

Palestine after Arafat: In which Direction is Change Heading?

Gema Martín Muñoz

Professor of Sociology of the Arab and Islamic World
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

The political events that have taken place in the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank over the past year have been of great relevance and reach, but firstly it is necessary to place them in the strategic location in which they have occurred. The situation in the Occupied Territories has reached critical rates for the survival of the Palestinian civil population. A study by the World Bank in November 2004, dedicated to examining the impact of the socio-economic crisis suffered by the inhabitants of Gaza and the West Bank, confirmed that the state of siege and the isolation to which they are subjected by the Israeli army is the key factor in the severe economic crisis they are suffering and is leading considerable groups of the population into a humanitarian crisis. The state of siege imposed by permanent military checkpoints and the prohibition placed on driving on the main road network of the Palestinian territories, thereby restricting the free movement of people and products, has blocked the Palestinian economic space and made commercial and financial activities impossible. The strict closure of its borders prevents the private sector from establishing commercial relationships with the outside world. As a result, in accordance with this report, the standard of living of Palestinians has fallen drastically, meaning that 47% of its inhabitants currently live below the poverty threshold and that unemployment rates are higher than 50%. Added to this, the systematic destruction of Palestinian homes and cultivable fields has devastated agriculture, another of their sources of economic subsistence.

On the other hand, as shown in the detailed report *Land Grab* published by B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights, the Jewish colo-

nies in the West Bank have not stopped growing and now occupy 42% of West Bank territory. In addition, the report states that repressive activities by the Israelis, such as the demolition of houses and the blockades, are entirely at the service of strategies to control land and water sources and are linked to the policy of expansion and construction of Jewish colonies in these territories.

In July 2004 the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled against Israel building a wall in the West Bank, given that it did not follow the border set in 1967 but that it entered Palestinian territory, violating international law and the human rights of the Palestinians. As a result, the International Court demanded its demolition. The wall, named the 'separation barrier' by Israel, further aggravates the restrictions of movements of Palestinian citizens and has a devastating effect on the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Just the first stretch of the wall has already affected 200,000 Palestinians who have been left caged in and separated from their family environment, their place of work, education or their cultivable lands. In other words, it has provoked an insupportable situation of subsistence which, of course, leads to the silent abandoning of these territories by some of their inhabitants, thereby the Israelis progressively achieve appropriation of territory, 'cleansed' of Palestinians. The initial route of the wall meant the de facto annexing of 17% of Palestinian territory, and although the Israel court has requested some changes to the route, ignoring the international order for its demolition, this is more symbolic than effective.

An important event took place within this context, which was the unilateral Israeli decision to apply its plan for the *disengagement* of Gaza, decided without involving the Palestinians themselves. In this sense, it has an important significance because it reflects the Israeli vision that the future of the Palestinian terri-

tories is a matter which above all is decided in agreement with Washington, whilst negotiation with the Palestinian representatives is a secondary factor and even unnecessary if the circumstances are not considered ideal.

The unexpected and as yet unexplained death of the historic Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, was announced on 11th November 2004. Arafat had spent three years living in unacceptable conditions imposed by the Israeli army – he was locked up, physically isolated and deprived of healthcare. The passing of the historic and charismatic leader who directed and indeed shaped the Palestinian national identity in his own image for more than half a century left a void. But Arafat did not leave a power vacuum because Israel had annulled his capacity to govern and that of the Palestinian National Authority over the previous four years. The total reoccupation of the Palestinian territories, the systematic destruction of all infrastructures (built with financing from the European Union), the urbanicide and the politicalicide to which the Palestinian territories have been subjected had turned their authorities and institutions into completely empty entities and symbols; their existence *per se* was still useful, admittedly, because in this way they continued demanding responsibility, directing recriminations and reproaches and laying the blame on a process that they had stopped being able to control.

However, the death of Arafat has been considered to be an opportunity to straighten out the road towards peace and Palestinian-Israeli negotiation, even sometimes irrespectively and unfairly in terms of the historical memory, as if in reality all the weight of the blame of such a long and tragic conflict had fallen on Yasser Arafat. The presidential elections were organised quickly and hurriedly, with the approval of Israel and Washington, as they aspired to make Mahmoud Abbas (also known as Abu Mazen) head of the leadership – they have wanted to see him at the helm of the Palestinian Authority for a long time. This was instead of opening a more unhurried process, from which the future Palestinian negotiator would emerge through a legitimate, representative, unitarian and strong leadership which would clearly define what are the vital national interests for the Palestinians.

As a consequence, although presented as a *renewal* within the Palestinian leadership, in reality the election of Abu Mazen avoided the necessary reforms and re-establishment of the PLO, the authentic historic Palestinian political body that would open its

doors to passing the generational baton of Fatah and to the participation of the Islamists within it. This would be the best road to channel through the political route into movements such as the Martyrs of Al Aqsa and Hamas, who have applied strategies of suicide terrorist attacks in Israel. On the contrary, the central committee of Fatah and the executive of the PLO, dominated by the *old guard*, hurriedly decided that there would be elections for the presidency of the Palestinian National Authority and that Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) would be the only candidate. This thereby maintained an obsolete and dying institution that was created in 1993 within the framework of the Oslo agreements to provisionally govern the Palestinian people in those territories from which the Israeli army had withdrawn, until a Palestinian state was created in 1999. Since the end of this negotiation process the Palestinian Authority has been nothing more than fiction. Not even the procedure seemed right to the new generation of Fatah, who insisted that the candidate should be chosen in primaries, nor that their leader Marwan Barghouti, imprisoned in Israel, should be excluded a priori. It is probably for this reason that Marwan Barghouti presented his candidature in such an ephemeral manner – to send the message that neither had the candidate been elected democratically nor had the necessary post-Arafat reforms been carried out in the heart of Fatah and the PLO in a historic moment in which this was the most important task.

In consequence and facing the future post-Arafat scenario, a situation still exists of lack of unified and strong leadership within the Palestinian political scene, which would allow negotiation to head towards bringing together or controlling the most powerful and popular Palestinian factions and that they are not those which are present in the new Palestinian Government. On top of this, the historic perspective in this conflict should not be lost by twisting the facts of the equation in such a way that instead of making it clear that the key to the solution is bringing an end to the colonisation of the Palestinian territories by Israel, as demanded by international law, the responsibility is placed on the Palestinians, giving the impression that the essential point is not occupation but in fact Palestinian democratisation.

In reality, the true question of the future lies in the attitude of Israel, which also means that the US is a key player in the development of the conflict. If the necessary steps are not taken by the Israeli Government to improve the daily life of the Palestinians and to

demonstrate that there is a negotiating attitude in which basic measures are taken, such as the release of Palestinian political prisoners (beyond the homeopathic doses that have been applied up to now), the end of selective killings, the mass demolition of houses, the end of the urban sieges...., then Mahmoud Abbas will hold none of the cards which will enable him to grow stronger as a credible leader of his people and to put an end to the militarisation of the Intifada. After the failure of the Oslo process, the repetition of a negotiation process that is not manifested in relevant benefits for the Palestinians will engender frustration and anger yet more virulent than before.

On the other hand, a fundamental factor will be to see how the plan for the *disengagement* of Gaza and some other West Bank colonies turns out. If, however, Israel intends to annex a considerable part of the West Bank, peace will not be achieved either in Palestine or in the Middle East. In this sense, an element of great importance on the matter exists and that the aforementioned paradigm of the clear Israeli position of negotiating principally with the US administration is followed. President Bush sent a letter, known as the *letter of guarantees*, to the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on 14th April 2004. On one

hand, he guarantees support to the security of Israel as a priority and hegemonic axis in the region (“the United States reiterates its steadfast commitment to Israel’s security (...) and to preserve and strengthen Israel’s capability to deter and defend itself, by itself, against any threat or possible combination of threats”); it is accepted that after withdrawal from Gaza, Israel will continue applying security restrictions in the territory; the *Jewish nature* of the State of Israel is recognised and the rejection of the right of return of Palestinians is assumed; and fundamentally, it is accepted that “in light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centres [in the West Bank], it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949.” That is to say, for the very first time a US administration accepts that the borders of 1967 are no longer the territorial reference point of the Palestinian State and that Israel can annex West Bank territory. If the words set down in this document are going to mark the lines of future negotiation, the Palestinian State that they wish to shape will not solve the conflict but will, on the contrary, inflame it even more.