

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 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 covers the Middle East Peace Negotiations and their subsequent stalemate in the wake of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum and the Taba talks. This brief introduction outlines the history of this period to provide a framework to guide the reader to the historical context of the papers.

From Sharm El-Sheikh to Taba

The period that came in the immediate aftermath of the Sharm El-Sheikh memorandum began with cautious optimism. A measure of progress was made in the months that followed the agreement between Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat, including the commencement of final status negotiations between the two sides. By the end of 1999, Arafat and Barak had worked with President Clinton to push for a final peace agreement, yet many in Palestinian society remained wary of the high hopes espoused by the leaders. Their skepticism would be validated by mid-2000, when the process all but collapsed and the region fell into a state of violence.

The much-anticipated Camp David Summit began on 5 July 2000, with Prime Minister Barak, President Arafat, and President Clinton coming together to lead tri-lateral negotiations. The Palestinian team had gone reluctantly, unconvinced by the concept of the summit but also looking for a repeat of the success of the first Camp David summit in 1978 between Anwar Sadat, Menachim Begin, and Jimmy Carter. The Israeli team, meanwhile, came fighting for its own political survival rather than to pursue a historic breakthrough. For his part, Clinton was eager to secure his legacy, wanting to be seen by history as the American president that mediated an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There were many attempts at Camp David to empower Arafat and Barak to move toward a landmark achievement, but both were prisoners of their domestic and personal agendas, i.e., personal and political survival, as well as the balance of power on the ground and a fear of betrayal by outsiders.

Instability within the Israeli political elite increased in the immediate aftermath of the Camp David failure, and it became clear that Ariel Sharon would likely succeed Barak after the pending elections. As Sharon prepared to send a message with his provocative visit to the Haram Al-Sharif, Palestinian leaders - including Abu Ala' and Arafat himself - made strong

and ultimately unsuccessful efforts to publicly dissuade him. It was, depending on how you look at it, either a historic miscalculation or political opportunism of the shrewdest kind on the part of Sharon. What is certain is that the visit sparked a series of demonstrations in the OPT and enflamed passions across the Arab and Muslim world. Barak, already politically fragile, ordered his police and army to crack down with maximum force and minimum mercy. By the time of the first Israeli casualties - two weeks, 80 Palestinians dead, and hundreds wounded later - when two Israeli reserve soldiers were killed under chilling circumstances in Ramallah on October 12, the violence had gained a momentum of its own.

2001 began with President Clinton making one final push for a peace agreement. Despite their reservations, Arafat and Barak went along for what proved to be another unsuccessful ride. The two sides quickly moved on to yet another peace effort, this time in Taba. Over the six days of the summit, the Israeli and Palestinian negotiation teams came as close to an agreement as ever, but the talks ended once again with no tangible decisions in place. Both sides had sent competent and willing negotiators that were well received by their counterparts, but the backdrop of impending Israeli elections and continuing violence proved to be too much for the decision-makers to overcome.

Increasing Violence Post-Taba

Israel, by now under the leadership of Ariel Sharon, made 2001 a deadly and demoralizing year for the Palestinians. The sudden loss of Faisal Husseini in May was a saddening blow to the Palestinian cause, especially with regard to leadership in Jerusalem. Within months, Israeli forces had occupied and shut down the Orient House, which was the national political address of Palestinians in Jerusalem, and other Palestinian institutions with ties to the PA.

The violence from both sides only continued to escalate in 2002, culminating with the large-scale Israeli incursion into the West Bank known as ‘Operation Defensive Shield.’ Bethlehem, Nablus, Jenin, and Ramallah all came under a blanket of curfews, arrests, and the use of heavy weaponry by the Israeli Army. President Arafat was isolated in his compound as international calls for Israeli withdrawal went ignored. In June, the implementation of an Israeli plan to build a separation wall began despite the barrier’s planned route drawing widespread local and international criticism for reaching far into the West Bank. All the while, illegal military operations and extraditions continued throughout the West Bank as the prospects for a sovereign and democratic Palestinian state continued to dwindle.

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.