

# The Uprising in Palestine

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## The Uprising: A Critical Analysis

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The popular rebellion in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 can only be understood fully if certain historical facts are duly noted. Generally speaking, two historical developments should be considered. First, an account must be given of the general mood of the people under occupation, or of their socio-political pattern of behaviour. Second, an account must be given of the development of the elements of leadership among the people. These two accounts will help to explain the intensity of the rebellion as well as the extent of the involvement of the organised national movement in it.

1: However harsh this judgement might seem, it is not too outrageously unobjective to maintain that the Palestinian population under occupation has generally lived a schizophrenic kind of existence for the past 21 years. On one level, which is the level of theory, the Palestinians in these areas have held to the ideology calling for liberation from the Israeli system. On another level, which is the level of behavioural reality, they have allowed themselves to be gradually coopted by precisely that system which they verbally and emotionally rejected. There was, in other words, a blatant contradiction between theory and practice, or between word and deed. The ideological slogan was "disengagement from the system" and "liberation from it". Yet the Palestinians as a group behaved in precisely the opposite direction, that is, towards being assimilated by the system. There were notable exceptions in this general assimilationist direction, especially among certain highly sensitised activist groups, or during highly sensitive political periods. One such major example is that of the Jerusalem lawyers who collectively decided to boycott the Israeli court system as soon as Israel annexed Jerusalem. To practise law under these new conditions, it was reasoned, would be to legitimise Israel's annexation. Over the past 21 years this principle was often called into question by various lawyers,

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officials and politicians. But it held. However it reflected a minority view and the predominant trend over the past 21 years has been towards assimilation.

There were certain landmarks on this overall process of integration over the past 21 years. Because of the importance of understanding the precise nature of this trend, I have chosen the example of newspaper publications in the territories as a model of what has generally been happening right up to the explosion of December 1987.

Arab newspapers in Jerusalem stopped publishing immediately following the Jordanian army's defeat in 1967. As the dust of the war subsided, an argument developed between two groups, whom I shall call the "ideologists" and the "pragmatists" for clarification purposes. The pragmatists were in favour of proceeding with the implementation of official measures in order to bring out an Arab newspaper. Their argument might have been articulated as follows:

"The Arabs of the West Bank need a newspaper of their own.

To desist from publishing such a newspaper under the pretext that it would constitute cooperation with the occupation authorities is to leave the field open for these authorities to disseminate their propaganda without challenge. If we publish our own paper, then we can at least provide a useful national service to the population.

"Of course, to publish means having to apply to the authorities for a permit, as well as having to accept the Israeli censorship rules. But these concessions are insignificant if they are measured against the obvious tangible gains which accrue from publishing."

The ideologists' position in contrast might have been articulated as follows:

"To publish means to apply to the Israeli authorities for a permit. But to do this means to legitimise this authority and to condone its rule over us. Yet everyone knows that we reject this rule, and surely this rejection must be reflected in our behaviour. Therefore, it stands to reason that we should refrain from applying to the authorities for a permit. Otherwise, we would be being inconsistent. Secondly, from the practical point of view, the Israeli censor will only allow the publication of that material which suits the occupation. Therefore, we will not succeed in any case in counterbalancing the authorities' propaganda war. On the contrary, we would be an unsuspecting instrument in this war. Therefore even if we manage to get some favourable items published over the years to come, their value will be insignificant against the losses we will incur from allowing ourselves to play a game whose rules have already been set down by our enemy. And these



losses will be both ideological as well as practical.”

I have tried to reconstruct the positions of the two camps at some length because one encounters their analogues throughout the 21 year history of occupation whenever an argument was consciously developed concerning similar issues. Generally ideological positions, sometimes backed up by practical considerations, were pitted against utilitarian or pragmatic dictates. And the issue has always been whether or not one should engage aspects of the system to one's advantage. Even in the heat of the call for a civil disobedience campaign in the past few weeks, a public figure such as Mubarak Awad, who is paradoxically associated with the campaign for disobedience, yields to the pragmatic argument and addresses himself to the Israeli Supreme Court to challenge the authorities decision to expel him from his hometown. In a sense, his move reflects his adherence to the general trend that has dominated for the past 21 years. Other major landmarks in this trend over the period have been the municipal elections in 1976, the use of the Supreme Court to challenge political issues, the acceptance of a link-up to the Israeli water and power systems, the use of the Israeli media and the use of Israeli Knesset members among other examples. These examples only cover cases where conscious collective decisions had to be made. The number of cases where no conscious collective decision was made is much larger. Indeed, the overall economic situation in the Occupied Territories – where almost half of the labour force is employed by Israeli institutions, and where about 90% of the goods and services consumed by people in the territories comes from or via Israel and where nothing can be done without an Israeli permit or license, including the setting up of charitable societies or of schools or of businesses etc. – has meant that on an individual basis people have had to allow themselves to be coopted behaviourally by the system in spite of emotion or rhetoric.

Indeed, there were exceptions. The lawyers' decision was one of them. The decisions by a number of activists not to take their appeals to the Supreme Court to stay expulsion orders is another such example. The refusal by the nationalist municipal leaders to deal with the civilian administration (which resulted in their being removed from office) is another example. The refusal of the universities to abide by Military Order 854 and specifically the refusal of the foreign lecturers to abide by the anti-PLO pledge were further examples. But these were isolated incidents in the overall history of occupation and the predominant trend was in the other direction, especially among those sectors in society that were not on the visible political frontlines.

The power of the so-called pragmatic approach was increasing to such an extent that if in 1967 it was still open to debate whether or not

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to apply for a permit from the authorities to publish a paper, the debate had been so decisively resolved by 1987 that would-be publishers applied for applications as a matter of course. Furthermore, the situation had so developed by the early 1980s that newspapers which were shut down for allegedly supporting so-called radical groups (such as *al-Darb* and *al-Mithaq*) appealed to the Israeli Supreme Court as a matter of course in an attempt to stay the orders.

As for the pattern of behaviour among sectors not subject to political scrutiny, the process of immersion was in full swing.

In other words, the chasm between reality and ideology was gradually increasing and the tension resulting from this becoming so high that a major explosion was inevitable. Perhaps the inevitability of the explosion can be explained in terms of additional factors, including the suppressive occupation measures. But it was obvious that the body politic of the Palestinian society under occupation was being affected by an intense case of schizophrenia that was bound to head to an intense explosion. There were only two directions for this explosion by way of the body politic attempting to restore its health again; either people's political aspirations had to be changed so that a new strategy had to be developed to reflect their assimilationist behavioural reality or the behavioural reality had to be changed in order truly to reflect people's political aspirations. So either people had to develop a new strategy of fighting for equal rights within the system, or they had to implement their theoretical strategy of disengaging themselves from the system. In December 1987 the people made their choice. This choice, as it was articulated in retrospect by the leadership of the uprising, was in favour of implementing steps to disengage from the system. Thus the call for total civil disobedience meaning the administrative and economic rebellion against the reality of total immersion in and subjugation by the system.

2: If one can understand the articulated strategy as well as the intensity of the Uprising only from an account of this historic background of the schizophrenia that has afflicted this society indiscriminately over the past 21 years, it is equally impossible to answer the question whether it was a home-grown rebellion unless one understands how the process of decision-making developed over those years.

One can divide the 21-year period of occupation into four phases in order to understand how local leadership developed. In the first phase, which extended roughly between 1967 and 1976, political leadership was generally defined in terms of a certain set of public figures who in many ways represented the previously existing order – that is the “Old Order”. The Old Order was a combination of elements including the family system, economic relations, the conservative



values of society and the Jordanian authority among others.

The structure of society began to crumble with the defeat of the Jordanian army in 1967. The military defeat and transformation ushered in a much more extensive social transformation in society and in economic relations. The pattern of labour was changing reflecting Israel's economic needs. This meant that labour was drawn from village farming into Israeli labour enterprises. It also meant that women were stepping forward and joining their male counterparts in the labour market. These two changes were bound to be reflected in the social and family values of the population. This was also reflected politically, where the effectiveness both of the Jordanian government as well as of the set of public figures associated with that government was diminishing, reaching to the point of total impotence. The keys of power over the smallest details were now in the hands of the army officers. The leadership was no longer of any use. In addition, the Old Order was the natural scapegoat of the military defeat.

Thus while the leftover leadership representing the Old Order seemed all there was on the surface, the seeds of change were already sown during this phase. A new order was emerging which reflected the disenchantment with the Old Order. This newly emerging reality finally found expression in the 1976 municipal elections which in effect produced a new set of public figures. This succeeded in replacing the older set as a group of politicians with which the leadership had now to be associated. But this exchange of public figure sets was itself only the tip of an iceberg of political transformation.

Gradually, and while these public figures assumed prominence in the media as the new leadership, the real power was slowly being transferred to the executive arm of this leadership, namely to the mushrooming political infrastructure of unions, societies and communities of the mass movement etc. In other words, the seeds of change and transformation of this second phase came into existence together with the leadership of this phase. By the late 1970s/early 1980s, the power of decision-making had genuinely been transferred to the mass committees (the student unions, unions, societies, committees, etc.), thus marking the third phase of the development of leadership. Because of the very diffuse nature of this leadership, it was clear that there was no specific geographic home for it. The political factions of the PLO were deeply enmeshed in it and it was so diffuse that the centre of decision-making moved with the circumstances from one location to another; once it was in Birzeit University campus, once in another campus, once Balata refugee camp and then it would move on to another refugee camp. Much depended on who was in jail and on who was not, on where Israel chose to strike and not to strike. There was also the

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human factor of who was active in what committee and who was not and who was able to coordinate more successfully with members from other factions and committees.

This third phase of leadership extended well into the mid-1980s, with its overall power slowly disintegrating for a number of reasons, partly reflecting the disunity of the PLO abroad. But a major reason for the waning of this leadership was its lack of centralised organisation in any real sense of the term. Ideally the mass committees would have produced a centralised command that could have led the people into the Uprising of 1987. Reality, however, was different. Underneath the massive network of political infrastructure that was the true centre of decision-making in the early 1980s, a new reality was emerging – a reality that finally gave expression to itself in the December Uprising. This reality was that of the masses themselves finally deciding to take matters into their own hands. The Uprising reflects the fourth stage in the development of leadership, the phase of the people's revolution where the people themselves became their own leaders. By its very nature this phase is transitory and we are already witnessing a return to some form of leadership which is an advanced model of the third phase.

3: It is necessary to dwell on the history of decision-making at some length in order to be able to answer the question, "Who was behind the Uprising?"

Clearly, the comment by some observers that this was a purely "spontaneous Uprising" is correct in that it was the masses themselves who made the essential move. But it is also correct to claim that the PLO was behind the Uprising in the following sense; as the power of political leadership slowly filtered down to the masses, the PLO organised a network of mass institutions which could wield this power. The PLO also tirelessly drummed up the morale of the masses in anticipation of a major political explosion. Political rallies, literature and organisation thus prepared the conditions for this political event. Indeed, this was borne out by the fact that, while at first the explosion of the masses was spontaneous, it was only through a pre-existing political fabric at the level of the mass movement that this explosion was harnessed into a prolonged, ordered and articulate revolution.

The physical intensity of this popular rebellion, reflecting the natural volcanic eruption, marked the first phase. In this phase, people poured out into the street as they had never done before. The initiative, the element of surprise and the power – all of these elements were clearly in the hands of the masses. Unable to cope, the Israeli army blindly carried out an extensive campaign of arrests. The army was still under the impression that this was the work of a handful of activists.



But as it became clearer that this was a mass rebellion, the army lost its nerve and it started to shoot indiscriminately at the people. But still they poured out, impelled by a 21-year history of repression, rhetoric and schizophrenia. Before the masses the army proved to be totally useless.

At the height of this first phase of the rebellion, local activists quickly drew up the strategy for the second phase. The call was for total civic/national disobedience, although at first the implications of this call were not very clear. Quickly a plan was drawn up to counter 21 years of integration into the system; employees had to resign, the Israeli economy was to be boycotted, military and administrative orders had to be rebelled against. The mystery leadership of the underground (the United National Leadership of the Uprising) issued a call to the Arab policemen to resign and the response was stunning. This marked the beginning of the second phase. The Palestinian national movement was clearly in control of the street. Once again, the entire institution of the occupation authority seemed totally at a loss before the masses.

But after three months had elapsed, the occupation authorities began to regain some of the initiative. This happened as the army took to raiding villages and camps. More than 10,000 had been put in jail. Hundreds were killed and several hundreds were rendered physically incapable due to a brutal policy of bone-breaking. This, together with time was taking its toll on the intensity of the Uprising. Even so, the Uprising was not quelled. A stand-off had been reached which is a turning-point. From now on either the process of disengagement from the system will proceed leading to a unilaterally imposed self-autonomy as a stage towards independence or the occupation authorities will gradually succeed in re-establishing control.

Either way, the Uprising has already accomplished wonders. Its most far-reaching accomplishment, in my view, is that it has shown the people under occupation the way. Now they know that they possess an incredible weapon, the weapon of their national will. Now they have the faith that, sooner or later, one way or another, this weapon will be used to achieve the right of independent national self-determination.

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