

Palestinian Society in the New Middle Eastern Context

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In the period between July 2002 and June 2003 Palestinian society has continued suffering the consequences of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which was influenced by internal factors related to the policies of the government of Ariel Sharon and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), as well as by external factors from beyond the borders of Israel and the occupied territories. The most important of the external factors are unquestionably the new situation created in the Middle East by the occupation of Iraq, and the attempts of the Quartet (UN, US, EU and Russia), to find a solution to the conflict through the application of the Road Map for Peace. The manner in which the occupation of Iraq was implemented, with no explicit resolution of the UN to legitimise it, has unleashed a growing wave of anti-American and anti-Western feeling in the Muslim world, which has stirred up the more radical fundamentalist branches and thus made it more difficult to find a political road out of the conflict. The Road Map is therefore unlikely to make any headway, and is in danger of becoming nothing more than a declaration of good intentions with no real application on the ground. Moreover, the Road Map indicates the general lines of a new peace process, but without providing any solution for the main issues that must be resolved (for example, borders, the territorial viability of a Palestinian state, settlements, refugees and the issue of Jerusalem), other than fixing a schedule, which today is already obsolete, and the need to guar-

antee Israel's legitimate right to security. Nor have the attitudes of Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat helped to accomplish the hopes placed on the Road Map. At an internal level, the heightened violence and the construction of the Barrier have contributed to radicalising the positions of two societies in upheaval, due to the damaging effects of terrorism and the repressive actions undertaken by the Israeli army and government. Between July 2002 and June 2003, at least fifty Palestinians carried out suicide bombings, and added to the other attacks and dozens of military operations completed by the Israeli army in the occupied territories, the tragic outcome has been more than 200 Israeli and over 300 Palestinian dead, and a minimum of a 1,000 people wounded on both sides. These figures may record a reduction in the number of victims, but nevertheless there has been a continuing escalation in the violence noted in the UN report of August 2002, which indicated that between 1st March and 7th May 2002, 497 Palestinians and more than a hundred Israelis had lost their lives. More serious still, a report issued by Amnesty International stated that between September 2002 (the start of the second *Intifada*) and September 2002, 250 Palestinian children were killed by the Israeli army acting in their responses to Palestinian provocation, and 72 Israeli children were killed in attacks by radical Palestinian groups. The Israeli army action was described as «excessive and disproportionate», and the Palestinian attacks were termed «direct and indiscriminate». These levels of violence are intolerable and only contribute to radicalising positions, while hindering any new proposals for re-initiating the peace process. This year, Palestinian society has once

again been profoundly shaken by the action of the Israeli army in the occupied territories (with selective assassinations that cause collateral damage amongst the civilian population, expulsions, the demolition of homes, the destruction of infrastructure, military isolation of Palestinian towns and villages, prohibition against the construction of Palestinian homes in areas set aside for future Israeli settlements, and so on), which as has been indicated only contribute to reducing the credibility of the Road Map and to providing justification for the radical groups who see no other solution but armed struggle and suicide attacks. An Amnesty International report issued on 2nd November 2002 was very clear in accusing the IDF of committing «unlawful killings; torture and ill-treatment of prisoners; and the use of Palestinian civilians as «human shields during its operation in Jenin and Nablus in April 2002». Two days earlier, a Human Rights Watch report had described Palestinian suicide attacks against Israeli civilians as crimes against humanity, and said that Arafat was morally and politically responsible for these attacks. The Palestinian people also feel angry and humiliated by the construction of new settlements in the West Bank and by the construction of the Barrier. In an article published on 6th October 2003, the independent Israeli newspaper *Haa-retz* reported that during the course of 2002 a 1,000 new housing units for Israeli families were sold in the occupied territories. The price of these homes, which are partly subsidised by the Israeli government, is significantly lower than similar homes situated inside Israeli territory, which explains the rise in the number of settlers in recent years. According to the Israeli Ministry of the Interior,

since the signing of the Oslo Accords, the number of settlers in the occupied territories (not including East Jerusalem) rose from 103,600 in 1993 to 231,443 in 2003. A detailed study of recent years shows that in 1999, there were 188,100 settlers; in 2000, 203,000; in 2001, 213,700; in 2002, 226,000; and in 2003, 231,443. This represents an increase of 23% in five years an average of 4.6 % each year. The building of new settlements, and of the infrastructure needed to support them (including roads, electricity supplies, schools, and water pipes) has not only exasperated the Palestinian population, who see it as a return to a land occupation policy similar to that of before 1948, but has also increased the Israeli government's spending on defence and infrastructure and is a political and economic obstacle that militates against a withdrawal from the occupied territories. On 17th November 2002, the Israeli Prime Minister disregarded international calls for a freeze on settlements in benefit of the peace process, and announced the expansion of new settlements in the city of Hebron. Indeed, according to his speech on 4th September 2002, Ariel Sharon foresees the existence of a provisional Palestinian state on no more than 42% of the West Bank and 70% of the Gaza Strip, and excludes from Gaza the areas that he deems to be essential for Israel's security. Declarations such as this remove any trace of credibility that the Road Map may have had, and contribute towards angering Palestinian public opinion, as the declarations imply that their future state would be reduced to little more than 10% of the former British Mandate of Palestine, and moreover to a series of isolated territories that would therefore not be economically, socially or politically viable. In June 2002, Ariel Sharon's government began to build a Barrier at Salem to the North-West of Jenin with the intention of encircling the West Bank. This was an old project first proposed in the time of Yitzhak Rabin, and also approved by Ehud Barak. For Israel, the barrier will act as a Security Barrier to prevent Palestinian terrorists from penetrating Israel; for the Palestinians, it is a «Barrier of Shame» that will divide families, villages, lands and crops, and which moreover will prevent them from visiting the mosques in Jerusalem. The construction does not follow the

Green Line (the 1967 border), but reaches far into the West Bank in order to protect certain Israeli settlements, while isolating Palestinian towns and villages from their territories and their neighbours. According to the Defence Minister and Israeli military sources, the Barrier will be completed towards the end of 2005 and will be some 750 Km long and 8 m high (150 Km had already been built by the end of 2003). The base of the Barrier is made of concrete and cement, but it also has electronic surveillance devices, trenches, electrified wires and stretches of sand with devices to pick up footsteps. The Barrier will cost around 1,600 million Euros. It will leave some 12,000 Palestinians in no-man's land, between the Green Line and the fortification, and approximately 95,000 Palestinians on the Israeli side of the Barrier. Its construction has been denounced by the UN and criticised by the US, which sees it as an obstacle to implementing the Road Map. Even so, Washington has made no official firm stance in opposition of the project. For the Palestinian people, the building of new settlements and of the Barrier brings back memories of Al-Nakba (the Catastrophe): the expulsion of 1948, when some 500 Palestinian villages were destroyed and their residents forced out, an episode which led to between 600,000 and 800,000 Palestinians being driven into exile. The Barrier and the settlements are also the most evident visual evidence of the occupation and serve as reminders of the humiliation suffered by the Palestinian people, and without a doubt to stir up resentment, which will easily be manipulated by radical and violent groups. In the opinion of many analysts, Ariel Sharon's aggressive and military policy is only feeding Palestinian despair and providing ground for the arguments in support of violence. Political changes have also had an impact on the conflict and on Palestinian society during these period. Firstly, the Palestinian elections, due to be held in January 2003, had to be postponed because the reoccupation of the territories and the siege by the Israeli army made it impossible for them to be held under normal conditions and in a climate of freedom. Secondly, government unity came to an end in Israel when the Labour Party quit the government in October 2002, resulting in the convocation of

early elections and Ariel Sharon and Likud's victory on 28th January 2003, in the election with the lowest turnout (68%) in the electoral history of Israel. Thirdly, yielding to pressure from Israel and the US, on 19th March 2003 Arafat named Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as Prime Minister, who was to resign on 6th September that same year after being unable to gain full control of the Palestinian security forces. Fourthly, after considerable negotiations and delays, the Road Map for Peace was presented on 30th April 2003, intended to chart the path of a new peace process and to lead to the proclamation of an independent Palestinian state in 2005. The PNA and Israel accepted the Road Map and in May resumed the public and official talks that had been stalled following the outbreak of the second Intifada of September 2000, and the Taba proposals in January 2001. Lastly, we should not ignore the debilitation of the Israeli economy (owing to the fall in tourism, investment and the value of the currency, and to the rise in unemployment), and above all that of the Palestinian economy. Israel's Operation Defensive Barrier, ordered by Ariel Sharon in March 2002, has brought practically all productive economic activity in the occupied territories to a standstill, and has meant that the Palestinian economy has gone from the stagnation and recession of the early days of the Al-Aqsa *Intifada* to a state of total paralysis.

To conclude, this past year provides us with little ground for optimism, and at the present time the solution to the conflict seems to be still more remote than before. Only the weariness and the consequent reaction of two societies that remain in upheaval following so much violence, may, in what we hope will be the near future, be a way out of the conflict. Indexes of public opinion indicate that there are increasing numbers of people in both Israel and the occupied territories who are in favour of negotiated peace. This is to be applauded, but the words of Saeb Erekat, the constant Palestinian negotiator, on the collapse of the last negotiations (Taba, in January 2001), he commented, «The only difference between the present time and the time when an accord is reached will be the number of Israeli and Palestinian names to be added to the death list and to our grief. In the end, peace will come.»