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THE INTIFADA: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Allow me to indulge in a few personal historical notes, as one way to present a perspective on a very complicated issue. It was, perhaps, already the end of the fourth or fifth month of our people's uprising against occupation. As it is my habit recently, I went by my mother's to see how she was doing. Already the scars of suffering were so deep and extensive that almost every family, every Palestinian individual, had been affected, directly or indirectly, one way or another. On this particular night my mother seemed particularly depressed. In an effort to raise her spirits, I said to her that the dawn of peace will break soon; that all nations must pay the price of their freedom.

She exploded in my face: But how long must we suffer? From the moment I became conscious of the world, she said, I became conscious of fear, of struggle. Her father, an activist from the Ramleh region in the mid-plains of Palestine, had been involved in resistance against the British. His property — he was a well-to-do landowner — was confiscated by them. Their country house, where she grew up as a child, had been demolished beyond a visible trace. In further retribution, he had been sent into exile for two years on some small island in the Pacific. Later, in the war with the Haganah, their family had been forced out of the small sanctuary apartment they took up in Ramleh. But even by then my grandfather, at the age of 48, had already died from a heart attack.

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In that war, another activist in the immediate family, my father, was shot and had to have his leg amputated. In the bloody turmoil the entire country, of course, was amputated. But all of that was back in the '30s and '40s. Now it is 1988. Yet the scars of the conflict still seem to grow. The wounds, instead of healing, seem to fester. More people are sent into exile, more houses, memories, are razed to the ground,

more properties are confiscated, more human bodies are mutilated for life. In the hospital wards, children that have escaped martyrdom are now trying to come to terms with having to live an entire life incapacitated, having to make do with one lung or limb less, with one eye gouged out. Martyrs, of all ages and from all places, continue to be buried under soil where their ancestors had lived and toiled for thousands of years. How much more must we die, my mother said, before we begin to live a normal life?

The plains of Ramleh, where my mother's ancestral heritage belongs, now constitute the heartland of Israel. In establishing itself, Israel had forcibly acquired and controlled about 77 percent of the land of Palestine. In 1967, the remaining 23 percent was forcibly ingested. But the land Israel conquered has people. The Palestinians are not cockroaches to be sprayed or snuffed out of existence, as some Israeli generals claim. They are not transit passengers who can be elegantly or otherwise removed to other destinations, and they are not, to use Huxley terminology, or the implication of Israeli military practice, gamma organisms that can be controlled for the service of God's chosen race. Palestinian blood is just as normal, and human, by every ounce and drop, as any Jewish or other blood. We are not semi-human. We are not a retarded race. We are not chance visitors from some constitutionally deficient corner of the galaxy. We are not illegitimate orphans that must be sent off or attached to the political homes of foster parents. We walked the earth of Palestine from the dawn of time, as history attests. There is no historical claim which the sons of Abraham, from Sarah's side, can put to the land which is stronger than the claim of sons of the king of Hebron, who welcomed and hosted Abraham and his tribe, when they arrived in Palestine from Iraq; or than the claim, more gener-

ally, of the descendants of the Jebusites, the Philistines, the Canaanites, the Edomites, and all the rest of the non-Jewish peoples who continuously inhabited and ruled the land from time immemorial.

A broad and balanced historical perspective is important because only if one has it can one understand the political language of the Palestinian people of today, as against Israeli political language, with which there is almost an instinctive familiarity and sympathy in the West, given the Biblical heritage. A balanced understanding is necessary because we are now standing at a historical moment, where being attentive to Palestinian language, and to the message it portends, with all its embedded historical references and all its potentialities, can make the difference between moving towards compromise, and peace, or towards intransigence, and catastrophe.

The Palestinian message cannot, and will not be lightly dismissed by a stroke of the pen, through the refusal to grant the chairman of the Palestinian people's chosen representative organization a visa to speak before the world body of the United Nations. Mr. Shultz cannot, with a stroke of the pen, hope to strike out thousands of years of the Palestinian people's history. We shall yet be heard, because ours is the voice of peace, the voice of a nation struggling to be free, the voice of the future.

For several years now, the term "U.N. Security Council Resolution 242" was treated as a magical antidote against diplomatic extinction. Resolution 242 had to be explicitly stated, explicitly accepted by the PLO as a precondition for negotiations. Never mind that Israel itself was late in accepting it. Never mind that, to quote Mr. Abba Eban, it was explicitly and consciously excluded from the Coalition Agreement between Labor and Likud in 1984. Never mind that Chairman Arafat and his close aides had referred to it on several

occasions as being acceptable from a Palestinian point of view as part of a package. Never mind that it does not address the issue of the Palestinian problem: it had to be explicitly endorsed by the PLO itself, as the basis on which to convene an international conference.

Why? Did some policymakers in Israel and the United States hope that by signing 242 the Palestinian people would sign themselves out of violence? Was it hoped that these matters could be settled as a border or an administrative dispute between Israel and Jordan? Because, if that was the case, then yes, that is not the message which came out of the PNC's 19th session, and those policymakers had every reason not to be satisfied.

Or was it hoped that, in the attempt to bring about an explicit endorsement of 242, the PLO would inevitably break apart, leaving the Palestinian people without an interlocutor, and the field open for quickly drawing up a list of names of so-called "enthusiastic Palestinians" from the Occupied Territories to make the required deal with Israel? Because, if that was the case, then yes, the events in Algeria must have been disappointing.

Or did these policymakers hope that, as in past sessions, the PNC would explicitly reject 242, and would then be officially and clearly branded as the party against peace? Was it hoped that, as so often in the past, the blame for the continued suffering of the Palestinian people can then be placed squarely on the Palestinians themselves, and their leadership? Because, if that was the hope, then indeed one can understand the irrational, the ferocious dismissal, especially by Israeli Labor and Likud leaders, of the PNC's resolutions.

The PNC Policy Statement respects all these hopes and plans because, while it explicitly referred to 242 as the basis for convening an international conference, it

also affirmed the necessity, as the Palestinian people see it, of having the peace conference also address the issue of Palestinian national identity and history. Resolution 242 covers the question of territory; it does not address the question of national identity.

In essence, the PLO said that while 242 is a necessary ingredient for making peace with Israel, it is not sufficient. But already to have said this is to have said that the PLO wants to make peace with Israel. Resolution 242 talks about the need for Israel to withdraw to secure and recognized boundaries; it talks about the need to initiate peace negotiations for a final settlement that will ensure the security of all states — all states — in the region: but it fails to mention, nor was it conceived to address, the inalienable historical right of the Palestinian people to sovereignty on their soil.

Is it so irrational, so unnatural, then that the Palestinian people, who have already been dispossessed of 77 percent of their ancestral land, should want a peace conference to address, not just the security of Israel, and not exclusively Israel's right to exist, but also, and equally forcefully and directly, the right of the Palestinian people to be equal with other nations, the right of the Palestinians to a state on what is, after all, 23 percent of Palestinian soil; and our own right, above all, to live within secure borders? Because, if it is either unnatural or irrational on our part to wish a peace conference to address these issues, then indeed, some politicians and leaders have every reason to be outraged by our impertinence.

Nor are the references to terrorism in both the Independence Proclamation and the Policy Statement wanting in clarity, or significance. The Proclamation explicitly affirms the rejection, by our Palestinian State, of the use of force, violence, and

terrorism against other states. And it affirms our commitment to the resolution of all regional and international disputes by negotiations and peaceful means. The Policy Statement also affirms the PLO's abidance by UN resolutions, the Arab Summit resolution, and the Cairo Declaration on the question of terrorism.

Has the Israeli premier, or his close aides, ever been so clear and explicit on this issue as this?

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The Palestinian people view the uprising in general, and the PNC resolutions in particular, as being a clear message for peace and for negotiations. Not a single leaflet of the leadership of the uprising, the PLO's network of underground committees in our occupied state, has called for the destruction of Israel or for the death of the Jewish people. Not a single leaflet condoned the killing even of the Israeli soldier in Bethlehem. Quite the contrary, the accidental and tragic death in Jericho of a mother and her children on the eve of Israel's elections was regretted, in no uncertain terms, by the local popular committee of the uprising in Jericho in a special communiqué. The underground leadership even issued two separate leaflets in Hebrew addressed to Israeli soldiers in the Occupied Territories, now our occupied Palestinian State, as well as to Israel's public opinion on the eve of the elections.

The message was clear. The soldiers were told: Go home. Go to your family and children. Live with them in peace, and let us live in peace. It is not your death that we seek. Our uprising is not aimed at the destruction of Israel. It is aimed at establishing freedom for ourselves, in our own state. Israeli voters were also addressed in no uncertain terms: vote for peace, they were told. Vote for negotiations.

The serialized leaflets of the underground leadership also devoted much of their space to defining the uprising strategy as being one of peace and negotiations in an international conference, and of the establishment of an independent Palestinian State alongside Israel. In the latest but one leaflet, the leadership explicitly welcomed the PNC's call for an international conference based on resolutions 242 and 338, coupled with our right to self-determination.

But Israel's response to the Palestinian peace message was, and continues to be, a message of rejection and repression. A population of some 1.5 million people continues to be treated as hostages on their soil. Israel's answer to the people's white revolution continues to be the use of violence, of terrorization of entire communities. How else can you view putting entire cities, entire regions, an entire population under curfew, under military siege for prolonged periods? How else can one understand such ruthless measures as the cutting off of all the vital signs of life from a village, a refugee camp, a city, for days or weeks on end, with no water, no electricity, no telephone links, no transport, no pedestrian movement allowed, on pain of being shot to death on sight?

How would you or your children feel if you lived under siege in a remote mountain village, in constant fear of armed soldiers breaking into your homes in the middle of the night, brutalizing and abusing you, perhaps beating up your sister or daughter,

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perhaps shooting your brother or your son, perhaps walking off with one or two of you to a military compound? Who is the victim of terror if, at the sight of a military road-block or of a passing military unit, you have come instinctively to know that you risk physical abuse and harassment, or even receiving a bullet or shrapnel wound, or being sent off to a detention camp in the Negev desert, where your six-month detention order is passed and renewed by someone for whom you are simply, and exclusively, a number?

Perhaps it is true, as Israel's generals assert, that only such measures will teach the population a lesson. But are such lessons to be tolerated, even to be condoned by the civilized world community? Is it conceivable that the urgency of protecting an unarmed captive population against a ruthless, sophisticated military machinery can be outweighed by hair-splitting sophistries about whether quite the right word was omitted, or said?

Surely, beyond all the academic preciseness that either is or isn't present in this statement or that by Palestinian leaders, one thing is clear: we want peace; we are prepared to negotiate; we want a settlement in which we can secure a spot on the earth to which we belong, where we can live in freedom and security, without fear, where we can attend to the construction of a safe and dignified life for our children. Surely, no amount of sophistry and word-wizardry, no amount of advanced diplomatic techniques of obfuscation, can hide this fact.

Let Israel, let the world, call our bluff, if that is how our message of peace is viewed. Let Israel come to the negotiating table. Let there be a step-by-step testable process of negotiations, of disengagement between the two sides. Let us lend less importance to formalities and more importance to substance. Let us concentrate less on the past and more on the future. For it is in the future that we shall have to live.

I have absolute confidence that we, the Palestinian people, have a vested interest in a future of peace. But where does Israel's self-perceived (not necessarily real) vested interest lie? Surely its obfuscation of facts, its continued repression, its rejection of negotiating offers, its twisted interpretations of our statements of intent, its prevarication — all of these are signs that Israel sees its interest as lying, not in an honorable, equitable settlement, but in a continuing state of conflict, leading gradually, surgically, to the obliteration of the Palestinian people and their claim from the political map. This is, perhaps, and quite likely, how Israel views a prospective peace settlement: not in terms of a historic compromise, but as a unilaterally enforced exclusive advantage.

But if such are indeed Israel's calculations, then there can only be a catastrophe in store, for us in the region, and perhaps for the entire world. The Palestinian uprising, now a year old, is a timely warning that Israel's chosen path will only trigger deeply embedded forces of rage that will eventually devastate the region and reduce it to ruin. It is a suicide path that only Israel's closest friends can prevent her from treading. It is a path in which no one, really, has an interest.