

## The Arab-Israeli Conflict Revisited

# The Palestinian Question and the Arabs (1917-2017): Popular Support, Government Stakes

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The Palestinian question was not born of the UN General Assembly Resolution in November 1947, unfairly dividing Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab State. It emerged much earlier, when the First Zionist Congress, held in Basel in 1897, adopted the project to create a Jewish State in Palestine. Since then, there was a colonial project clearly aimed at Palestine. But for the project to become a reality, the support of a major power was needed. This came about with the November 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which Great Britain promised the Jews of Europe it would create "a national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, without consulting its Arab inhabitants, who nonetheless constituted 95% of the population. From the start, Arab peoples have expressed unwavering solidarity with "our brother nation of Palestine." During the British Mandate period (1922-47), Arab volunteers came in from all over to join the Palestinian resistance to the Zionist project, above all during the great revolt of 1936-39. The matter of Palestine took hold in the Arab collective conscience as a "new colonial issue." Later, the expulsion of two thirds of the Palestinian population in 1947-48 (called the Nakba) and the creation of Israel in May 1948 would be seen by Arab peoples as a "major collective humiliation." In 2017, the Nakba continues, more painful than ever, with an occupation combined with colonization.

But although for the Arab peoples, the question of Palestine is above all an "Arab matter," it is often more of a matter of Arab inter-state relations than a national cause to be defended tooth and nail. From 1917 to the present, the Palestinian issue has been manipulated by Arab regimes in a sort of nationalist

one-upmanship where defending the Palestinian cause emerges as a lever for political legitimation or regional leadership, or a means to divert attention from internal problems.

This does not mean that the solidarity of Arab states was always "self-serving" or "suspect." During certain periods, the solidarity of Arab countries was real, sincere and decidedly fraternal. Unfortunately, this solidarity has been quite ineffectual since, 100 years after the Balfour Declaration (1917), 70 years after the UN Partition Resolution (1947) and 50 years after the occupation of all of what remained of Palestine (1967), the Palestinian question remains.

## The Palestinian Question between the Two World Wars

Upon returning from the First World Zionist Congress in 1897, Théodore Herzl wrote in his journal "I have founded the Jewish State... [it will exist] possibly five years from now, definitely fifty years on." This statement was prophetic: in 1947, the UN General Assembly voted in the Partition Resolution.

For the Palestinians, this was a **catastrophe in the making**. The 1917 Balfour Declaration already "made them foreigners in their own country and heralded their expulsion" (H. Laurens, 2007, p. 8). No one failed to notice the danger. The British repression of the Palestinian revolts of 1922, 1929 and above all 1936-1939 confirmed British support for the Zionist project (B. Khader, 1977, Vol. II). Palestine then became a decisive factor in the development of Arab nationalism, even its emblem. Arab populations demanded their governments rush to the aid of the Palestinian people. Support congresses were held just about everywhere. But the independent Arab States had no military means or concrete war expe-

rience, whereas the others were still bent under the colonial yoke and therefore had no autonomy. Thus, Great Britain, the mandate power from 1922 to 1948, could crack down on the resistance to the Zionist project without fear, especially since nationalist sentiment was in its infancy and torn between various antagonistic tendencies.

In fact, in the early 1940s, the Hashemites of Iraq and Transjordan had embarked upon two competing projects: that of the Fertile Crescent, whose objective was to unite Syria, Transjordan and Palestine under the aegis of the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq; and that of Greater Syria, aiming to regroup Syria and Palestine under the Transjordan Hashemites.

Both projects caused concern among the Egyptians, who saw it as an attempt by the Hashemites to create a regional power capable of opposing the Kingdom of Egypt. Egypt thus “torpedoed” both projects, inviting independent Arab countries to discuss a project to create a League of Arab States, which resulted in the Alexandria Protocol of 7 October 1944, preparing the Arab League Pact, which was signed in Cairo on 22 March 1945, officially founding the League of Arab States (LAS).

Since it was founded, the League has made the Palestinian question its signature issue. Of the 17 resolutions adopted by the LAS Council on 14 December 1945, 11 concerned Palestine. One of the first steps taken by the League was to set up an Arab National Fund (*Sandūq al-Ummah al-Arabiyyah*) designed to prevent the appropriation of Palestinian land by Jews. On 16 September 1947, the LAS’ Political Committee proposed sending Arab troops to Palestine should the UN General Assembly vote in favour of partition.

But the Transjordan Hashemites were concocting other plans. Whereas Transjordan had ratified the Arab League Pact, on 10 April 1945, King Abdullah of Transjordan (he had proclaimed himself king on 25 May 1946) relaunched the idea of a Kingdom of Greater Syria covering Syria, Transjordan and Palestine to his advantage. Syrian nationalists, favouring a republic, sabotaged the project. At this point, King Abdullah did not hesitate to turn to the Zionist leaders, letting them know that in case Palestine was partitioned, Transjordan was ready to annex the Arab part. On 17 November 1947, a few days before the partition vote, King Abdullah secretly met with Golda Meir, then acting head of the Jewish Agen-

cy’s political department, informing her of his project to annex what remained of Palestine to Transjordan (Avi Shlaim, 1988).

Sensing what was afoot between the Zionists and the Hashemites, the League attempted to set up an Arab Salvation Army (Jaysh al-Inqahd al-Arabi), but instead of giving its command to Mufti Amin al-Husseini, an emblematic figure of the Palestinian resistance, the Arab States chose a competitor, Fawzi al-Qawuqji. The Mufti then proceeded to establish his own militia, the Army of the Holy War (Jaysh al-Jihad al-Muqaddas), placing it under the command of his cousin, Abd al-Qader al-Husseini. Thus, on the eve of the creation of Israel, Palestine had simply become a bargaining chip between Zionists and Transjordanian Hashemites, and a factor of division among the Arab States.

### **The Palestinian Nakba and the Arabs (1947-1949)**

The Arabs managed to prevent neither the Partition Resolution (1947) nor the creation of Israel (1948), nor, a fortiori, the ethnic cleansing taking place between those two dates (Ilan Pappé, 1992). The forced exile of two thirds of the Palestinian population constitutes a veritable *sociocide*, that is, the displacement of the Palestinian people from their homeland and their geographic dispersion. At the same time, the massive influx of Palestinian refugees to Transjordan, Syria and Lebanon has made the Palestinian question an internal issue for a number of Arab countries.

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The magnitude of the disaster was such that the popular demonstrations multiplied in all Arab countries, demanding that the Arab armies be mobilized to liberate Palestine. In fact, Iraq, Egypt, Syria and

Transjordan sent troops, but they were less numerous than the Haganah and Jewish militias, and above all poorly equipped and poorly trained, when not simply directly under British command, as was the case with Transjordan's Arab Legion. In addition, there was the rivalry between King Farouk of Egypt and King Abdullah of Transjordan, whom Egypt suspected of having sent his Arab Legion less to save Arabic Palestine than to annex what was left. Egypt's suspicions proved founded.

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Indeed, after the Arab armies were routed in 1948, Egypt, with the support of Saudi Arabia, attempted to establish an autonomous Palestinian State in the remaining part of Palestine and set up a Palestinian government under the authority of the Jerusalem Mufti. But King Abdullah caused the project to be aborted by convening a major Palestinian congress on 1 December 1948 and having them recognize his sovereignty over Palestine and the unification of the two brother countries. This was the birth of the Kingdom of Jordan.

As could be expected, the proclamation of Palestine's annexation caused a general outcry in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The Jericho Congress was derided as a "dangerous diversion" and a "Great Conspiracy" (*al-Mu'amarah al-Kubra*). But with the strength of British support, the King was not intimidated: on 25 December 1948, secret negotiations were initiated with the Zionist leaders to bring his project to fruition. Clearly, Palestine was sacrificed on the altar of state ambitions.

## Palestine in the Arabist Age (1952-1967)

The Arab defeat of 1948-1949 left an immense sentiment of bitterness and anger. In 1948, Constantin Zureiq (1909-2000), one of the great ideologues of Arab nationalism, published an uncompromising book entitled "Ma'na al-Nakba" ("The Meaning of the Disaster"), in which he condemned Arab leaders' ineptitude and their divisions in dealing with "existential" threats and called for unity in moving forward. Another Palestinian intellectual, Musa al-Alami (1897-1984), in a book entitled "The Lesson of Palestine," censured Palestine's exploitation by certain parties and called for unity and modernity. Both of them sensed that the question of Palestine would create havoc in the Middle East if not resolved rapidly.

Indeed, beginning in the 1950s, the Middle East was the scene of considerable upheaval directly tied to the Palestinian question. The Lebanese Prime Minister, Riad al-Solh, was assassinated on 13 July 1951. On 20 July 1951, it was Jordan's King Abdullah who was assassinated in the Al-Aqsa Mosque of Jerusalem, foreshadowing Anwar Sadat's assassination 30 years later, in 1981. In 1952, Egypt's King Farouk was forced into exile following the Free Officers' Revolution of 23 July 1952.

After the Egyptian Revolution, the issue of Palestine became the cardinal question for Arab nationalist renewal, of which Gamel Abdel Nasser became the uncontested leader.

The Eisenhower Administration attempted rapprochement with Nasser in the hope of recruiting Egypt into the anti-Soviet camp, as had been the case with Turkey, which joined NATO in 1949. Nasser's reply to US Secretary of State Foster Dulles was decisive: the real threat to Egypt was not coming from the Soviet Union but rather from Israel. Traveling to Israel on 13 May 1953, Foster Dulles was informed by Moshe Sharett that Israel lacked the space to accommodate all Jewish immigrants (it already occupied 78% of historic Palestine), that it would never revert to the former territory allotted by the UN and that there was no question of authorizing the return of refugees as stipulated in Resolution 194 (H. Laurens, 2007, p.351). His language had the merit of clarity. For the Arabs, it became patent that Israel would not be content with what it had obtained but would implacably pursue expansion, constituting a threat not only to the Palestinians but also to all Arabs. The Ara-

bization of the Palestinian question thus followed from the very nature of Zionist ideology.

Is it surprising that, in his speech on the nationalization of the Suez Canal on 26 July 1956, Nasser often referred to Palestine? "... Such is the battle, citizens, that we are waging today against imperialism, its agents and its procedures, against Israel, that work of imperialism, established to destroy our Arab nationalism as it is destroying Palestine..."

In fact, on 29 October 1956, the Israelis invaded Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. A few days later, the French and the British launched a joint offensive: this was the Suez Crisis, called the Tripartite Aggression in the Arab world. For them, no doubt remained: Israel was not the "haven of peace" described by Zionist literature, but an "outpost of Western imperialism."

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What happened next is well known: defeated militarily, Nasser walked away with a political victory. He became an Arab leader and later a great Third-World leader and an architect of Non-Alignment.

As of the Suez War, the Palestinian question became an Arab question. Nasser's Egypt led the way. The Hashemite monarchies became concerned. And although the Jordanian monarchy managed to weather the nationalist storm and survived internal and regional convulsions, Iraq's Hashemite monarchy was swept aside in 1958. That same year, the United Arab Republic was proclaimed (Egypt-Syria). Arab nationalism was in fashion and pro-Western regimes were on the defensive. There was a reversal of alliances. After that, two axes faced one another: the nationalist axis represented by Egypt, Iraq and Syria, and the monarchic axis, represented by Saudi Ara-

bia and Jordan. A cold war (M. Kerr, 1973) now divided the Arab States, at times leading to open conflict (Yemen Civil War beginning in 1962). This polarization weakened the League of Arab States. Using its position as "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," Saudi Arabia sought to replace the Arab regional subsystem with a more extensive Islamic subsystem by creating the Muslim World League (1961-1963), the Islamic Alliance, and the Organisation of Muslim States (1968 Mecca Conference). Despite Saudi diplomatic activism in the Muslim world, the political initiative up until 1967 was Egypt's, and Arabism, despite the dissolution of the United Arab Republic (1962), remained the predominant ideology and the main source of legitimation for existing regimes. Israel was considered the "national enemy of the Arabs," and the liberation of Palestine would only occur through "Arab unity."

The Palestinians were caught between the two axes and used by both in a bidding war serving their interests. This was confirmed in 1964 when the Alexandria Summit (5-6 September 1964) decided to create the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), with a Palestinian lawyer at its head, Ahmad Shuqayri. For Nasser, it was a question of getting a jump on Yasser Arafat's Fatah fighters, who were preparing their struggle outside of any state control, but also a way of sending a signal to Jordan that their annexation of Transjordan was not irreversible. This was understood by the Kingdom of Jordan, which only grudgingly accepted the creation of the PLO and which, on 14 June 1966, ended its cooperation with it. In a gesture of defiance towards Nasser, Jordan even joined the Islamic Pact launched by Saudi Arabia as a parry to Nasser's Arab nationalism (B. Koryan & A. Hilal Dessouki, 1984, p. 268-269). Clearly, the PLO has been caught in the snares of inter-Arab conflict from the outset. The Palestinian question has been internalized within the Arab regional system, and therefore prisoner to its contradictions.

### **Palestine and the Arabs in the Statist Era (1967-1981)**

On 5 June 1967, Israel launched a blitz offensive on various fronts, occupying Egypt's Sinai, Syria's Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and Transjordan. Israel

never made any secret of its intention of taking down the Nasser Regime and breaking the Arabist spirit, considered an “existential” threat to the Jewish State. The defeat of the Arab armies produced the effect of an earthquake. The nationalist sentiment of the Arab masses, deeply wounded, devastated and disoriented, clung to the Palestinian Resistance. The Arab States, humiliated, simply reiterated their refusal of any peace agreement with Israel at the Khartoum Summit (29 August – 2 September 1967).

But the Palestinian Resistance suffered from a congenital ailment: in contrast to the Algerian or Vietnamese maquis, it was being organized from outside of Palestine, primarily in refugee camps in Jordan. Its armed presence in sovereign countries was not only exposing them to possible Israeli strikes, but above all threatening their very sovereignty. Elated about their victory over the Israeli army at the Battle of Karameh in 1968, the Palestinian Fedayeen ended up constituting “a State within the State of Jordan.” King Hussein sent his troops against the Palestinian Fedayeen, forcing them into exile: this was Black September, 1970. Nasser died of a heart attack in the same month. It was the end of an era and of a dream, the twilight of nationalist ideology and its standard-bearer.

With Sadat, statist ideology prevailed: the slogan was now “*Masr awwalan*” (Egypt first). This statist orientation emerged in 1971 when Sadat dropped the term “United Arab Republic” and returned to the name “Egyptian Arab Republic,” began encouraging Islamic organizations to act as a counterbalance to Nasser nostalgics (H. Laurens, 1991, p. 247), and changed the Constitution (September 1971) to indicate that “Islam is the State religion.” In view of these new orientations, the 1973 October War was more a war for the liberation of the Sinai than for that of Palestine.

The events that followed proved this: on 9 November 1977, Sadat announced to Parliament that he was ready to go to the Knesset with a message of peace. Putting words to action, he went there on the 19th and delivered a speech followed by the media of the entire world. He mentioned Palestinian rights but ignored the PLO in order not to “offend” his Israeli hosts. By travelling to Israel, Sadat broke a taboo. His solitary action displeased his Arab

peers, who accused him of “breaking the Arab consensus.” A restricted Summit, held in Algiers on 2-4 February 1978, established a “Steadfastness Front” to defeat the Egyptian initiative. To no avail: Sadat signed the Camp David Accords in September 1978, to the consternation of the other Arab countries and the PLO.

At the Arab Summit of Baghdad (2-5 November 1978), the other Arab countries unanimously rejected the Camp David Accords and proposed transferring the League of Arab States’ headquarters from Cairo to Tunis. But Egypt was determined to forge ahead, encouraged by the United States: a Peace Accord between Israel and Egypt was signed on 26 March 1979. Egypt recovered the Sinai, but the talks on Palestinian autonomy envisaged in the Camp David Accords quickly bogged down. What was worse, on 30 July 1980, the Israeli government passed a law regarding the annexation of Jerusalem, which became the “eternal capital of the Jewish people.” That was the end of the Palestinian facet of the Camp David Accords: Egypt had been hoodwinked. Sadat had recovered the Sinai but lost Palestine. In July 1981, he was assassinated during a military parade.

From 1973 to 1981, the PLO had the wind in its sails and was a focal point in the media. The solidarity of Arab peoples was total. The Europe of the Nine (i.e. the 9-member Economic Committee of the EEC) engaged in the Euro-Arab dialogue as of 1975 and began to refine its position on the Israeli-Arab conflict by recognizing the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination, through negotiations in which the PLO would be a partner (Venice Declaration) (B. Khader, 2017).

The pragmatic orientation of the PLO, which was no longer discussing the full liberation of Palestine, displeased certain Arab countries, in particular the Baathist regimes of Syria and Iraq. Syria attempted to short-circuit the PLO by creating resistance organizations totally subservient to the Damascus regime, such as Al-Saika, or Ahmad Jibril’s Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC). Iraq did the same, creating the Arab Liberation Front and Abu Abbas’ Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), wholly under control of the Iraqi government. Not only was Palestine dividing the Arabs, but the Arabs were now also dividing the Palestinians.

## **Palestine and the “Petro-Dollarization” of the Arab Regional Sub-System**

Sadat's assassination gave Saudi Arabia free rein. Made rich by the two oil price shocks of 1973 and 1979, the country now felt empowered to pilot the Arab regional sub-system. The situation couldn't be better: Saudi Arabia had financial means, its competitors were weak: Saddam Hussein's Iraq was embroiled in its war against Iran (1980-1989) while Hafez al-Assad's Syria was entangled in the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1989).

Now it was up to Saudi Arabia to defend the rights of the Palestinian people. A month after Sadat's assassination, the Crown Prince of Arabia proposed a peace plan on 7 August 1981 based on UN resolutions. Among other things, Prince Fahd demanded Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, and the creation of a Palestinian state with its capital in the Arab sector of Jerusalem. He demanded the US stop supporting Israel, an end to the Israeli arrogance so hideously embodied by Menachem Begin, and the recognition of the Palestinian factor... which was the main factor of the Middle East equation. But in Point 7 of his plan, he demanded that “all states in the region should be able to live in peace in the region,” which implicitly meant recognizing the State of Israel.

Normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab countries was in the air. This was a considerable change and historic opportunity that Israel could have seized. The opportunity was wasted: after destroying the Iraqi nuclear reactor Osirak on 7 June 1981, Israel annexed the Golan Heights on 14 December 1981 and on 6 June 1982, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon. PLO infrastructures were destroyed and Arafat and his comrades went into exile. The Palestinian refugee camps, left unprotected, were now at the mercy of Ariel Sharon and his Lebanese Phalanges allies. From 16 to 18 September 1982, Lebanese forces, under the Israeli army's watchful eye, entered the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Nearly 4,000 men, women and children were massacred. In March 1983, following the Kahan Commission Report on these tragic events, Sharon was forced to leave the Ministry of Defence but remained in the government.

In his Tunisian exile, Arafat now had greater autonomy. Though he had lost his Lebanese base after los-

ing the one in Jordan, the Palestinian cause had gained a great deal of sympathy in Arab and international public opinion. Not on a military par with Israel, it was now on the political and moral levels that the PLO would concentrate for the sake of efficiency and realism. Arafat accepted the Fahd Plan presented at the Arab Summit in Fes (September 1982). He reconciled with the Jordanian monarchy, travelling to Amman in October 1982, and alluded to the idea of a Palestinian-Jordanian confederation. But Arab attention in the 1980s was primarily focussed on the Iraq-Iran war. Whereas the Arab states supported Saddam Hussein's regime for obstructing Iranian revolutionary activism, Syria broke the Arab consensus and stood behind Khomeini's Shiite Iran (Iran is returning the favour today). Saudi Arabia grew concerned about this rapprochement between the Iranian Shiite regime and the Syrian Alawi regime and attempted to establish a “Sunni Axis.” Jordan restored relations with Mubarak's Egypt on 25 September 1984, and the extraordinary Arab Summit held in Amman from 8 to 11 November 1987 opened the door to Egypt's return to the Arab family. Only four countries continued to boycott Egypt: Syria, Algeria, Lebanon and Libya. The war between Iraq and Iran subsided with Khomeini's death on 3 June 1989. The Lebanese war found a happy end in the Taif Agreement, signed on 22 October 1989 under the aegis of Saudi Arabia.

A popular uprising of unprecedented scale broke out in Palestine. This was the 1987 Intifada. The date was no accident. In fact, from 1967 to 1987, the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza rose by nearly 75%, meaning that nearly one Palestinian out of two was born under Israeli occupation. Since its inception, however, the Palestinian resistance was organized, as we know, from outside of Palestine. Driven back from Jordan, then exiled from Lebanon, the resistance was now dispersed, geographically disconnected. The resistance thus had to be brought into occupied Palestine. As of 9 December 1987, all the occupied territories went into ferment. The mobilization was grass-roots, collective and pacific: Palestinian youth threw stones at Israeli soldiers, who responded with real bullets. Arab peoples protested across the board. In Europe and everywhere, emotions ran high. Israel's image was tarnished. The

Intifada made the entire world grasp the horror of the occupation, the injustice of the colonization and the disregard of international law. As of 22 December 1987, Resolution 605 of the UN Security Council, passed thanks to the United States' abstention, stated that the Security Council "strongly deplores those policies and practices of Israel, the occupying Power, which violate the human rights of the Palestinian people [...]."

Israel thought it had dismantled the PLO, but not only had it been rehabilitated, but its prestige had been boosted. King Hussein of Jordan took note and announced Jordan's total disengagement from Palestinian affairs in late July 1988. All ties with the West Bank were broken. It was the end of the annexation of the West Bank. Arafat addressed the European Parliament on 14 September 1988 and two months later, the Palestinian National Congress, held in Algiers in November 1988, adopted Palestine's Declaration of Independence, with East Jerusalem as its capital (15 November 1988). Recognition of the State of Palestine came from around the world, with the exception of Europe and the United States. Worse, the US refused to grant Arafat a visa to address the UN General Assembly. The latter was thus held in Geneva from 13 to 16 December 1988 to hear out the Palestinian leader. Arafat asserted his acceptance of Resolutions 242 and 338 regarding the acceptance of Israel's existence. This time it was the United States that proposed initiating significant dialogue with the PLO (B. Khader, 2017). But Yitzhak Shamir rose to power in Israel in June 1990 and rejected any plans aiming to acknowledge any role whatsoever for the PLO in any possible peace talks.

But for the Palestinians, 1990 was a black year for another reason. On 2 August 1990, Saddam Hussein's army occupied the emirate of Kuwait. Immediately, the US set up an international coalition and, in January-February 1991 launched an operation to liberate Kuwait called Desert Storm. Paradoxically, Arab public opinion, largely hostile to the occupation of Kuwait, expressed anger against the US: "why Kuwait and not Palestine?", Arab protesters around the world chanted.

The Kuwaiti crisis was overcome by force, but anti-American sentiment spread like wildfire. In Kuwait itself, Palestinian expatriates (numbering some 250,000) were unjustly accused of having support-

ed the Iraqi army and the majority of them were expelled. There was a serious break between the Kuwaiti people and Palestinian communities. After Jordan and Lebanon, the Palestinian question had now become an internal issue for Kuwait.

### **The Palestinian Question in the Oslo Predicament (1993-2010)**

The crisis followed by the Gulf War (1990-1991) constituted two tragic episodes: already Lebanized, the Arab regional system broke apart. Not only were states divided, but now there was also a rift among the Arab people. No Arab country ever dared engage again in the minefield of the Israeli-Arab conflict. After the USSR's implosion, it was the Americans who took all the initiatives. Having been accused of practicing a two-faced policy in the Kuwait affair, the Americans organized the Madrid Peace Conference (October 1991). But neither the PLO nor the Palestinian inhabitants of Jerusalem were invited, at Shamir's request. It was thus a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation that participated in the Conference (A. Belkaid, 2011).

But the mountain laboured and brought forth a mouse, as they say. The negotiations floundered. Yitzhak Rabin succeeded Shamir in 1992 and adopted a more flexible position. Secret negotiations were held in Oslo between Israeli and Palestinian emissaries. They resulted in an "Interim Accord" called the Oslo Accord, officially signed on the White House lawn on 13 September 1993 by Rabin and Arafat. Arab countries had no say in the matter. No Arab leader went to the signing ceremony. And for good reason: Iraq was under embargo, Syria was embroiled in Lebanon and Mubarak's Egypt was struggling with internal problems.

The Oslo Accord was a promise of negotiation. The latter would be undertaken under American patronage. This was supposed to result in the creation of an independent Palestinian State by 1999. The process, however, quickly became mired. Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish fanatic in 1994. Shimon Peres replaced him but was beaten by Netanyahu in the 1996 elections. As of that moment, it was complete deadlock. Instead of putting a brake on colonization, the latter was accelerated, sparking the Palestinians' anger and the incomprehension of Arabs in general.

President Clinton tried to put the Oslo process back on track, organizing the Arafat-Barak talks in July 2000 at Camp David. Negotiations hit a snag on the issue of Jerusalem and finally failed. It was in this sombre climate that Sharon decided to visit the sacred al-Aqsa mosque compound on 28 September 2000 to assert Israeli sovereignty over a reunified Jerusalem. The provocation stirred up a hornet's nest: this was the outbreak of the Second, or Al-Aqsa, Intifada.

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Succeeding Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister in 2001, ruthlessly cracking down on the agitated Palestinian territories. Cities under Palestinian authority were reoccupied. Refugee camps were severely punished. Arafat himself was confined to his Mukata'a headquarters in Ramallah until his death in 2004.

The Arab states witnessed this surge in Israeli violence without reacting. No collective initiatives were taken, no pressure exerted. Their weakness was now plain to see. The Arab people felt humiliated in the face of such resignation.

Sensing the danger that the definitive stalemate of the peace process represented to regional security, the Arab states attempted to take the initiative. At the Beirut Summit (28 March 2002), they proposed an Arab Peace Plan to Israel that revived the Fahd Plan put forth 20 years earlier. Applauded by Europe and even the US, the plan was rejected by Is-

rael. The American invasion of Iraq on March 2003 postponed it indefinitely.

The geopolitical upheaval caused by the invasion of Iraq diverted attention from the Palestinian question, to the great satisfaction of Israel, who could now continue to colonize the occupied territories unmolested. Though Arafat's death (11 November 2004) caused a great commotion in Arab countries, the election of Mahmoud Abbas in January 2005 and the January 2006 legislative elections did not generate a great deal of enthusiasm. Many Arabs questioned Western support of the Palestinian democratic process, while the Palestinian Territories continued under the yoke of occupation. We know the rest: Hamas won the elections but was relieved of its victory. It then took possession of Gaza and established a parallel government. Saudi Arabia attempted an intra-Palestinian reconciliation mission (2007), in vain. Each Arab country took sides, supporting either Hamas or the Palestinian Authority, thus aggravating the rift dividing the Palestinian people to the present.

### **The Palestinian Question and the Arab Spring (2010-2017)**

The social movements occurring in numerous Arab countries as of 17 December 2010 have taken the entire world by surprise. The "Arab exception" theory postulating that Arabs are rigid, inert and reticent to democratic change was shaken. Though pan-Arabist references to the Palestinian question have been very discreet in slogans chanted by protesters, the fact remains that the succession of events, the role of Arab satellite chains, the recovered sense of pride, all of this outlines a pan-Arab sentiment whose political core is the refusal of a foreign yoke, the aspiration to freedom, and faith in the possibility of change (A. Belkaïd, 2011). For the history of the Arab world since the different independences has been experienced by the Arab people as a litany of successive, multiple humiliations; not only the humiliation of repression and underdevelopment, but also the humiliation inflicted on the Arabs in Palestine. Even if demonstrators are not waving the Palestinian flag, it is clear that for them, Palestine constitutes "the mother of all humiliations" (B. Khader, 2012). Moreover, wasn't the first Arab Spring Pales-



tinian, when the first Intifada, which was pacific, popular and inclusive, ignited Arab spirits in 1987? Everywhere, Arab peoples were comparing the courage of the young Palestinians with the cowardice of their leaders. A sense of shame gripped all societies, heightened by the second Intifada. When Israeli tanks were destroying the Jenin refugee camp, a Palestinian yelled in anger: "*Wen el arab?*" ("Where are the Arabs?"). "No one replied," comments J.P. Filiu, "for the Arab leaders were assembled at the Beirut Summit, in the absence of Yasser Arafat, confined to Ramallah, trapped in his besieged presidency" (J.P. Filiu 2011, p. 179). "*Wen el arab*" was yelled many a time during the three Israeli offensives against Gaza (360 km<sup>2</sup> and 1,800,000 inhabitants) in 2008, 2011 and 2014.

The Arab Spring movements have been perverted, diverted, hijacked. Polarization, chaos and war retains all the media's attention. Since 2014, the spotlights have been focused on Daesh (the Islamic State). One problem eclipses another. Palestine is no longer a rallying point. The Arab states are struggling with their internal problems. The Arab people are distraught, disoriented. Doubt has crept into their minds and pessimism is rampant.

And yet it is at this low point when hope surfaces. In December 2016, a Security Council Resolution (No. 2334) condemned Israeli colonization. The United States, which had used its right to veto 42 times to protect Israel since 1980, abstained this time. On 28 December 2016, John Kerry delivered an uncompromising speech stating he believed the Israeli policy of colonization rendered the "Two-state" solution impossible. On 15 January 2017, François Hollande organized an International Conference for Peace in the Middle East in Paris, with the participation of 75 delegations. In late March 2017, an Arab Summit, held at the Dead Sea in Jordan, put the Arab Peace Plan back on the table, albeit in the knowledge that Israel rejects the very idea of a return to the 1967 borders. In April 2017, President Trump received Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, at the White House.

What does all this gesticulation mean? It simply means that, no matter how much we ignore the Palestinian question, it always returns with force, for it is this issue which will ultimately determine lasting peace in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Region.

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