

Lecture

# Notes on Palestinian - Israeli Meetings In The Occupied Territories (1967 - 1987)

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The Palestinian-Israeli meetings from June 1967 to June 1987 have been discussed in the Israeli news media, meetings that have been held in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza and in Tel-Aviv and the settlements of the Arab Triangle, are not a new development or, for that matter, a political secret.

These meetings have been taking place throughout all the years of Israeli occupation. True, they have sometimes been infrequent and cool, but they have continued unabated, and have affected the issues of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict both positively and negatively.

The meetings began immediately after the June War of 1967 and were initiated mainly by Israelis. Sometimes, however, such meetings were encouraged by foreign consulates in Jerusalem or certain figures and delegations visiting the region. They were rarely held at the request of the Palestinians, although there have been occasions when an Arab or Palestinian living outside the Occupied Territories took the first move.

Most of these meetings were held in Israeli offices and clubs, in the form of joint debates or seminars, and were reported in the press and broadcast over radio and television. The results, which were then discussed in universities, clubs and political salons, provided rich material for study, research, and political analysis of the Israeli occupation. (Leaders, establishments, tactics, and strategy ... and its impact on Palestinians).

What was the general trend in these meetings? What were the points of agreement and disagreement? What were the Palestinian and Israeli positions in these meetings? What are Israel's real objectives? Finally, will these meetings remain on the margin of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, lacking any value and substance, or will they blow the winds of change and become the key to a future political settlement?

These meetings have differed in nature, topic, participants, and objectives and follow no clear direction due to the lack of a substantive Arab position and proper follow-up and documentation. The meetings became more significant when they filled the political vacuum in the Occupied Territories and when local Palestinian national figures became involved. So, the nature of the meetings changed over time. While they began as an instrument for intellectual and political debate, they have now become a tool for testing intentions, and for manoeuvring. Most importantly though these meetings have served as a bridge of communication, conveying information and ideas, and permitting an exchange of viewpoints between the parties concerned.

Arab and Palestinian positions have differed on these meetings. Some people supported them, others opposed them, and yet a third group maintained a reserved attitude. Local opposition subsided gradually, especially when the meetings began to be held in Palestinian locations. The meetings were originally held at the Van Leer Institute, the Truman Institute, the Shiloah Center at Tel-Aviv University, and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Palestinian locations in Jerusalem included the YMCA, the American Colony Hotel, the International Hotel on the Mount of Olives, and the National Palace Hotel.

The meetings were held during two periods each lasting ten years. The first is known as the period of the "military" occupation (1967-1978) and the second as the period of "civil administration" (1978-1987). The two periods witnessed significant local, regional, and international developments related to the changes in the Occupied Territories.

The most important meetings of the first period were held after the following significant events:-

- The June 1967 War.

- The 1969 Rogers Plan and the Egyptian Government's acceptance of it.
- The events of September 1970 in Jordan.
- The announcement in Amman of the "United Arab Kingdom" plan in March 1972.

The important meetings of the second period occurred during the following times:-

- After the 1979 Camp David Accords and the signing of a peace treaty with Israel by the Egyptian Government.
- Following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.
- Following the announcement of and the preparations for the meeting of the 18th Palestine National Council session in Algiers on 20 April 1987.

The representatives of the Palestinian side in these meetings came from four main areas: Jerusalem, Nablus, Hebron, and Gaza. This comprehensive geographical representation was maintained throughout the twenty year period. The representatives included national figures and businessmen. Most of the prominent Palestinian figures who are concerned with public and political affairs, and the press, have taken part in these meetings. During the first period, however, the representation was confined to the traditional religious leaders and heads of big families.

During the first period (1967-1978), the representatives were as follows:-

Jerusalem and Ramallah:

Sheikh Hilmi Muhtasib, attorney Anwar Khatib, attorney Anwar Nuseibeh, attorney Sa'id 'ala' al-Din, attorney Aziz Shehadeh, journalist Mahmoud Abu Zulf, Sheikh Ali- Taziz, Hasan Tahboub, Abd al-Aziz Suwayti, Salih Abduh, Abd al-Mu'ti Qutb and Nadim Zarou.

Nablus and Tulkarim:

Walid Shak'a, Hamdi Kana'an, Hikmat Masri, Qadri Tuqan, Haj Ma'zuz Masri, and Abd al-Ra'uf Faris, and Hilmi Hannun.

Hebron and Bethlehem:

Sheikh Muhammad Ali Ja'bari, Rashad Khatib, Hikmat Hammuri, Elias Freij, Izzat Atawinah, *and the heads of village councils and a large number of mukhtars.*

Gaza :

*Haj Rashad al-Shawwa, Dr. Hatim Abu Ghazalah, Zuhair Rayyis,* and chairman of municipal councils in this sector.

In the second period (1978-1987), however, while the traditional representation was maintained with directors of establishments and heads of major families or their representatives, the circle expanded to include businessmen, representatives of the local press, individuals closely associated with the local government authorities and a new generation of young personalities.

During the second period (1978-1987), in Jerusalem and Ramallah, *Sheikh Sa'ad al-Din Alami*, chairman of the Islamic Council, replaced *Sheikh Muhtasib* after his death. *Anwar Khatib* and *Anwar Nuseibeh* maintained their traditional positions. Attorney *Aziz Shahadeh*, *Mahmoud Abu Zuluf*, editor of Al-Quds newspaper, continued in his place. Other journalists also featured prominently in the meetings, including Al-Fajr's *Hanna Siniora* and Al-Nahar's *Othman Hallaq*, Al-Awdah's *Raymonda Tawil* and *Radwan Abu Ayyash*, and Gesher's *Ziad Abu Ziad*. Engineer *Ibrahim Dakkak* and fellow Arab Communists, including *Tawfiq Ziad*, *Emile Habibi*, *Dr. Ahmed Hamzeh Natsheh*, *Emile Touma*, and *Saliba Khamis*, took part in joint seminars with the Israelis in Eastern and Western European capitals. The Palestinian arena also witnessed academic dialogue between

professors from Bir Zeit and Al-Najah Universities and those from Israeli institutions. This dialogue was reported in the local Palestinian and Israeli press. Palestinian participants included *Salim Tamari, Munir Fasheh, Ramzi Rihan, Albert Aghazarian, and Anton Sansour.*

In the Nablus area, family representation during the second period included *Hikmat Masri* and *Haj Ma'zuz Masri.* Following the death of *Hamdi Kana'an, Basil and Sa'id Kana'an* took over, as well as *Hafez Touqan, Wahid Masri, Ibrahim Abdul-Hadi and Izzat al-Alul*

Additional contact was made, however, by a group of Nablus businessmen who acted with the encouragement of the Jordanian Minister of Information in Amman, and went to Tel Aviv to meet with Shimon Peres at the headquarters of the Israeli Labor Party. The group included Nablus municipal engineer *Hani Arafat,* and the two businessmen *Basil and Sa'id Kana'an.* This was in the early 1980s.

In Hebron and Bethlehem, traditional representation continued. Following the death of *Sheikh Ja'bari,* engineer *Fahd Qawasmeh* and later his deputy, *Mustafa Natsheh* took over. The representation also included Hebron municipal council member *Khalid Usaylah,* appointed mayor *Abd al-Magid Zir,* mayor *Elias Freij, Edward Khamis, Hanna Nasser,* and *Dr. Ahmad Hamzeh Natsheh.* Family representation, however, was maintained through *Nabil Ja'bari,* President of Hebron University, and *Muhammad Rashad Ja'bari* of the Education Department in Hebron.

Leaders and followers of the Village Leagues, were never represented at these meetings, because these Leagues were and still are agents and tools of the occupation authorities.

They have been ostracized by the Palestinian national movement, since they are against the hopes and aspirations of

this movement and are rejected by everyone at home and abroad.

In Gaza, the Palestinians were represented by heads of local institutions and families such as *Haj Rashad al- Shawwa*, *Dr. Haidar Abd Shafi*, *Dr. Hatem Abu Ghazaleh*, other personalities close to the main stream of the PLO such as attorney *Fayez Abu Rahmeh*, and leaders of professional unions. Occasionally, there appeared on the Palestinian side, young people with a wide network of local and foreign contacts.

On the Israeli side, the meetings of the first period (1967-1978) were attended by heads of the military establishment, who "enforced" the meetings ; officials from the government, political parties and other groups who "utilized" the meetings ; university and research institute professors and academics who sought and " encouraged " the meetings, and the media, who "followed" the meetings.

Among the leaders of the Israeli military and political establishment who enforced the meetings were *Chaim Herzog*, *Binyamin Ben Eliezer*, *Menachem Milson*, *Ephraim Sneh*, *Moshe Dayan*, *Shimon Peres*, *Yigal Allon*, *'Ezer Weizman*, *Ariel Sharon*, *Moshe Arens*, and *Yitzhak Rabin*.

Others, who utilized the meetings, included *Moshe Sassun*, *David Farhi*, *Amron Cohen*, *David Levi*, *Nahum Goldman*, *Teddy Kollek*, and *General Dani Matt*.

The Israeli representation's official and professional structure in the second period continued as in the first. However, a new independent trend opposed to government policy also appeared. This trend was represented by individuals and groups with liberal views from within public institutions, but who were not in a position to change Israeli



policies. All they could do was search for alternative solutions. This group included such current and former Israeli Knesset members, party leaders, and spokespersons of major political trends as *Ari Elyaf*, *Uri Avneri*, *Mordechai Bentov*, *Aharon Cohen*, *Abba Eban*, *Mattiyahu Peled* and *Ora Namir*, among many others.

Invitations to the first round of meetings in 1967 came from the office of the Israeli Prime Minister. The Israeli side was headed by Prime Minister *Levi Eshkol*. The Palestinian invitees included *Walid Shaka'a* and *Hikmat Masri*. These two men were known at the time for their close association with, and enthusiasm for, the Egyptian leadership and policy of Jamal Abdul Nasser who backed the Palestinian cause and resistance leadership.

Invitations at the end of the second round of meetings in 1987 with government representatives came from the office of the acting prime minister and foreign minister. The Israeli side was headed by *Shimon Peres*, the Israeli Foreign Minister, and the Palestinian invitees included *Hanna Siniora*, *Fayez Abu Rahmeh* and *Sari Nuseibeh*, all three of whom are close to the thoughts and policies of main strQam PLO leadership.

The main topics raised and discussed at these two major meetings were intended to crystallize Israeli and Palestinian positions, interests, needs, aspirations and objectives.

The same questions posed by *Moshe Dayan* at a meeting (during the first period) with Hamdi Kana'an and Aziz Shehadeh on April 16, 1968, were raised at most of the meetings. Moshe Dayan designed Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories and set the Israeli scenario for future Arab-Israeli relations. He also played a significant role in drafting the Camp David Accords.

*Moshe Dayan's Questions raised the following six points:*

"1. *Do you, the Palestinian, with or without Jordan, want to conclude a separate peace with Israel, without committing yourself to Egypt or Syria?*

2. *If you wish to conclude the peace contract with or without the King, do you want complete peace, as distinguished from such half-solutions as an armistice or declaration of a state of non-aggression?*

3. *Do you want to solve the refugee question within the political solution?*

4. *An agreement between us will only take place with the blessing and support of the United States.*

5. *There will be no change in the status of Jerusalem. It is possible to solve the question of the Holy Places and religious institutions.*

6. *Regarding security, if I were to meet with King Hussein and if he asked me about the possibilities of concluding peace, my answer to him would be that the matter depended on the answers to these questions:*

a- *Are you ready to reach a real peaceful solution, with or without the approval of the other Arab States?*

b- *Would you agree to basic changes to the state that existed before June 5, 1967?*

c- *Would you agree that there should be no international forces between us; because the nature of the solution between us would be in the form of a federation, separate states, a Palestinian state, or a federal government consisting of Israel, Palestine and Jordan?*

*During the meeting with Dayan in 1968, attorney Aziz Shehadeh outlined the situation in this way:*

"Israel is faced with four solutions, which can be summed up as follows:

1. Formation of a Palestinian government.
2. Return to Jordan.
3. Formation of a federal union with Israel or Jordan or both.
4. Israel's annexation of the West Bank, making it part of Israel.

Which of these solutions has Israel chosen?"

Former Member of the Israeli Knesset, *Uri Avneri*, reveals another opinion in his book, *Israel Without Zionism*, published in 1968. He said there are three courses open to Israel:

1. Accepting the solution of the four major powers if they reach an agreement.
2. Sticking to its current rigid stance and facing isolation.
3. Concluding direct peace with the Palestinians.

*Regarding the third point, Avneri said the following at a public meeting of 2,000 people in Haifa in December 1968:*

"I asked General Chaim Herzog, who is a most respected Israeli military figure, whether the day would come when we would sit together with the Palestinian fedayeen. He replied, Yes, certainly. We want a dialogue with the Palestinians. Perhaps, it could begin with the leaders of the Occupied Territories. But after that we must negotiate with the leaders of the fighting organizations."

This is the policy Avneri followed. He met with a number of PLO leaders, at first by himself, and then in the company of retired general *Mattiyahu Peled*. This was before, during, and after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Avneri published the details of these meetings in his book, *My friend, the Enemy*, published at the end of 1986. He mentions meetings with *Issam Sartawi*, *Sa' id Hamami*, *Yasser Arafat* and others. He also writes about the leaders of Israel's Peace Now movement, the Palestinian-Israeli Committee Confronting the Iron Fist, and the committees of solidarity with Palestinian universities.

In 1972, *Yigal Allon* said, in the context of the plan that carries

his name:

*"We must take the initiative in establishing ties with the leaders of the West Bank inhabitants, so as to find out their readiness to negotiate with Israel to encourage them to set up an autonomy linked to Israel or Jordan, and to find a common solution to settle Gaza refugees in the West Bank."*

In the statements *Shimon Peres* made after meeting with *Siniora, Abu Rahmeh, and Nuseibeh* in March 1987 Peres outlined Israel's official position: "When two nations occupy one land, the alternatives are division of land or authority. As to the future, we will see." Peres and the Palestinians discussed such topics as the international conference; the possibility of local political activity, while guaranteeing that there will be no radicalism or violence; and the question of Palestinian representation in a joint delegation with Jordan at an international conference. Some observers believe that the main aim of the meeting was to provide a tangible, open answer to Yasser Arafat's statements about his willingness to be represented by non-PLO members. It was as if Peres wanted to tell Arafat: "I am sitting and negotiating with your representatives in the West Bank and Gaza, but not with you personally."

Local Palestinian stands and aspirations concerning the meetings have developed and changed over the twenty years period. During the first period, *Qadri Touqan* expressed his version of the Palestinian position as:

*"If the PLO leaders come to us through liberation, we would go to Jericho and meet them with cheers. But if they come through peaceful solutions, then we deserve to be the country's leaders more than they."*

In an interview with *The New York Times* on 9, September 1967, *Aziz Shehadeh* said,

"We must not extend a hand to the Israelis unless we are willing to extend another hand to the Arab states. If we become secessionists and separate from King Hussein with the Arab agreement, there would be no settlement and we would not gain anything".

*Anwar Nuseibeh* expressed the Palestinian consensus on these meetings after his meeting with *Nahum Goldman* in 1977:

*"I see no reason why I should not explain the Arab viewpoint whenever conditions permit. I would be failing in my national duty if I, or any other Arab, were to miss an opportunity to express the correct Arab opinion. It is not wrong in this case for the Arabs to take the initiative."*

During the latter part of the second period, there were several Palestinian-Israeli meetings outside the Occupied Territories, for example: *Uri Avneri's* meetings with PLO leaders; the dialogue of *Dr. Walid Khalidi*, *Sari Nuseibeh* the author of this paper and other figures, with European and Harvard University academics in 1984 and 1985, and other international and Palestinian-Israeli conferences. Palestinians welcomed these meetings. There was also local support for the meeting which took place in Rumania on 6, November 1986, between four Israelis and PLO members, in spite of the Israeli Knesset decision banning such meetings and punishing those participating in them.

At the Rumanian meeting neither side committed itself to a clear, peaceful settlement, but the meeting called for:

- 1) An end to violence,
- 2) Negotiations;
- 3) A joint search for peace.

This statement was affirmed at the meeting which the four Israelis held with *Faisal Husseini* and several other

Palestinians, in the middle of March 1987 at the Arab Studies Society in Jerusalem.

The meetings of this period were not without differences and opposition within Palestinian ranks. This was particularly evident in 1986, during the preparation of the Palestinian-Israeli declaration in favor of an international conference. The invitation to the meetings to discuss the declaration came from Knesset member *Abba Eban* and others. The Israelis contacted *Hanna Siniora* and *Fayez Abu Rahmeh*, the two men named by the Palestinian leadership as members of the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation for the proposed preparatory talks in 1985. The long preamble to the declaration spoke about the Palestinian and Jewish peoples' destiny to live side by side, on one land. The declaration contained a joint appeal calling for negotiation and repudiating violence and terrorism. The consensus of local Palestinian opinion was that the declaration must include a frank provision recognizing the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the PLO as their sole, legitimate representative. However, the Israeli side dropped the definite article 'the' and the provision read "legitimate representative of the Palestinian people". The declaration further mentioned the national rights of the Palestinian people, but also recognized the rights of the "State of Israel", not just the right of the Jewish people to exist. In view of the inclusion of these views, some on the Palestinian side decided not to attend the joint meeting at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem or to approve the text of the declaration as announced by *Abba Eban* at a news conference.

This Palestinian stand, however, was opposed by *Hanna Siniora*, who sent a personal invitation to *Elias Freij* and also to *Sa'id* and *Basil Kana'an* to attend the meetings and sign the declaration. The four of them did not revise, discuss, or amend the declaration. Moreover, the three new representatives came from outside the group that had examined the declaration, which raised many questions within the local Palestinian arena. This was considered a personal

victory for *Abba Eban and his group*.

Thus these meetings, which have been going on since June 1967, have become an established fact and have produced diverse results, both positive and negative. These results could become the key to a political resolution of the conflict, especially in view of the intensive Israeli foreign policy activities and the growing regional and international interest in an international conference.

The positive results can be summed up as follows:

- Exploring opinions and ideas in the search for short and long-term solutions.
- Following and explaining local reactions to Israeli and Palestinian stands and policies.
- Projecting local leadership or coordinating these leaderships and establishing cooperation among active figures within the Arab community.
- Promoting local national leadership.

The negative outcome of these meetings could be summarized as follows:

- Penetrating the ranks of political trends in order to prevent a national alliance between them.
- Dividing people into moderates, extremists, and neutrals; classifying them into loyalists and opposition, and exposing their relations and contacts at home and abroad.
- Urging the local Palestinian side to relay Israel's stands to the Arab states directly concerned, such as Jordan and Egypt, as well as to Palestinian leaders abroad, and vice

versa.

- Keeping the subject of the meetings alive in the media locally, regionally, and internationally.

The meetings began as a small, unknown vehicle standing before a long dark tunnel. Some twenty years later, however, they have become a recognized bus running regularly along a fixed route and in all directions. The options before everyone now are the following:

- To be on the bus and to drive it or help drive it;
- To follow it until it achieves our national objectives;
- To remain behind and let it travel without us and possibly reach destinations which do not serve our community.

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