

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 year 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 period from Israel's disengagement from Gaza up to the beginnings of the Annapolis conference. This brief introduction outlines the history of this period to provide a framework to guide the reader to the historical context of the papers.

Another Phase of Transition in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

In August of 2005, Israel's unilateral decision to remove 8,500 settlers living in the occupied Gaza Strip was ready for implementation. Sharon's plan had been met with its share of skepticism from both sides of the conflict and had endured numerous protests and outbursts of violence from right-wing Israelis. Still, the plan went forward and was completed in mid-September, one month after it had begun. The positive feelings in the Gaza Strip after the evacuation of all the Israeli settlers in part of the occupied territories were short lived, however, as it became clear that "disengagement" was not an accurate term for the plan. In fact, with none of their own citizens left in the Gaza Strip, Israeli politicians were now free to use the Israeli army to suffocate and demolish the entire Strip. There would certainly be tough times ahead for the people in Gaza.

By the start of 2006, the Palestinian legislative elections that had been postponed for over six months were finally held. Hamas furthered the electoral success they had enjoyed in the municipal elections of the year before, and the Palestinian political scene was on the verge of a major shift. In response to Hamas' victory, aid coming from the United States, Israel, the European Union, and other nations was cut off. By May, Ehud Olmert had assumed the post of Prime Minister and chosen to cease talking to the Palestinian Authority. The relations, or lack thereof, were further complicated in June with the capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit by a Palestinian group in Gaza.

Palestinian In-Fighting and Renewed International Efforts

Intra-Palestinian fighting intensified in January 2007, as Hamas and Fateh failed to broker an agreement that would establish a unity government. The two sides met in Saudi Arabia in February, with Hamas leader Khaled Masha'al and President Abbas meeting to reconcile the differences between the two parties. The Mecca Agreement that came out of that meeting was not respected and would be soon forgotten. The factional fighting reached a head in June as Hamas gained control of Gaza in what they claimed was a preemptive maneuver to counter American and Israeli influence in the Palestinian political rift. Violence among all three sides - Israel, Hamas, and Fateh - claimed the lives of numerous Palestinians during the summer of 2007. Hamas solidified its hold on Gaza and scored a political coup by securing the release of BBC reporter Alan Johnston, who had been kidnapped by militants in Gaza four months earlier.

The latter half of 2007 was marked by renewed efforts from the international community to find a lasting peace for Palestinians. The Quartet on the Middle East appointed Tony Blair as its envoy on the same day that he stepped down as Britain's Prime Minister. The US led the way in restoring some aid to the Palestinians in order to bolster the standing of President Abbas. In July, a call by President Bush for an international meeting to be held in the fall was quickly endorsed by the UN and the members of the Quartet. By September, the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland was chosen as the venue, and formal invitations were sent out in late November. President Abbas described the meeting as an opportunity for a "new beginning", though his optimism was countered by skepticism among large sections of the Israeli, Palestinian, and international communities.

The conference was held at the end of November, with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice acting as the chief organizer. The stated goal was to set up a timetable for future negotiations on final status issues along the guidelines of the 2002 "Road Map for Peace". President Abbas, Prime Minister Olmert, and representatives from more than 30 nations, the UN Security Council (UNSC), and the Quartet were in attendance, and the meeting resulted in a draft resolution presented to the UNSC by the US, though it was quickly withdrawn due to Israeli objections. In the immediate aftermath, the question of whether Annapolis would bring about meaningful negotiations remained open, and Palestinians were left wondering whether their future would hold revived prospects for peace or another period of transition into further conflict.

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.