

Introduction

Palestine has enjoyed geographic, religious and political centrality in the Middle East and has since the beginning of the last century been vulnerable to the plans and ambitions of foreign powers. The resulting conflicts have led to the dispersal and prolonged suffering of the Palestinian people, and during the past eight decades in particular the Palestinian people have fought continuously to defend their internationally recognized rights to freedom and independence.

The ambitions and policies of the various external powers involved over the years have had an undeniable impact on inter-Arab relations, and on the international relations of Arab states. They have also had a direct effect on shaping the history of Palestine and the evolution of its future. Despite this external pressure, the Palestinians have succeeded in defending and maintaining their Arab identity and political presence by organizing socio-economic institutions and a political infrastructure which have allowed them to challenge the power of the various conquerors in the ongoing national struggle. Having legitimate representation forced other parties to recognize and engage with them despite attempts to deny them their rights to self-determination and national independence.

This volume is one of a series that organizes key political documents covering the time from the pre-Ottoman period to 2007. This volume includes the text or excerpts of over 130 documents, covering the second period of the Middle East Peace Negotiations from 1995 to the Sharm el-Sheikh memorandum in September 1999. This brief introduction outlines the history of this period to provide a framework to guide the reader to the historical context of the papers.

Continuing Negotiations

During 1995, Palestinian and Israeli officials held numerous meetings and eventually signed the “Oslo II” Interim Agreement in Washington on 28 September, detailing the mechanisms for, and the limitations of, the extension of Palestinian self-rule to significant portions of the West Bank. The agreement divided the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem, into Area A (comprising major towns where the PNA gains administrative control with Israel retaining certain security duties – excluding Hebron, to which Israel redeployed); Area B (with Palestinian villages coming under PNA civil authority, but with Israel retaining overall “security responsibility”); and Area C (Jewish settlements and “militarily sensitive” areas, where Israel remained in full control).

The sense of optimism which followed the long awaited Israeli redeployment from West Bank towns at the end of 1995 came to an abrupt end in early 1996, when Israel’s assassination of Hamas activist Yahya Ayyash (“The Engineer”) triggered a series of suicide bomb attacks on Israeli targets and violent responses on the part of the Israeli army. The urgently convened international summit on combating terrorism held in Sharm Al-Sheikh was not able to ease the tension and, by the end of March, another deadline for further Israeli redeployment had passed.

In April, President Arafat and PM Peres – replacing Yitzhak Rabin who had been assassinated by right-wing Israeli fanatic Yigal Amir - resumed their talks and confirmed the commencement of the final status talks in May. A few days later, the PNC met for the first time since 1964 on Palestinian soil and voted to amend the PLO Covenant in accordance with the Oslo stipulations.

Palestinian – and Arab – concerns and frustrations came to a peak when the extreme nationalist half of the Israeli electorate - openly opposing the Oslo process - returned Likud to power on 29 May, with Binyamin Netanyahu as the new Prime Minister. In August, these fears were confirmed when the Israeli cabinet voted unanimously to cancel restrictions on settlement development in the West Bank and Gaza, in a blunt disregard of the spirit of the Oslo agreements. This was followed by the provocative opening of a tunnel under the Haram Ash-Sharif compound on 24 September that led to violent clashes between Palestinians protestors and Israeli forces, during which 62 Palestinians were killed and over 1,600 injured (with 14 Israeli soldiers killed and 50 wounded).

Nevertheless, negotiations continued and in January 1997 the Hebron Protocol was signed, dividing the city of Hebron into H1 and H2, with Israel retaining full security control over the settlement enclaves in the H2 section and security responsibility for the rest of Hebron going to the PA.

The next crisis erupted soon after, when Israel announced plans to construct a new settlement (“Har Homa”) at Jabal Abu Ghneim in Jerusalem, followed by the US House of Representatives 10 June vote to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The political situation continued to deteriorate when Israel responded to a 30 July double suicide bombing in Jerusalem’s Mahane Yehuda market with a total sealing of the Palestinian Territories and a widespread arrest campaign during which the army was authorized to operate “if necessary” inside Palestinian-controlled territory.

1998 began with increased Israeli settlement activity and a stalemate in the peace talks. The PA turned down proposals to override the third phase for redeployment, while Washington repeatedly asked Israel to carry out serious further withdrawal. Throughout the first quarter of the year, clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli army occurred frequently.

Under pressure from the Israeli opposition to achieve "peace with security", Prime Minister Netanyahu joined President Arafat on 23 October 1998 in signing the Wye River Memorandum, outlining a revised timetable for the phased implementation of the first and second further redeployments stipulated in the 1995 Oslo II Accords. Stage I was completed in November 1998, while the implementation of stages II and III (due by 31 January 1999) were indefinitely postponed by the Netanyahu government in December.

In spite of this, clashes continued between Palestinians and Israeli troops, and the release in December of Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin by the PA drew Israeli accusations of trying to stall the implementation of the agreement.

January 1999 saw Israel heavily criticized by European Foreign Ministers for not implementing the Wye River agreement. In February, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution calling upon Israel to cease all settlement construction immediately, the only two votes against coming from Israel and the US. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of Ehud Barak and Binyamin Netanyahu as they prepared for the coming Israeli elections left the Palestinians with little hope for the future. Barak's eventual election win

on May 17 was accompanied by his confirmation that he would make no concessions on the issues of Jerusalem, borders or established settlements in Palestinian territory.

In early July, the UN General Assembly upgraded Palestine's representation, allowing it to put its signature as "co-sponsor" on proposed resolutions.

By the time Ehud Barak and Yassir Arafat met in Sharm Esh-Sheikh in September 1999, very little progress had been made in advancing the "peace process". Barak's vow to dismantle illegal West Bank outposts was matched by an increase in settlement expansion, and sporadic violence continued to punctuate daily life among the Palestinians. The "Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum on Implementation Timeline of Outstanding Commitments of Agreements Signed and the Resumption of Permanent Status Negotiations" laid out a three-stage timetable for the completion of the second further redeployment of Oslo II and was essentially an extension of the 1998 Wye River Agreement which had brought so little change to the lives of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian population was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the process of negotiation.

A Final Note

Although we have endeavored to make this publication as reader/user friendly as possible, one should be aware that there is some inconsistency in terms of the spelling of non-English words - names and places (such as Haram Ash-Sharif or *Intifada*) – since we adhered, wherever possible, to the original version rather than apply our usual spelling rules. It is for the same reason that the volumes contain a number of minor typographical errors such as the omission of apostrophes, inconsistent capitalization, and spelling mistakes found in the originals.

Footnotes included in the volumes - excluding those marked "the ed." - are mostly those that appeared in the original texts though the readership note that the numbering will not necessarily be accordance with the original version.

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