

22 March 1997

Palestinian Perspective on the Peace Process

PASSIA

Participants: Delegation from the Canadian Embassy, Tel Aviv (Canadian Security and Defense Forum), Sheikh Jamil Hamami, Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi

SUMMARY

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi started by giving an overview of the current situation of the peace process, and said that we now find ourselves in a gray area where there is no black and no white. In Oslo, a culture of peace was started between Palestinians and Israelis based on mutual recognition. This encompassed a revolution in thinking on the Palestinian side: the acceptance of a two-state solution and a reduction of the Palestinian territory to 22% of its original size. It also encompassed a revolution on the Israeli side: the acceptance of the PLO as a partner in negotiations.

Israel today, especially since the murder of Rabin and the election of Netanyahu, is a divided society. The agreement in Oslo between Labor and the PLO had been built on the idea that separation of the two societies is the only way to achieve peace; this separation should be built on the principles of portioning, phasing and testing. Likud, however, does not want to leave, but to share the West Bank. Since the election of Netanyahu, the culture of peace has been forgotten; and he has successfully reintroduced a culture of fear. During the period of crisis management in Washington following the opening of the tunnel in September, however, the Likud also recognized Arafat. Netanyahu, however, does not accept the Palestinians as equal partners, and it is questionable if the Palestinians can go through all the suffering again - the uprooting of trees, the demolition of houses, the closures - in order to convince Likud of the need for a culture of peace.

Netanyahu is dragging the people into conflict. This became more than obvious in his decision to start building the new settlement in Jabal Abu Ghneim. Arafat has so far controlled all the protest marches, but how much longer will he be able to contain people's frustrations and anger? The suicide attack in Tel Aviv has shown that Arafat cannot control everything any longer. Hamas is part of the Palestinian house and Islam, being deep-rooted in Palestinian society, can easily be politicized; this fact has been underestimated by Netanyahu. Now, the culture of fear is governing the scene; there is no longer trust between Palestinians and Israelis.

We should not leave Arafat and Netanyahu alone in this situation. We should invite the regional leaders to join in the efforts to move forward with the peace process. We should involve Mubarak and King Hussein in the process. What we have built since Oslo are not just illusions; thus, we should not let one person turn back the clock because he wants to impose his personal *debacle*, his corruption, on the region.

We are now passing through a period in which people are shaken, worried and confused. Peace cannot be exclusive; it must be on a basis of equality and justice. If we do not want to lose everything, we must send a message to the Israeli public, that we are in favor of a peaceful solution. If this does not happen, we will all become Hamas: we will all become so depressed, with nothing left to lose, that we will be ready to give our lives.

Netanyahu is not in favor of partition. He wants a *de facto* binational state with two political regimes: a system of apartheid. How can we convince Israeli public opinion that we need a

government that negotiates with us?

What will happen when Arafat dies? It took us 40 years to build up this leader and to develop his image from that of a "terrorist" into an acknowledged leader and partner in international organizations. There is no other legitimized, elected leader. When Arafat is not there any more, we will be back to square number one.

Sheikh Hamami: I agree totally with what you say. However, Netanyahu cannot change his culture, his nature or way of thinking. With all that has occurred recently, we have lost all trust in the progress of the peace process.

Discussion:

Question: You said that we need to regionalize the peace process. What mechanisms do you have in mind in order to do this?

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: The peace process has a regional dimension that should not be ignored. Cairo has supported the process from the beginning; it has even taken Arafat by the hand and led him to the negotiation table. For Arafat, Cairo is the only Arab strategic alliance in the peace process for three reasons: Camp David, the Egyptian-Washington alliance and the Egyptian-Gazan special relationship.

Now, talking about Amman, everything that affects the Palestinians also affects the Jordanians. The Palestinian-Jordanian relationship has a hidden agenda: the so-called Jordanian option that has been propagated by Likud as well as by Labor, the hatred between King Hussein and Arafat with the Palestinian fear of Jordanian interference in Palestinian issues and the fact that the West Bank is a prison without access to Jordan. It needs the access via the Allenby bridge to breath.

Both Mubarak and King Hussein have a personal interest in the success of the peace process. Thus, we need to open it up. Arafat needs to know that he is not alone, and Israel needs to know that it is not put in the ghetto, but is welcomed in the region.

Question: In the light of the latest suicide bombing, could you elaborate on the current important and influential factions in Hamas?

Sheikh Hamami: First, I want to state that Hamas is against killing innocent people, but the visit of King Hussein to the families of the victims of the Jordanian soldier has been regarded as a humiliation. Once again, Netanyahu has stated that he does not have any respect for the Palestinian people. We wish to push for a peaceful settlement and a just peace. Throughout history, people have refused to give up their rights, but I think we have to change if we want to achieve peace. Peace should be built on people, not on governments.

The second point is that Hamas has engaged in a dialogue with the authority and the other factions, first in Cairo and then in Nablus, because we are looking for a way out of the stalemate. Instead of looking for tools with which to destroy Hamas we should search for tools to unite. Hamas has recognized and accepted that there are two peoples and that there will be two states. There are different schools of thought inside Hamas, but we agree that, at the moment there is no peace process, and that at a certain point we should stop cooperating with the Israelis and instead start to build the Palestinian society, of which Hamas is a part.

Question: It has always been stated that, according to the 'land for peace' formula, land and

peace are not possible at the same time. It seems to me, however, that Hamas and peace are two things that do not go together. It was the three Hamas bombings that brought peace to a standstill and the earlier bombings that allowed Netanyahu to win the elections. Hamas is a destructive force.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: I respect this view but you also have to appreciate the following: for a long time, no Israeli would deal with the PLO because its members were considered terrorists. In Oslo, the Israelis realized that there is no alternative to Arafat, and now this is even recognized by Netanyahu. The other thing is: who created Hamas in the first place? It was Israel that encouraged this alternative leadership. Now, you cannot put the genie back into the bottle easily. Islam is deep-rooted in Palestinian society and can easily be politicized. Hamas was the genie that appeared during the Intifada, but now, it is still there, it is part of civil society, it is part of the family. It tries to integrate itself in the political landscape, for example, by founding the Islamic Salvation Front in Gaza. We should not make it an enemy; dialogue is the tool. The Tel Aviv bombing springs out of the mentality of revenge, out of the mentality of the Middle East that demands 'an eye for an eye.' It is the same mentality that demanded the killing of Yahye Ayyash.

Question: But this was not an individual yesterday: it was a political act of violence. It seems that Arafat does not want to prevent such terrorist attacks from happening.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: What can he do? If you have four sons in the house and somebody provokes them 24 hours a day, how can you control them for those 24 hours? It was an individual act and it was not backed by Arafat. How can you stop a desperate suicide bomber? All of us pay the price.

Question: Is the democratization of Palestinian society part of the peace process or is it opposed to the peace process?

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Yes, democratization is one of the basic tools of the peace process. In the first elections to the PLC, however, we had an overwhelming majority for the Fatah candidates. It is the old guards of the PLO, the nobles and the young generation of the Intifada that have been elected. The question is whether they are the ones most capable to be the new leadership? Now, they have to prove their ability as leaders; the old assets will not be enough. People such as Hanan Ashrawi, on the other hand, were elected because they had already proven themselves.

Question: A widespread approach in stopping the terror is the jailing of all Hamas activists. I think it would be more effective to involve them in the peace process. My question is if Arafat is ready to accept these people as a part of the government.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Arafat is a maestro of tactics. He cannot ignore or work against Hamas. He has to play the card of Hamas in the game with Israel. He has to feed and nurture its members and use them in the negotiations. During this transition phase, he wants and needs everybody to be with him in the house. Thus, he has already appointed two people affiliated with Hamas as ministers.

Now, coming back to the question of democracy; this is not the kind of democracy that I want. There are many constraints. An example of this is the recent case of the NGOs and the World Bank's refusal to give its money to Arafat, who wanted to distribute it to the NGOs. We are fighting for a Palestinian Basic Law and for a law on the NGOs. We are in need of dialogue, free speech, and independent NGOs.

Question: There is always a great deal of talk about the role of the Americans. What do you

do to influence the Americans?

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: The problem is that we do not have a real presence in Washington. We are too weak: we are practically crippled. But it is not a hopeless case. We have to work with the regional partners and should beg people like Hanan Ashrawi to go and lobby in Washington. Arafat, unfortunately, does not want this.

One of our main problems is the huge gap between the Intifada mentality and the Gaza mentality. We are afraid of becoming another authoritarian Arab system.

Question: What is your future scenario for the peace process and the region?

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: The BBC screened a documentary on this subject last year which it projected two scenarios. In the first one, the Arab world would be divided and without leadership with small battles taking place here and there. The second one involved economic integration under the umbrella of the Arab League and a Palestinian state in a Jordanian confederation.

Question: What is the role of the Israeli Arabs in the peace process? Could they serve as a bridge between Israel and the Palestinians?

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Some 17% of the Israelis are Palestinian. They are divided into four groups: the ones that seek autonomy within Israel, the ones that want to maintain their Israeli citizenship but in an Israel that does not consider itself as an exclusive Jewish state, the ones that want to become Palestinian citizens, resident in Israel, and the ones that want to go back to the Palestinian territories according to an idea of exchanging settlers against refugees and Israeli Arabs. There is no consensus in the Israeli Arab community, and sometimes there are even confrontations. The majority does not have an explicit position at the moment. They want to wait for the results of the transition period and then think about their positions.

Question: You said that exclusivity is not an option. How do you think that Jerusalem can be shared?

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: The Palestinian scenario is that Jerusalem should stay an open city with two municipalities, two capitals, and each community belonging to its house. Here, I am speaking about the Jerusalem of 1948 and not Jerusalem as it has been expanded by different rulers. Beilin's concept is to expand, rename and then share Jerusalem. In this plan, the West would stay as it is, the East would be named disputed areas, and the Old City would be ruled by the religious leaders with Palestinian sovereignty over the Muslim and Christian holy sites. The new Arab Jerusalem and Palestinian capital would be in Abu Dis.

Question: You said that the trust that has grown since Oslo is now dying. What about Netanyahu's new proposal for the final status talks?

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: There is no trust in Netanyahu. He is not delivering: for example, he is not redeploying in the way it was agreed upon. How can we trust in what will be agreed upon in final negotiations when we were deceived after putting trust in the transition agreements?

Question: How do you see the peace process 15 days from now?

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: I am afraid there will be more sacrifices and more victims. The closure and arrests will affect every Palestinian family. This will bring us back to the notion of enemies instead of neighbors. We need an immediate meeting between Arafat, Netanyahu and the regional leaders to prevent this. The mentality of Netanyahu is revenge, not reconciliation.
