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Intifada and Independence

EDWARD SAID

The Palestinian uprising or *intifada* on the West Bank and Gaza is said to have begun on December 9, 1987. A month earlier an Arab summit meeting in Amman had resolved the usual moral support for the cause of Palestine, although the various kings and presidents had also indicated that their primary interest was not Palestine but the Iran-Iraq war. This partial demotion of Palestine was gleefully noted by commentators in the United States who were led by the usual "experts," (Daniel Pipes, Thomas Friedman et al.) ever ready to portray Yasir Arafat as a bumbling scoundrel, grinning his way from one failure to another. What seems to have escaped "expert" and official Israeli notice was that the Occupied Territories had already had twenty years of a regime designed to suppress, humiliate, and perpetually disenfranchise Palestinians, and that the likelihood of an outside force actually improving the situation had gradually disappeared. Instead the situation for Palestinians had gotten worse, and their sense of embattled loneliness, even abandonment, had increased. Capitulation was impossible. An intensification of resistance therefore seemed required and with it, greater discipline, more determination, enhanced independence of method, planning and action.

In discussing the unfolding *intifada* (note that this is the only Arabic word to enter the vocabulary of twentieth-century world politics) we are in fact talking about two dynamics, one internal to Palestinian life under Israeli domination, the other external, in which the Palestinian exile presence has interacted dialectically with regional and international powers. Consider first the internal situation. Alone of the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, the West Bank and Gaza remained in an unforgiving limbo of local repression and frozen political process. Sinai was returned to Egypt in 1980, the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem were formally annexed by Israel, a change in status hardly welcomed by the Syrians and Palestinians who lived in those places, but at least the annexation represented a new dynamic. In the meantime, more settlements were established on the West Bank and Gaza, more land expropriated. After municipal elections on the West Bank (not in Gaza) in the spring of 1976 overwhelmingly returned pro-PLO candidates, the officials were summarily dismissed. Whenever leaders emerged they were either imprisoned, killed or maimed by Jewish terrorists, or they were simply expelled.

And always, the expropriations of land, the increasingly tight control over water, the perpetual encroachments of Jewish settlements pressed down on Palestinians in the Territories, which after 1977 became known as “administered” lands, renamed “Judea and Samaria.” The Camp David accords as interpreted by the Israelis and the U.S. opened no avenue of independence, only a series of pointless negotiations with phantom Palestinian “inhabitants” from the Occupied Territories who could never be identified or promised anything. There were occasional, and quite unsuccessful, attempts to empower collaborationist Palestinians (e.g., the Village Leagues) who would perhaps be more amenable to doing the Israeli wish, but those never acquired anything like the credibility needed to swing a critical mass of Palestinians behind them. After a time they were dropped and forgotten.

Although it was frequently referred to as a benign occupation, the Israeli presence on the West Bank and Gaza hurt more and more people as time passed. Students were forced to endure the extended closing of schools and universities. Workers who depended on intermittent piecework inside Israel for their livelihood faced daily reminders of their subservient status; they were paid less than Jewish workers, they had no union to support them, they were required to be kept under lock and key anytime they stayed overnight inside the Green Line. Some were burned alive as a consequence, many others referred to themselves as “slaves.” There was a proliferation of over a thousand laws and regulations designed not only to enforce the subaltern, rightless position of Palestinians under Israeli jurisdiction, but also to rub their noses in the mud, to humiliate and remind them of how they were doomed to less-than-human status. Books by the thousands were banned. The colors of the Palestinian flag were outlawed; even the word “Palestine” could earn its user a jail sentence. Administrative detentions were common, as were the dynamiting of houses, torture, collective punishments and harassments, complete with rituals of dehumanizing behavior forced upon unarmed Palestinians. Yet Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza were required to pay Israeli taxes (but had no one to represent them), to submit to the gradually more and more cruel whims of settlers who did what they wanted with impunity, to face their alienation from their own land. To plant a tree required a permit. To hold meetings also required a permit. Entry and exit required permits. To start a well required a permit, one that was never given.

None of these horrific things went completely unnoticed. A fair number of Israelis protested them, and the Israeli press, notable for its independence by and large, recorded them. Various groupings—the Israeli League for Human Rights chaired by the unflagging Professor Israel Shahak, the small bands of peace activists sometimes including Peace Now, a handful of writers, academics, intellectuals, Knesset members—signaled the world that outrages were taking place. But the massive political, economic, and military support of the United States enabled

things to go on as usual. The outrages continued (in fact they increased) and with them, the powerful propaganda and justifying rhetoric of those whom Noam Chomsky has called “the supporters of Israel” went forward unabated. By the early months of the first Reagan administration it became clear that there was nothing Israel might not do, from unmercifully punishing Palestinians under its rule to invading countries all around it, that the U.S. would not support. Aid levels went up tremendously, so that aside from the direct budget-to-budget support that Israel (uniquely of all the countries that receive U.S. foreign aid) was assured of (all of it paid at the beginning of the fiscal year), in amounts that exceeded one third of the total U.S. foreign aid budget (3 billion dollars in 1988), there were other kinds of unprecedented and blanket deals made. A strategic partnership was devised between the two countries; Israel was accorded favored country trading status; previous debts were forgiven; a huge variety of intelligence, military, and political liaisons were established; U.S. taxes were waived on Israeli securities, bonds, and funds. Not for nothing then did the head of AIPAC, Tom Dine, say in early 1987 that never had the U.S. (and especially the Congress) been more pro-Israeli than now.

People in the U.S. who had made a practice of speaking up for human rights everywhere in the world, and particularly in countries within the Soviet sphere, simply said nothing about the appalling situation created by the Israeli occupation. Yet the alternative sources of information—contrary to the shameless pandering to the Israeli lobby of the U.S. media as described, for example by Robert I. Friedman in *Mother Jones*, June 1988—kept up the monitoring of the internal situation. Here mention must be made of local groups such as Law in the Service of Man, a group of Palestinian lawyers, the West Bank Data Project, funded by the Ford Foundation and directed by Meron Benvenisti, the Alternative Information Center in Jerusalem, Raymonda Tawil’s Palestine Press Service, whose courageous and objective efforts to record, and occasionally contest human rights abuses from murder to land expropriation made it impossible to pretend that no one knew what in fact was going on in the name of democratic, freedom-loving Israel.

By the second Reagan administration a sizeable amount of Israeli revisionist historical research had exposed the much longer record of Zionist attitudes and practices toward the Palestinians. As the truth about 1948 and 1949 came to light—thanks to the efforts of Tom Segev, Simha Flapan, Benni Morris, Avi Shlaim and others—a remarkable coincidence between their research and the testimony of three generations of Palestinians was clear. More to the point, there emerged a perceptible continuity between Zionist theories and actions before as well as after 1967. The occupation, for all its deliberate and programmatic humiliation of Palestinians, its bare-knuckled attempts to rob a whole people of nationhood, identity, and history, its systematic assault on civil institutions and vulnerabilities, could be seen as extending the

logic of earlier Zionists like Ben-Gurion, Herzl, and Jabotinsky into the present. Far from revealing a defensive strategy of self-protection against extermination and annulment this logic instead showed a political and state philosophy relentlessly on the offensive, spurning Arab overtures for peace, attacking civilians undeterred by compassion or understanding, pretending all along that Israel was engaged in a fight for its survival. In this context the protestations of Israel's idealistic friends, that Zionism's early spirit was being corrupted and betrayed by Israeli occupation methods, sounded both indecent and unconvincing.

It was the terrible force of these realities that Palestinians under occupation resisted; the symbols of the *intifada*—the stone-throwing children—starkly represented the very ground of the Palestinian protest, with stones and an unbent political will standing fearlessly against the rows of well-armed Israeli soldiers, backed up by one of the world's mightiest defense establishments (the Israeli military buying mission in the U.S. alone had a \$25 million per annum administrative budget), bank-rolled unflinchingly and unquestioningly by the world's wealthiest nation, supported faithfully and smilingly by a whole apparatus of intellectual lackeys. The occupation had lasted for twenty years without a single change for the better. Life was more difficult. Israelis were less interested in peace and coexistence. The U.S., the other Arabs, even putative allies like the Soviet Union seemed paralyzed by that mixture of foregone hypocrisy and benevolent hand-wringing that always contributed to sustaining the occupation still longer. Therefore the time had come to start trying to change realities, from the bottom up. On the 18th of December 1987 the well-known Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani produced his brilliant ode to *Atfal al-Hajarah* (Children of the Stones) and in characterizing their dazzling gesture of revolt, he also pinned down the café-haunting, *nouveaux-riche* merchants, commission-agents, polygamous princes, intellectuals, and rulers whose exploits in London and Cannes had in fact produced the *jil al-khiyanah* (generation of treason) that surrounded and still continued to exploit the Palestinian cause.

But, as I said, the *intifada* also has its antecedents in the external, that is exile, situation of those dispossessed and dispersed Palestinians who were driven from their lands in 1948 and 1967. By 1969 the Palestine Liberation Organization and its constituent groups had emerged as a mobilizing force not only for Palestinians but for a whole generation of Arabs—intellectuals, young people, politically influential activists for whom the fall of Abdel Nasser and his unionist style of Arab nationalism had to be replaced with a political vision more capable of implementation and defense after the disasters of 1967. An early motto of the Palestinian movement was the ideal of establishing a secular democratic unitary state in all of Palestine; this attracted much attention in the Arab world first because of its intrinsic merits as a notion that rose beyond the crippling inhibitions imposed on whole populations by

Zionism on the one hand and small-scale state nationalisms in the Arab world on the other. Also implied in the secular-democratic-state concept was a political and social program that would liberate people from the legacy of imperialism, in which partitions, make-shift state boundaries, and top-heavy national security states produced neither the true independence nor the political actualities for which earlier generations had so strenuously fought.

In the period 1969-74 Palestinians had disastrous encounters with Arab state authority—in Jordan, and Lebanon principally. This revealed the defensiveness of standing regimes as well as uncritical fidelity to ethnic or resurgent religious nationalism. The secular state idea was slowly abandoned. In 1974 at the Palestine National Council meeting a new notion was put forward first by the Democratic Front, then it was espoused by Fatah, and Arafat in particular. Palestinian nationalism had to be recuperated immediately by a Palestinian national authority; thus, as the PNC resolutions began to put it, any portion of land liberated from Israeli occupation should go directly under the independent jurisdiction of a Palestinian “national authority.” Also in 1974 Arafat came to the UN to offer his peace plan, having earlier in the year gained an Arab Summit consensus that the PLO was “the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”

Thus a new trajectory was established toward the idea of partitioning Palestine, although the word *partition* was never uttered, and the program of a two-state solution was frequently both unclear and often diverted. The PLO remained committed to “liberation” at the same time that the highest Palestinian authority—the PNC—had begun to speak of political (as opposed to “military” or “armed struggle”) measures in furtherance of its national objectives; while it remained fixed explicitly on the complete liberation of Palestine the PLO seemed to indicate a preference for the political independence of a Palestinian state. In time the liberation idea slipped from sight except as a historical-cum-rhetorical gesture, for after all, most Palestinians were not from the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, and their loss had to find a commemorative place somewhere in the concrete actualities of Palestinian life. Moreover the UN’s General Assembly, the Non-Aligned movement, the socialist block, the Islamic conference had begun to show accelerating interest in Palestinian statehood, inalienable rights, and so on. So while the international context showed a clear improvement in the Palestinian national status, and pointed toward a Palestinian state on a part of Palestine alongside Israel, some Palestinians, some Arab states, Israel, and the U.S. engaged in furious battle in which civil war (Lebanon), invasion (Israel’s massive interventions in Lebanon, from the early seventies until the great campaign of 1982), inter-Arab imbroglios (the aftermath of Camp David, the contest with Syria’s Hafez al-Assad, 1976-present), Palestinian insurrections (1983-5), were aimed ultimately at curtailing and perhaps even capturing the still potent symbol of “Palestine,” which

remained the greatest central foreign policy issue of the entire Arab world. During this period it was the PLO, Fatah, and Yasir Arafat who provided the focus for the gradually emerging and finally unmistakable double-sided idea that Palestinians had to arrive at their vision of their own future *on their own*, and that this vision, while theirs, had also (and somehow) to conform to the international consensus (or “international legality” as the going phrase became in 1988).

Any history of the period then would have to concentrate on the relentless and unevenly matched fight between Israel and its supporters on the one hand, and Palestinian nationalism and its supporters on the other. What was at issue was not just the political claims to self-determination of the latter, but the very idea of Palestine itself. The military contours of this fight had immense scope. Thus, for example, when Israel invaded Lebanon in full force in 1982, producing not only the horrors of the siege of Beirut but also the massacres of Sabra and Shatila (described with oxymoronic double-speak by the Israeli court of inquiry as showing the “indirect responsibility” of the Israeli army in charge), it was openly admitted by Israeli spokesmen at the time that (a) the real battle was for the West Bank and Gaza, and that the PLO had to be destroyed utterly because of its representative status, and (b) that because it had become internationally “responsible”—having observed a UN-monitored truce on the Israeli-Lebanon border for eleven months before June 1982—the PLO had to be attacked. Similarly, Israel’s U.S.-supported attacks on Tunis (October 1985) and its assassination of Abu Jihad (April 1988) in his home there showed the almost limitless extent to which Israel would go in combatting any independent Palestinian force.

Not that there were no defections from the basically hard Likud line, always reinforced with astonishing complaisance by the Reagan administration whose perennial “green light” was never turned off. There were. New configurations appeared within Israel expressing all sorts of doubt about Israeli policy in Lebanon (the southern part of whose territory continued to be occupied even as I write), the Occupied Territories and the Third World generally, in which support for discredited regimes, was, it seemed, a vital order of business for the Israeli military-industrial complex. Similarly in Western Europe and the United States, whose support of Israel had traditionally been one of the cornerstones of liberal and Jewish public opinion after World War Two, the less and less friendly questioning of Israeli policy proceeded apace. Important symbols in the erosion of the wholesale approval of Israel were Arafat’s meetings with the Pope, the slow but sure support given Palestinian positions by the European community, and the mounting authority of Zionist Jews critical of Israeli policy (Nahum Goldmann, Pierre Mendes-France, Philip Klutznick, Bruno Kreisky, were early leaders of this trend).

Yet throughout it was the Reagan administration's active cooperation with Israeli intransigence and hostility to Palestinian aspirations, human rights, and life itself that characterized the environment external to Palestine. Some of the milestones were the moral permissiveness which—from Alexander Haig to George Shultz—the U.S. accorded to Israel's adventures outside its borders; the astounding additions to the U.S. dole to Israel after one or another of that country's particularly horrific exploits (450 million dollars added immediately after Sabra and Shatila, 180 million dollars on the very day in December 1988 when Reagan admonished the Israelis about expulsion and killing of Palestinians); the almost grotesque congruence between Israeli and U.S. positions on "terrorism" which became the watchword of U.S. policy in the second Reagan administration. In fine, we can say with Christopher Hitchens that the complete "Israelization" of U.S. foreign policy occurred, so that by the penultimate year of Reagan's tenure Israel had become the U.S.'s main strategic ally east of the English Channel.

With what horrendous cost to Palestinian civilians—most of them refugees—one can scarcely say even at this point. Over 20,000 Palestinians and Lebanese were killed by Israeli troops in the summer of 1982 alone. How many more in the Occupied Territories and elsewhere were punished by Israel—the reports of torture were internationally known at least since the mid-seventies—through imprisonment, expulsion, maiming, killing, loss of property and freedom, it is difficult to say, but the figures that now exist are awful. They show something like a ratio of 100 Palestinians killed for every Israeli killed (this in the midst of an appallingly mindless chorus led by Israel about the scourge of Palestinian "terrorism") and, according to Alexander Cockburn, something of the order of one out of every sixty-six Palestinians imprisoned (roughly ten times the average figure for blacks under the South African regime). During the *intifada* more Palestinians proportionate to the population were killed by Israeli soldiers than were U.S. soldiers during the Korean and Vietnam wars. All of this was part of an orchestrated campaign to exterminate Palestinians as a political presence in Palestine. To Begin they were "two-legged vermin"; to General Eytan they were "drugged roaches in a bottle"; to Shamir they were "grasshoppers"; to politer spokesmen, Palestinians were "the Arabs of Judea and Samaria"; to the *New York Times* they were simply "Arabs."

Even so, the Palestinian political line grew clearer and clearer. This is a major irony. In the U.S. Arafat and the PLO were remorselessly and repeatedly attacked by a supine media and an Israeli-dominated policy elite for terrorism, extremism, rejectionism, and hostility to democracy; in the Arab world attacks on Arafat (this led to a whole mutinous movement within Fatah ranks in 1983, eagerly financed by Syria) were fueled by charges that he was a capitulationist, that he had conceded too much to his enemies, that he had given up armed for political struggle (the distinction in the Palestinian context was fatuous,

but it had great emotional staying power nonetheless). The PNC for its part stayed on course. In 1984 it was convened despite enormous Syrian pressure in Amman. Once again the partitionist idea—with Jordanian confederation—was implicitly accepted. A new alliance was forged with Jordan in 1985 and 1986, precisely to accommodate Palestinian nationalism to the international consensus, now unambiguously upheld by Gorbachev's Soviet Union. All the Arab states, with the exception of Syria and Libya, had come around to the two-state view, although few actually said it publicly. Then came the criminal war of the Beirut refugee camps, sponsored by Syria between 1985 and 1988; Arafat and his men were being constantly pressured by Syria and its pocket insurgents. Threats from the U.S. (which had aggressed against Libya in 1981 and 1986, as it was to do in 1989) the deepening Palestinian gloom on the West Bank and Gaza, the indifference of the Arabs, the endless Lebanese crisis, the rise of an anarchical Islamic movement, the hemorrhaging effect of the Iran-Iraq war, the ceaseless enterprise of the Israeli-U.S. axis (as symbolized throughout 1986 and 1987 by Iran-Contra and the campaign against Nicaragua), the absence of reliable Arab and strategic allies: all these took a severe toll from the Palestinian drive led by the PLO.

It remains impressive, I think, that the Palestinian center acquired more, not less, authority from its constituents. In April 1987 a PNC meeting held in Algiers stressed that an international conference and negotiations there were the desired means to end the dispute with Israel. Jordan had already defected from its alliance with the PLO, the result (said Palestinians) of U.S. pressure. At regular intervals, but with sharper clarity after 1984, Arafat stated his willingness to meet with Israelis, to negotiate a peaceful settlement, to end the longstanding conflict. His remarks were either not reported, or they were scorned. And meanwhile the situation on the West Bank and Gaza kept getting worse. Talk of "transfer" became widespread. Rabbi Kahane with his explicitly racist, but unimpeachably frank, claim that Israel couldn't both be Jewish and democratic, attracted attention, grew more popular. Isolated incidents (the 1985 moronically criminal hijacking of the *Achille Lauro*, the Rome and Vienna airport massacres) were treated as "trends," whereas the assault on Palestinian rights literally everywhere, but especially in the U.S., Lebanon, and the Occupied Territories were pooh-poohed. When it finally erupted, the *intifada* was treated by the media (and the Israelis) as a law and order problem; the historical and political context was refused and unreported.

A number of things occurring in the U.S. stand out as a small part of the international background for the *intifada*. In early 1988 a group of Palestinians in Los Angeles, legal residents all, were indicted under the Smith-McCarran Act for subversion, and threatened with expulsion. We must remember that a U.S.-Palestinian citizen Alex Odeh had been assassinated in the same area less than three years before, yet none of

his well-known assailants were apprehended. During the previous winter Congress passed the so-called Grassley Amendment (in effect, a Bill of Attainder) invidiously pointing the finger at the PLO, alone among all world organizations, as "terrorist," and closing the Palestine Information Office in Washington, threatening the PLO's UN observer mission with termination. The Los Angeles indictment and the Grassley Amendment were fought, and were ultimately defeated, but they showed how deep was the official U.S. hatred of the Palestinians, how far the government was willing to go in forgiving Israel everything it did and punishing Palestinians for their mere existence, how arrogantly the administration dismissed the Arab position, and Arab humanity itself.

Despite all the protestations about freedom of the press, public discussion about the Palestinian people dominated and carried by the media remained at a remarkably low and degraded level. Aside from "terrorism," a notion never carefully defined or even reflected upon, Palestinians were confined in such basically condemnatory terms as extremists (as opposed to moderates, who never seemed in evidence), rejectionism (Israel was routinely referred to in terms indicating morality and flexibility), and faction-ridden (despite the fact that the overwhelming preponderance of the PLO stood behind the centralist consensus). Among "dovish" Zionists in the West and Israel (chief among them Yehoshofat Harkabi, Arthur Herzberg and Abba Eban) Palestinians were referred to in the scandalously racist framework of "a demographic problem," the suggestion being that too many Palestinians were a threat to Israel's Jewishness (or "purity," as the more honest of this group put it). In such instances I am reminded of W. E. B Du Bois's answer to the question for an American Black "how does it feel to be a problem?": It is, he says, "A very strange experience." For in fact the entire tenor of Zionist and Western discourse about the Palestinians has been to reduce us to so problematic, eccentric, and unthinkable a level as to make our every effort to appear to be human only a confirmation of our dehumanized, permanently subaltern status. This has been the conceptual coefficient of the war against Palestinians led in the West by the supporters of Israel.

Faced with such an array of pressure, real threats, actual punishment, the Palestinian will was mobilized, and by the end of 1987 had reached the threshold of pain it could no longer endure. The shadow line had to be crossed, and whether or not the crossing actually took place on December 9, that quickly became the date when, as the Palestinian journalist Makram Makhoul reported, fear was forbidden, and the stone was taken up. From now on there was to be no turning back, as the Palestinian sense of irreversibility took hold: the occupation had to end, political independence had to be declared, the sacrifice had to be made. After King Hussein had withdrawn his faltering and unpopular claims to the West Bank in late July 1988, the die was cast. A PNC would have to be convened, the Palestinian claims had to be put forward, not in

vague terms but in the accents of a movement bent upon national statehood.

II

The 19th session of the Palestine National Council (November 12-15, 1988), formally entitled the "Intifada Meeting," was momentous and in many great and small ways, unprecedented. Held in Algiers, there were fewer hangers-on, groupies, and "observers" than ever before. Security was tighter and more unpleasant than during the 1987 PNC session, also held in Algiers; Algeria had just had its own brutally suppressed *intifada* in the autumn of 1988, so the presence of several hundred Palestinians and at least 1,200 members of the press was not especially welcomed by the Ben Jadid government, which paradoxically needed the event to restore some of its tarnished revolutionary luster. This was also to be the shortest PNC meeting ever held. Barely three and a half days long, it accomplished more by way of debate, discussion, resolutions and announcement than any Palestinian meeting in the post-1948 period. Above all, this PNC secured for Yasir Arafat the certainty of his place in Palestinian and world history for, as one member put it, "We're not only living through a Palestinian revolution; it's also Abu Ammar's revolution."

None of the approximately three hundred and eighty members came to Algiers with any illusion that Palestinians could once again get away simply with creative ambiguity or with solid affirmations of the need to struggle. The *intifada's* momentum and its ability to have created a clear civil alternative to the Israeli occupation regime, now necessitated a definitive statement by the PNC of support for the *intifada* as an end-to-occupation and relatively non-violent movement. This required an unambiguous claim for Palestinian sovereignty on whatever Palestinian territories were to be vacated by the occupation. Together with this, there also had to be an equally unambiguous statement on peaceful resolution of the conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews based on UN Resolutions 181 (partition), 242, and 338. In short, the PNC was asking of itself nothing less than emphatic transformation: from liberation movement to independence movement. Jordan's recent withdrawal of claims for the West Bank made the need for transformation urgent and compelling.

If you live in the U.S., participating in Palestinian discussions, debates, and soul-searching reappraisals is particularly poignant. Palestinians meet rarely enough, given the wide-spread dispersion among our 5 million people, and the fact that we have no center, no territorial sovereignty of our own makes our distance from most other Palestinians in the midst of a U.S. society whose government's hostility to us seems to be limitless, a continuously frustrating experience. Tunis serves the role of occasional headquarters, but since Abu Jihad's assassination Arafat's presence has necessarily been fitful and erratic. Yet most of us

in the PNC made at least one trip there; many documents and drafts went through fax, express mail, or over the phone. And the date of the PNC kept getting postponed, but was definitively set by late October, not without trepidation, since Algeria's internal volatility remained high.

PNC members were to be quartered in bungalows adjacent to the enormous meeting hall set in a conference-cum-vacation center built by Ben Bella in 1965, approximately thirty miles west of Algiers. Four of us traveled together overnight to Paris from New York, transferred from de Gaulle to Orly airport, and arrived in Algiers at 2:00 P.M. on November 11. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and I were driven off to one bungalow, only to find it already occupied; a second choice turned up the same fact, so we settled for a downtown hotel, which came to mean no hot food and hardly any sleep for three and a half days, as we commuted back and forth at the craziest hours. Despite jet lag, we went back to the conference center late that Friday night to call on Arafat, who seemed involved in three concurrently running meetings. He was confident but looked tired. Everyone knew that this was his step first to articulate, then to persuade everyone to take, then finally to choreograph politically. He handed me the Arabic draft of the declaration of statehood and asked me to render it into English. It had been drafted by committee, then rewritten by Mahmoud Darwish, then, alas, covered with often ludicrously clumsy insertions, and inexplicable deletions. Later Darwish told me that the phrase "collective memory" had been struck by the Old Man because, we both opined, he took it for a poetic phrase; "Tell him it has a serious and even scientific meaning," Darwish implored me, "maybe he'll listen to you." He didn't, and I didn't listen to Arafat when he wanted other phrases from other contexts inserted.

Nobody was to see these texts until much later, and indeed perhaps the oddest part of this PNC—with its obsessive postmodern rhetorical anxieties—was how the two main documents (declaration of statehood and political resolutions) were discussed in public debates for hours on end without a piece of paper before us. After the opening ceremonies on Saturday the PNC divided itself into two committees, the Political and the Intifada. Arafat had the texts memorized, and Nabil Shaath, adroit chairman of the Political Committee, had them before him. All significant discussion about what we were doing took place in the riveting atmosphere of that Committee, with speaker after speaker sounding off on what after all was the most significant political moment in Palestinian life since 1948. Words, commas, semicolons, and paragraphs were the common talk of each recess, as if we were attending a convention of grammarians.

The heart of the discussions occurred in the speeches given late Sunday and mid-afternoon on Monday by George Habash and Abu Iyad (Salah Khalaf) respectively, the first an opponent of the by now well-known substance of the political program, the second, Arafat's key supporter and one of the main leaders of Fatah. Habash's express

reservations concerned the clear acceptance of 242 and 338, resolutions not only unfriendly to us because they treat us only as “refugees,” but also because they contained an implicit prenegotiating recognition of Israel. This, Habash said, was going too far too soon; there had been agreement that such tough issues as recognition, 242, borders, etc., would be handled at the international conference. Why, Habash asked, was it so necessary to go forward on everything *before* the conference? He spoke passionately and clearly, saying without hesitation that he and the Popular Front wished to remain within the PLO, no matter the outcome or the disagreements. To which, in a meandering and yet always fascinating speech, Abu Iyad responded by saying that decisions had to be made now, not only in the face of the discouraging realities of the Israeli elections, but because our people needed an immediate, concrete statement of our goals. What clinched it for me as I listened to Abu Iyad was the logic of his thesis that decisive clarity was needed from us principally for ourselves and our friends, not because our enemies kept hectoring us to make more concessions.

Arafat remained throughout the debate, occasionally intervening, and yet maintaining his office, so to speak, from his seat in the house; an endless stream of secretaries, delegates, messengers, experts came to him and yet he seemed attune to every phrase uttered in the hall. He had told me early on that he had planned the Declaration proclamation to occur shortly after midnight November 15, after a whole night’s debate November 14. By about 9:30 P.M. Monday, November 14, the political program had been passed by large majority in the Political Committee, and immediately afterward, the whole PNC was reconvened in plenary session. Habash and supporters fought each sentence almost word by word on the crucial 242/338 paragraph, which was voted on in different forms half a dozen times. The somewhat garbled paragraph that resulted shows the effect of these battles in its ungainly phraseology, although the actual substance remains unmistakable. At one point Arafat stood up and recited the entire program from memory, indicating as the Chair hadn’t done, where the clause, sentence, and paragraph breaks occurred, so that there could be no mistake about meaning, emphasis, conclusion. For the first time in PNC history voting by acclamation wasn’t going to be enough; Habash insisted on precise tallies, which emerged to his disadvantage, 253 for, 46 against, 10 abstaining. There was a sad nostalgia to what he represented, since in effect by voting against him we were taking leave of the past as embodied in his defiant gestures. The declaration ceremonies that closed the meetings were jubilant, and yet somehow melancholy.

About this break with the past there could be no doubt whatever. Every one of the great events in December 1988—Arafat’s meeting in Stockholm with five leading American Jews, his speech and press conference in Geneva at the U.N., his explicit recognition of Israel, the beginning of a U.S.-PLO dialogue—was made possible by the PNC’s

decisions, and the break with the past. To declare statehood on the basis of Resolution 181 was first of all to say unequivocally that an Arab Palestinian and an Israeli state should coexist together on a partitioned Palestine. Self-determination would therefore be for two peoples, not just for one. Most of us there had grown up with the reality (lived and remembered) of Palestine as an Arab country, refusing to concede anything more than the exigency of a Jewish state, won at our expense in the loss of our land, our society, and literally uncountable numbers of lives. A million and a half of our compatriots were under brutal military occupation (as we met, the entire 650,000 people of Gaza were under total curfew), fighting tanks and fully armed soldiers with rocks and an unbending will. For the first time also, the declarations were implicitly recognizing a state that offered us nothing whatever, except the by now empty formulas of Camp David, or the openly racist threats of population "transfer."

The declaration of statehood spelled out principles of equality, mutuality, and social justice far in advance of anything in the region. Call them idealistic if you will, but better that than the remorseless sectarianism and xenophobia with which Palestinians have had to contend for these 5 decades. Then too the *principle* of partition was asserted, not the territories specified in the 1947 UN resolution. All of us felt that since Israel had *never* declared its boundaries, we could not declare ours now; better to negotiate the question of boundaries with Israel and a confederal relationship with Jordan directly with both, than to spell them out fruitlessly in advance. There was no doubt, however, that we were in fact discussing the territories occupied in 1967.

Secondly, there was absolute clarity in speaking of a peaceful settlement to the conflict. "Armed struggle" does not appear in the binding Resolutions. Central to the Resolutions is a long and awkward sentence endorsing the international peace conference based on "UN Resolutions 242 and 338." The language surrounding acceptance of the UN Resolutions is a statement of the obvious, not a reservation about acceptance. For example, representation by the PLO on an equal footing with other parties, the aegis of the Security Council, the *implementation* of 242 and 338, the centrality of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people: all these are mentioned as the *context*, the history, the Palestinian interpretation of what we were accepting. This was especially necessary since 242 and 338 say literally nothing about the political actualities of the Palestinian people, which in 1967 seemed scarcely evident, except as the detritus of the Arab-Israeli June war.

Thirdly, the rejection of terrorism in all its forms (also asseverated in the Declaration) makes an emphatic distinction between resistance to occupation (to which Palestinians are entitled according to the UN Charter and international law) and indiscriminate violence whose aim is to terrorize civilians. Note that no all-purpose definition of terrorism exists

today, one that has validity and impartiality of application internationally. Yet the PNC took a step that is unusual in its attempt to make distinctions between legitimate resistance and a proscribed indiscriminate violence of states or of individuals and groups. Also note that Israel has always arrogated to itself the right to attack civilians in the name of its security. These facts highlight the courage of what is ventured in the Palestinian statement.

Finally and most important, all the resolutions, however they are read, clearly intend willingness to *negotiate* directly. There are no disclaimers about the "Zionist entity," or about the legitimacy of Israeli representatives. All of the relevant passages about peace, partition, statehood in the 1964 Palestinian National Covenant are flatly contradicted by the 1988 PNC Resolutions, which given their statement add, not lessen, force. All the refusals, attacks and insults heaped on the Council's results, both by Israel and the usual array of U.S. "experts," signifies consternation; clearly, the more Palestinians take responsible and realistic positions, the less acceptable they become, not just because Palestinians want peace, but because official Israel does not know what to do when peace is offered it. There is a dispiriting continuity here between the early days of Israel's existence when Ben-Gurion refused peace with the Arabs, and the all-out rejection trundled out today by Likud and Labor alike.

The point is not that the Council documents are perfect and complete, but that they must be interpreted as everyone in Algiers intended—as a beginning that signals a distinct break with the past, as an assertion of the willingness to make sacrifices in the interests of peace, as a definitive statement of the Palestinian acceptance of the international consensus. A few days before the Algiers meeting Sharon appeared on Italian television vociferating loudly about the need to kill Arafat. That no comparable sentiment was expressed about Israeli leaders anytime in Algiers is a fact that furnishes its own eloquent comment on the real difference now between Israeli and Palestinian leaders. These are dangerous times for Palestinians; the occupation will get worse, and assassinations and full-scale political war will intensify. For once, however, the record is unmistakable as to who is for peace, who for bloodshed and suffering. But the Palestinian campaign for peace must be joined, since sitting on the sidelines is no longer any excuse.

What is difficult either to understand or condone is how the U.S. media—quite unlike the rest of the world—has internalized the rejectionism promulgated by the Israeli and U.S. establishments. Far from reading the texts as they were meant to be read, commentators persist in suggesting that whatever was said in the texts could not by definition be enough. On November 20 a major *New York Times* editorial accused the Palestinians of "gamesmanship and murkiness" in Algiers. The egregious A.M. Rosenthal ranted on (November 18) about "a cynical continuation of the Arab rejectionism of Israel," and the equally im-

probable George Will (*Washington Post*, November 20) said that the Algiers meetings were the equivalent of a Final Solution to Israel. Why is Israel itself not asked whether it is willing to coexist with a Palestinian state, or negotiate, or accept 242, or renounce violence, or recognize the PLO, or accept demilitarization, or allay Palestinian fears, or to stop killing civilians, or to end the occupation, or to answer any questions at all? Perhaps the U.S. media will someday break their silence, as Palestinians and the rest of the world already have.

III

What so dramatically transpired after the Algiers PNC was also a direct result of the *intifada*, which in 1989 continues bravely in its second year. But if the political victories of the Palestinian people have been duly noted and even celebrated internationally, the profounder social and moral achievements of this amazingly anticolonial insurrection require fuller acknowledgement

People do not get courage to fight continually against as powerful an army as Israel's without some reservoir, some deeply and already present fund of bravery and revolutionary self-sacrifice; Palestinian history furnishes a long tradition of these, and the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza have provided themselves generously from it. Yet what is new is the focused will, the creative and voluntary nature of the people themselves. There has been no easy resort to weapons, for example, and no exercise in noisy, even if noble-sounding, rhetoric. Instead the leaflets of the *intifada* have been concise, concrete, and above all, possible; each was a *nida'* or appeal, and neither an order nor a *bayan*. Above all the sense that the *intifada* demonstrated a collectivity or community finding its way together is what was most impressive. The source of this is the organic nationhood that today underlies Palestinian life. For the first time Palestinians exposed themselves to it, allowed themselves to be guided by it directly, offered themselves to its imperatives. Instead of individuals and private interests, the public good and the collective will predominated. Leaders were never identified. Personalities were submerged in the group.

The *intifada* therefore accomplished a number of unprecedented things. In my opinion, the future of the Middle East as a whole is going to be influenced by them, and Palestine and Israel will never be the same again because of them. In the first place, collaborators with the occupation were encircled and gradually rendered ineffective, as the entire mass of people under occupation came together in a block that opposed occupation. Even the class of merchants and shopkeepers played a major role in this transformation. Secondly, the old social organizations that depended on notables, on family, on traditional hierarchy—all these were largely marginalized. A new set of institutions emerged, and in fields like health, education, food and water supply, agriculture, these provided an *alternative* social organization to that

dominated by the occupation regime. In short the new alternative social situation that emerged was national, independent, and the first step in the appearance of the Palestinian state announced formally in Algiers on November 15. Thirdly, the role of women was substantially altered. The Palestinian woman had been essentially a helper, a housewife, a secondary person in what was in effect a male society, as is the case throughout the Arab and Muslim world. During the *intifada*, however, women came to the fore as equal partners in the struggle. They confronted Israeli (male) troops; they shared in decision-making; they were no longer left at home, or given menial tasks, but they did what the men did, without fear or complexes. Perhaps it would be still more accurate to say that because of the *intifada*, the role of men was altered, from being dominant to becoming equal.

These are momentous changes and, as I said, they will surely have an effect throughout the Middle East as the twentieth century advances towards its end. In the meantime, however, 1989 presents a more concrete challenge. In the immense and understandable wave of euphoria that swept the Palestinian and Arab world as the U.S.-PLO dialogue began, a number of other things are worthy of concern and attention. The Israeli government elected in November 1988 is composed of men whose hostility not just to Palestinian aspirations but to Palestinians as human beings is undying. Men like Rabin, Sharon, Netanyahu, Arens and Shamir are the inheritors of a tradition of uncompromising brutality and lying, in which *all* means are justified so long as the end—Israeli ascendancy at the expense of Palestinian life itself—can be assured. Under the influence of these men during the last six weeks of 1988 the level of protests and of repression in the Occupied Territories has increased significantly. On the other hand, the media has either been banned from reporting the facts or, as the case appears to be with the *New York Times*, it has deliberately chosen to downplay the ugliness of what is taking place. To fire into a funeral procession and kill four people, to shoot at a group of men quietly observing a moment of silence and kill three, to maim children, to put whole cities like Nablus and Gaza under twenty-hour curfew for several consecutive days, to humiliate and beat people at random, to destroy houses—all these are sickening examples of an Israeli policy that has escalated its violence against Palestinians, with insufficient or no notice taken of them by the mainstream influential Western media.

What *has* captured media attention is the process of negotiation by which, for instance, Yasir Arafat pronounced certain phrases and then received American recognition. Since that time Palestinian spokesmen have been on television, have been interviewed by the radio, have been quoted extensively by newspapers. All of that discussion has been political. What has been left out has been the paradox by which Palestinian moderation has been met with increasing Israeli intransigence and actual violence. I myself agree with the policy articulated and voted upon by

the PNC. I am a member and I voted enthusiastically for a realistic and above all clear policy. I certainly do not advocate any retreat from what we decided to do politically in order to gain the independence of the state of Palestine. But what surprises and worries me is that those of us who live outside the Occupied Territories have had to minimize a good part of the moral claim on which we stand when because of the limited opportunities offered us, we neglect to speak in detail about what is happening to our people on the West Bank and Gaza. I do not mean that we should speak only about what is being done to them by Israel but also what heroically they are doing for themselves.

Here is where the difficult and crucial role of detail becomes important. The struggle for Palestine has always been, as Chaim Weizmann once said, over one acre here, one goat there. Struggles are always won by details, by inches, by specifics, not only by big generalizations, large ideas, abstract concepts. Most of what the world now knows about daily life during the *intifada* is the result of (a) what the Palestinians under occupation have experienced minute by minute, (b) what has been reported about those experiences and achievements first by Palestinians and then by international agencies like the UN, Amnesty, and concerned citizens' groups in Israel, Europe, and North America. Those of us Palestinians and Arabs who live outside Palestine—in exile or dispersion—have not been afforded enough time to testify to the daily details of life under occupation; we have therefore not impressed on the awareness or the conscience of the world what our people are suffering and how cruelly Israel has treated their aspirations. These details are what our struggle is all about: why for example should a Palestinian farmer require a permit to plant a new olive tree on his land, whereas a Jewish settler can do what he wishes on land expropriated from the Palestinian? This policy of persecution and discrimination is what we have contested, and still do contest. It is more important a fact of our political lives than negotiating with a U.S. ambassador in Tunis.

I am deeply concerned that in the glamorous search for recognition and negotiations we will lose the moral and cultural detail of our cause, which is a cause after all and not just a sordid game to control images, or to say the right phrases, or to meet and talk with the right people. The U.S. (and in particular President Reagan and Secretary Shultz, and now President Bush and Secretary Baker) has been supplying the Israeli army with the bullets that kill Palestinian men, women, and children. It is up to us—Palestinians and supporters of Palestinian rights—to formulate a policy that deals directly with *this* America, as well as the other America, represented by the many people who support Palestinian self-determination. Neither can be neglected. Most important of all, we cannot neglect to register and attest to the suffering and the greatness of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Only by doing those two things will we become partners in the common struggle, and not onlookers or mere passive observers. Thus will the inside and outside become one.