current phase is considered a testing period of brains and muscles whereby both sides are under pressure to deliver due to domestic constraints.

Palestinians cannot trust the new Israeli right wing government that has stationed its tanks at the entrances of Palestinian towns. The clashes woke the Israelis up, and they were faced with reality: Washington confirmed this. Netanyahu was forced to recognize that there is no other partner but Chairman Arafat.

After ten days of confrontations the Palestinians - with the backing of Amman, Cairo and Riyadh - expected the tunnel in Jerusalem to be closed and Israeli redeployment. Instead, Chairman Arafat has to control the anger in Gaza with empty hands and nothing to offer. How can one be surprised to see Palestinian police taking off their uniforms to fight alongside the children of the Intifada against the Israeli occupiers?

Under other circumstances we might have seen suicide bombs in addition to the stones, but Hamas is split since its moderate leaders have entered a national dialogue with the PNA. This developed with events such as the assassination of the "engineer." The movement is left with young ill-experienced people, inclined to spontaneous revenge. Hamas is going in two directions:

1. One side questions why it should be labeled with suicide attacks. It wants to go back to the rules, not under the Moslem

Brotherhood label, but by establishing a movement peculiar to Palestine..

2. The other side is made up of inexperienced youths who question why they should change their direction. The struggle for Al-Aqsa is everyone's.

Regarding the role of the Diaspora, there were several attempts to establish a forum involving Diaspora Palestinians in Jordan but it was viewed as an anti-Arafat move. In Washington, a similar forum was established under the guidance of Professor Hisham Sharabi, and we have heard related news from Lebanon.

Palestinian security is another sensitive issue. Chairman Arafat has already established 11 bodies, but there is no system of continuous direct coordination between Israel and Palestine. The Chairman could use the issue of security coordination as a bargaining issue. The Preventative Security is supported by the EU and the US. The function of the National Police is not clear: is it to maintain the US's definition of security?

Another crucial and sensitive issue is Jerusalem, that is still occupied by Israel and where settlement construction continues as before, supported by the US. Palestinians are becoming a minority in the city but they continue to fight for their rights. Some 220,000 Palestinians live in Jerusalem, and more than 200 Palestinian institutions, in addition to the holy sites, including Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the religious bodies have maintained their presence. There have been talks on the issue of Jerusalem: key points included the custodianship of the holy sites, neighborhood councils, schemes such as the London borough system, and sovereignty (divided or shared / 1948 or 1967 borders). Palestinians are ready to negotiate these issues but Netanyahu is closing the files.

Question: Was Netanyahu's election one of the direct results of the bombings and Peres's handling of security?

Answer: Perhaps, but it began with the assassination of Rabin which reflects the existence of strong tendencies to the right in Israel, and this was before the elections.

Question: Netanyahu tried to find an alternative to Arafat. Did he view Jordan as a possible option?

Answer: The real question is whether Netanyahu will pull out his tanks and redeploy from Hebron. Netanyahu is aware that Jordan is not an option and Arafat - with the backing of Cairo and Amman - will remain steadfast. His influence, however, depends on the support of his people. One cannot deliver another leader easily: Chairman Arafat was elected and is therefore legitimate.

Question: What about normalization?

Answer: At the present time many Palestinian can neither go to university, nor to hospital, nor even wake up in the morning to go to work. Now is a critical moment; family dynamics are changing and pressure and violence are internalized. We have been living this occupation for 29 years. Now Netanyahu has taken a particular position and the world has to play to his tune. If Chairman Arafat would declare Zones A and B as a liberated and independent state he would have the support of the Arab regimes and Europe.

Question: Is it reasonable to declare independence?

Answer: We are in a better situation than in 1948 and the world will support us. We must not fall into the trap of the Israelis, we have tried muscles. The new Israeli government wants to suspend permanent status negotiations in order not to allow for a provisional government in the territories. Today, Arafat's legitimacy is there. If he was to bring everybody in, he could implement Oslo unilaterally.

Question: How much support would this need from outside?

Answer: If Europe supported the Palestinian security apparatus, and if the majority of the people supported Arafat, these, in addition to the economic and political support from Egypt and Jordan, would be significant moves.

Question: People do not have the basic necessities of life. Are there other areas of economic support? What are the reserves?

Answer: There are currently not enough resources to support an independent state. However, every village seems to be an independent state as it is difficult to travel from one to another. Understandings can be reached with Egypt and Jordan on economic relations. There is also the disparity between the levels of income. Per capita income for an Israeli is US\$15,000 per annum compared with US\$1,000 for Palestinians. This is a real difference and, together with an unemployment rate of at least 50% and the ongoing closure, seriously limits what one can and cannot do. Industrial zones are needed but Israel hampers their establishment. Many Palestinian businessmen here and in the Diaspora are not willing to invest under the current conditions.

The recent explosion of anger was necessary, and it will happen again. We are back to the situation where for many there is nothing to lose. But mind you, it was not Netanyahu who imposed the closure; it was the Labor party. Peres, in a single day, killed 50 persons in Qana. Netanyahu, in three days, killed 68 people. The Palestinian social fabric is fragile: the slogan of the streets has changed from "long live Palestine" to "Allahu Akbar."

Question: You are painting a bad picture. What is the reaction of the

young?

Answer: This is a very important question. There was a lot of hope for a better future but the reality falls short of our expectations. The youth has no perspective which has turned some towards religious radicalism, as the phenomenon of suicide attacks has shown. Why build society if people cannot envisage a better future?

I look at the Israeli mentality as displayed by the Likud as an immature mentality that is unable to accept the stages of peace making. They still think that they can maintain control over other people. History shows this is wrong and not feasible. The street - those in favor and those opposed to Oslo - has lost confidence in the process. Netanyahu needs to change his mentality.

Question: What are the prospects for the future?

Answer: The peace process is not only governed by the moods of Netanyahu and Arafat; it is in many ways an international matter. Now, Israel is using the pre-election time in the US. Yet, Palestinians have gone through worse. We are a people with a cause. The worst thing would be if people lost patience in the Middle East region.

Question: If we don't see any international intervention, how can the negotiations continue?

Answer: Some 50% of the Israeli people bought the idea of peace. But the Israeli government has its own version of peace and disregards the Palestinian version. This is the dilemma we are in. We feel frustrated because we were ready not to look back anymore - no longer telling the stories of land loss - but to the future; otherwise nobody could have borne the negotiating so far. The Israelis, however, are obviously not mature enough to agree with Oslo. Netanyahu delivered nothing but provocations.

Question: What about the Syrian role?

Answer: Labor had even on the Syrian track at least some approach to Asad; there was an eight-point draft agreement between the Labor and the Syrians. I expect a storm within the Labor party in their coming election will eventually deliver a new leadership.