

The Palestinian Struggle for Liberation: Where Do We Go from Here?

Inès Abdel Razek

Advocacy Director

Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy

Policy member

Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network

The wave of Palestinian demonstrations and uprising in 2021 – commonly called by Palestinians the Unity Intifada – and the subsequent 11-day devastating bombardments on Gaza – has brought to light Palestinian society's determination to reclaim their agency in confronting the Israeli apartheid colonial structure, and the current Palestinian political system, which is part and parcel of that structure.

Last year's uprising and its continuation in multiple, yet intermittent forms, today, has consummated the divide between the Palestinian Authority's leadership and Palestinian society and expedited the harmful irrelevance of the state-building agenda and the Oslo paradigm to bring about Palestinian self-determination and rights. The current state of permanent Israeli state violence and Palestinian anger amidst increased pressure, has exacerbated the loud cognitive dissonance between the internationally-backed paradigm of a conflict between two warring parties embarked on a faulty peace process, and the actual reality of power dynamics on the ground as one of apartheid.

Palestinian Leadership: The Trap of Oslo and Authoritarianism

The Palestinian Authority (PA) has been increasingly seen by the Palestinian people as the other side of

the occupation's coin, and the fracture between the PA and society has been consummated. The inaction and irrelevance of the PA during the 2021 Unity Intifada, followed by the assassination of vocal opponent and critic Nizar Banat, has marked a tipping point of no return in the authoritarian path of the PA's political and security apparatus and incapacity to lead a path towards Palestinian liberation.

All powers have been concentrated in the hands of very few people loyal to President Abbas, including Hussein El Sheikh¹ and Majed Farraj who respectively control the relations with the Israelis and the PA security and intelligence forces and who have been placed in key executive positions by the President.

Increasingly openly on social media and in public debate, people are calling for the resignation of the PA President and PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) chairman Mahmoud Abbas, calling the PA "collaborators." Most recently, in May 2022, Hamas' landslide victory and Fatah's broad defeat in the Birzeit University Student Council – elections considered a barometer for the national political landscape – testifies to the long decline of the President's faction dominating the PA. There, the 2021 uprising for Jerusalem, the assassination of Nizar Banat and the murder of Shireen Abu Akleh by Israel were at the centre of the debates.

By accepting the terms and conditions for the creation of the PA through the Oslo Agreements, the PLO traded its national struggle for liberation and structure as a national resistance movement for a constrained form of self-rule with no sovereignty and dependence on Israel in almost every sphere. The international support changing the centre of

¹ www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/02/08/en-palestine-l-ascension-de-hussein-al-sheikh-visage-d-un-pouvoir-en-bout-de-course_6112813_3210.html

gravity of political representation to the PA's limited autonomy under the agenda of "state-building," has further led to the demise of the PLO, which was supposed to remain the sole political representative of all Palestinians.

The PA leadership is therefore trapped: in order to maintain its very existence, it has to cooperate with and accept full dependency on Israel, whose sole goal is to eventually take "maximum land with minimum Arabs"² and use the PA to administer ever-shrinking and fragmented Bantustans.

This is not unfamiliar to other colonial settings in history where the colonizer cultivated local authorities run by elites with power patronage, serving to mediate between the colonizer and colonized and promoting tribalism as a way to consolidate limited autonomy in Bantustans.

Most Palestinian society and particularly young people recognize³ that Oslo has failed to bring about Palestinian rights and resent the Palestinian leadership for actively accepting a reality of entrenched apartheid and continued settlement expansion. Therefore, in the absence of any meaningful political strategy by the political leadership, a reality of ever-increasing colonization and military control from Israel with no intention of stopping, there has been growing support for armed resistance and direct confrontation through grassroots resistance, as a more effective way of confronting colonial domination.

Israel's Consolidated Power and Impunity

Maintaining the viability of the Middle East Peace Process and Oslo paradigm has allowed Israel to subjugate the Palestinians and their current leadership, enabling the settler-colonial agenda to go ahead with impunity and a sense of comfort.

Particularly since the end of the Second Intifada in 2005, Israel has progressively put Palestinians out of sight for Israelis, through a process of ghettoization and isolation, notably with the 750-km-long and eight-metre-high wall, bypass roads and tunnels benefitting

West Bank settlements, the full blockade of Gaza, mass permanent surveillance and other forms of coercive policies.

Enjoying a sense of relative security and freedom, Israelis have learned to enjoy "peace" as the absence of violence against them, regardless of the oppression of millions of people such tranquillity implies. Israelis have grown indifferent to "Palestinians" (or rather "Arabs" as many Israelis don't recognize Palestinian as a legitimate belonging), who have become a mere political issue among many others, as illustrated in the absence of Palestinians in the debates of the last four parliamentary elections held in the past three years, with Israeli society displaying ever-increasing confidence in their almighty ethnonational dominance.⁴ Settlers have integrated all institutions of the State, and racist and violent slogans, policies and marches have been mainstreamed across the entire Israeli political sphere. And Israelis are only reminded of Palestinians when they are sporadically facing violence through individual armed attacks or rocket fire, like in 2021 or more recently in March 2022.

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Regardless of their political colour – from Labour to Religious nationalists – all Israeli governments and prime ministers of the past decades have steadily pursued settlement expansions and annexation, which has included the demolition of Palestinian homes,⁵ forced expulsions and the passing of racist laws⁶ for preventing non-Jewish demographic growth.

The erasure of Palestinians has been facilitated by the impunity Israel has enjoyed internationally. Despite maintaining millions of people under violent subjugation and control, who have no say in their

² <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79991>

³ www.badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2021/09/15/wp27-pal-youth-vs-oslo-eng-1631700884.pdf

⁴ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/28/israels-left-and-right-stuck-in-segregationist-racist-trap

⁵ www.ochaopt.org/data/demolition

⁶ www.972mag.com/edition/israel-citizenship-law-racism/

fate, Israel has continued to be seen by the West and its allies as a liberal democracy. Such an illusion rests on the belief that one can separate the pre-1967 State from the rest of the territory under its de facto sovereignty; it also deliberately ignores the fact that Palestinians with Israeli citizenship do not have the same rights as Jewish citizens and that denying the Palestinian refugees' right to return to their homeland since 1948 is part and parcel with the apartheid structure.

With that understanding, Israel's allies have not been conditioning their relationship with Israel to end its apartheid on Palestinians. On the contrary, Israel has benefitted from strengthened geopolitical, political and economic ties with Western countries, without being held accountable or facing consequences for its consistent violation of international law and human rights.

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The EU remains Israel's biggest trading partner and has continued to give the State billions in cooperation programmes.⁷ The US continues to give USD 3.8 billion of public funding annually to the Israeli military. Similarly, with the "Abraham Accords," the Gulf countries and Israel are advancing their respective ethno-nationalist and economic agenda. In that equation, Israel has turned the occupation of millions of Palestinians into a geopolitical asset, exporting a model of militarized control "tested" on Palestinians. Israel's impunity has been particularly bitterly perceived by Palestinians following April's territorial aggression of Ukraine by Russia. The automatic heroization of Ukrainian grassroots resistance, the romanticization of armed resistance by Western media and the swift

economic and political sanctions being adopted widely against Russia by governments and private actors, have come in stark contrast to the permanent criminalization of Palestinian civil society and resistance, including demands for boycott, divestments and sanctions.

Therefore, the logic – often repeated by the international diplomacy involved –, by which isolation and boycotts of Israel would "hurt peace" or be counter-productive, leading society to increasingly extreme positions instead of bilateral negotiations and dialogue, has failed the reality test. Years of expecting Palestinians to negotiate their freedom and fundamental rights while Israel continues its colonization and entrenching apartheid as a fait accompli, years of insulating Israelis from unaccountable violence, have done nothing to prevent society from further ethnonationalist radicalizing and repressing Palestinians.

Rethinking Palestinian Self-determination beyond Partition

With the Unity Intifada and renewed grassroots mobilization, whether on the ground or online, Palestinians have actively defied Israel's divide-and-conquer policies and shaken Israel's belief that it could be shielded from the impact of its subjugation of the Palestinians.

Palestinians have increasingly put the emphasis on the need to have a unified anti-colonial struggle, breaking the artificial barriers and borders that have imposed the fragmentation of the Palestinian people from Historic Palestine, primarily through the Green Line and imposed exile. The Unity Intifada has not happened suddenly and can find its roots in earlier demonstrations for a new paradigm in the struggle for freedom in Palestine, such as the Great March of Return in Gaza in 2018, or protests against police violence in Umm Al Fahem (a Palestinian city on the Israeli side of the Green Line), all of them massively repressed by Israel or co-opted by the dominant Palestinian political factions.

The defiance against both Israeli oppression and the Palestinian political crisis was inevitably centred

⁷ www.timesofisrael.com/eu-innovation-program-granted-1-35b-to-over-1600-israel-projects-since-2014/

around Jerusalem,⁸ not only because of its historical and religious significance for Palestinians, but also because its youth population is disconnected from both the PA (prevented by Israel from operating in the city) and the political structures of 1948 Palestinians. From the #SaveSheikhJarrah campaign that started in April 2021 to the funeral of Journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in May 2022, Palestinians have been reclaiming their identity and unity, with Jerusalem at the heart.

The digital space has become a tool for Palestinians to reclaim their narrative, to consciously contribute to collectively re-imagining the Palestinian present and future

The participation of 1948 Palestinians (Palestinians with Israeli citizenship who live on the territories taken in 1948) in the uprising, in cities like Lydd, Haifa or Jaffa was particularly significant and a reminder that many of them still position themselves within the larger Palestinian anti-colonial struggle, despite their direct exclusion from the two-state and Oslo Agreement-backed statehood project. This is not the first time in the Palestinian national struggle that Palestinians from Historic Palestine have been central to the struggle – this was also the case, for example, in the General Strike of 1936 and the Land Day uprising in 1976 – but it was certainly the most significant participation in many years.

The Unity Intifada last year and current political dynamics mark a generational shift, with young people under the age of 30, representing about 70% of the population, having grown up under the disillusion of the Oslo paradigm and scarred by a childhood during the Second Intifada. This new political generation is currently turning to direct confrontation with the Israeli authorities and creative forms of grass-

roots organizing, in the absence of any Palestinian representative leadership and national strategy for liberation.

The effective use of social media by activists and civil society organizations has been central to the organizing and spreading of the mobilization, while defying media bias and imposed fragmentation. The digital space has become a tool for Palestinians to reclaim their narrative, to consciously contribute to collectively re-imagining the Palestinian present and future and changing the vocabulary and imagery imposed by Israeli and Western-dominated narratives. The political transition at play contains many hopes but also many uncertainties as to how the newly inevitable framing will materialize politically for the Palestinian national movement.

The Challenges ahead for a Unified Political Movement

If the popular mobilization today can only strengthen and has power to take down the old order, the principal challenge for Palestinians remains building a new political order that can articulate a political strategy and move it forwards towards self-determination. A new political order must be able to unify the Palestinian communities, including refugees and those living inside the 1948 territories, as well as articulating the steps needed to dismantle the apartheid colonial structure. Key challenges remain for the powerful energy and agency regained by the new Palestinian generation.

Often overlooked by Western diplomats and governments when analysing the challenges of “Palestinian democracy” are Israeli policies and practices to actively demobilize the Palestinian people and deter any forms of democratic political fabric: permanent surveillance and the use of predictive technologies,⁹ mass arrests¹⁰ and incarcerations including of children;¹¹ recruiting informants¹² and dividing people socially; all remain major obstacles to Palestinian organizing.

⁸ <https://merip.org/2021/11/jerusalem-youth-at-the-forefront-of-2021s-unity-intifada/>

⁹ www.mei.edu/publications/nowhere-hide-impact-israels-digital-surveillance-regime-palestinians

¹⁰ www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/24/a-war-declaration-palestinians-in-israel-decry-mass-arrests

¹¹ www.dci-palestine.org/no_way_to_treat_a_child_palestinian_children_in_the_israeli_military_detention_system

¹² <https://electronicintifada.net/content/israels-dark-arts-ensnaring-collaborators/7712>

Second, the monopoly of power among the large factions, Hamas and Fatah, who have largely accommodated the current power equilibrium with Israel, also remains a reality. Functioning as a patronage system based on clientelism rather than political parties, they intend to hijack all forms of political mobilization, and the undercurrents that led to their creations (local committees, social institutions etc.) still have a powerful presence and loyalty structures.

In addition, the international community has had a habit of directly or indirectly interfering, deciding who is an acceptable interlocutor on the Palestinian political landscape, conditioning engagement, favouring personalities, while criminalizing others as too “radical” or “terrorists,” and creating perverse incentives for some to appeal to foreign audiences and others to grandstand domestically, weakening the ability of Palestinians to develop a united organic leadership,¹³ while reinforcing phenomena of social hierarchies.

It is imperative to rebuild civic and political engagement through trust-building, social cohesion and a sense of belonging among Palestinians

Finally and most importantly, prospects for elections in the current institutional structures cannot be equated with hope for democratic renewal. The PA elections exclude more than half of Palestinians, who

are 1948 Palestinians or in exile, while the current PLO electoral structure defined by its Basic Law of 1968 is based on outdated quota mechanisms. Therefore, it is imperative to rebuild civic and political engagement through trust-building, social cohesion and a sense of belonging among Palestinians. Short of that, partial electoral exercises bear the risk of reinforcing fragmentation and tribalism.

Conclusion

Palestinians, particularly the younger generations of activists and intellectual elite, are actively managing to attract the international spotlight and gain support from international allies in the human rights community and social justice and antiracist movements around the world. Such dynamics are helping the growing recognition that Israel maintains an apartheid regime in the whole of Historic Palestine, with a necessary political reframing from one focused on a conflict between two parties in an equal dispute, and on a faulty bilateral peace process, to one of apartheid.

Palestinians are regaining ownership over their narrative while shaping their own aspirations and demands rather than waiting for international diplomats to take belated action. But the historical transition we are currently witnessing in the Palestinian national movement could last for many years, as long as the international community continues to back the old playbook of a two-sided conflict using bilateral negotiations, refusing to see Israel as a bad-faith actor and hold it accountable for its crimes and criminalization of Palestinian resistance in all its forms.

¹³ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/10/palestine-s-emerging-national-movement-questions-on-my-mind-pub-84717>