

PALESTINIAN POLITICS AFTER THE GULF WAR

AN INTERVIEW WITH FAISAL HUSSEINI

REP: The Palestinian position during the Gulf crisis has been the subject of a great deal of attention in the West. How did the Palestinians of the territories experience the crisis and war? What in fact was the Palestinian position?

Husseini: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait took the Palestinians living under occupation completely by surprise. Once the initial shock was over, intensive discussions began. People were asking whether Iraq had the right to invade Kuwait; whether Kuwait was or was not historically part of Iraq; whether Palestinians should support the existence of established regimes, or whether, on the contrary, they should aid any unitary Arab movement; whether it was fair for the fortunes of the Gulf to be used for the benefit of the ruling families there.

But at the same time there were contrary opinions. For some, any comparison between the invasion of Kuwait and the situation in Palestine immediately brought to the fore the principle of international legality, and the fact that we could not demand this right for ourselves while denying it to others. So public opinion soon reached a turning point.

The PLO resolved it on 6 August when it launched its first initiative calling for the immediate withdrawal of the Iraqi troops from Kuwait before 10 August. Here, too, under occupation, the communiqués published by leading

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personalities (acting in a private capacity) as well as by the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) all called for the application of international law and for the opening of negotiations between Kuwait and Iraq.

This was the situation until it became clear that the Americans had decided to send troops to Saudi Arabia. During the same period, the Arab League split, with one part deciding to invite in the American troops and the other opposing this decision. People were very affected by this. It no longer was a question of problems between Iraq and Kuwait, but a showdown between America and our region.

When the American troops launched their offensive, the Palestinians were firmly convinced that the true objective was to prevent the application of international law and to destroy Iraqi military potential. We had said that whoever was for international legality should oppose the war, since the war in any case would be bad for the Palestinians, who would be the real losers in the new balance of power that would inevitably emerge.

In short, the Palestinians supported Iraq (despite the fact that the political leadership never stopped clinging to the idea that this battle was for international legality) and fully backed Iraq's proposal to withdraw from Kuwait on condition that the withdrawal be followed by other withdrawals in the region.

Our official position was pragmatic. We had been facing a veritable offensive from Egypt against the PLO on the pretext that the Palestinians had not supported the transfer of the Arab League headquarters from Tunis to Cairo; the Syrians had not changed their policy towards us; the Gulf states were helping the Islamist movements rather than the PLO; the U.S. had suspended its dialogue with the PLO; and Western Europe was more preoccupied with the fate of Eastern Europe. Thus, the Palestinians bitterly watched while their cause was increasingly ignored, and Iraq's "linkage" initiative seemed like the only attempt to keep the Palestine question at the center of the debate. Unfortunately, the Palestinian position was not understood by the Gulf states or Egypt. These countries demanded that the Palestinians take a clear position against Iraq; it was not enough for us merely to call for an Iraqi withdrawal. And this all-out condemnation was a position that we Palestinians were not able to take. Why not? Because in the last analysis, all-out opposition to Iraq amounted to supporting a military solution to the crisis. How could we back a military solution when we had been continually proclaiming international law, like a slogan, when we had been spending years convincing our people to accept a political rather than a military solution with the Israelis? In our eyes, Yitzhak Shamir is an evil man whose image among us is not worse than Saddam's among the Israelis. This being the case, how could I as a Palestinian who called upon his people to resolve our conflict with the terrorist Shamir peacefully, ask this same Palestinian people to accept a military solution when it was against Saddam Hussein?

Our official position was pragmatic, but it was also a position of principle. We were demanding international legality for everyone. I don't believe that

this position was erroneous, but that we didn't know how to present it. Somewhere along the line, our demand for international legality became blurred, either because we did not stress it enough, or because we didn't make it systematically enough—at all events all that was heard was our call to stand up to foreign intervention and to defend Iraq, to lift the blockade against Iraq, and so on.

I should also say that the Palestinians were seeing Tel Aviv being bombed for the first time, and the strike initiative was Arab rather than Israeli. This, against the background of the daily clashes between the soldiers and our youth, and the arrogance of the Israeli troops crowing the first day that Iraq had been crushed—all this combined to make the Palestinians loud and clear in their sympathy for Iraq and their defiance against Israel.

Today, they say the Palestinians should be made to pay the price for their “bad choice,” for “betting on the wrong horse.” But the Palestinians can't be sanctioned like that for the simple reason that they are the principal and fundamental factor in any solution of the Middle East problem. The states that are trying to “punish” us today are the same ones that are trying to stabilize the region; they well know that no one can achieve this stability without cooperating with the PLO, without taking into consideration our legitimate interests.

I've had many occasions since the crisis to meet Western leaders, who express their anger against the PLO. The West seems to forget that it wasn't the Palestinians who built up Iraq's military force or gave the country military technology and chemical weaponry. It was the Western countries that outfitted the Iraqi ship, which was launched at a time when we were sinking and no one was paying any attention.

REP: Were you disappointed by the reactions of the Israeli peace camp?

Husseini. The Israeli peace camp was true to itself during the Gulf crisis. What I mean is that we were accustomed to seeing most of their symbols and figures knuckle under at the least crisis, bending to the pressures of their street and giving in to the preconceived image that Israelis have of Palestinians. So we saw them, as usual, making inflammatory statements before they realized that they were harming not only the Palestinians but their own positions. The declarations of Yossi Sarid, and certain statements of Shulamit Aloni are cases in point, although Aloni retracted the same day. Two facts emerge from all this: the first is that the Israeli vision of the Palestinian is always dominated by racist preconceptions. The second is that certain members of the peace camp confused Palestinians with their allies. They no longer saw in us an adversary with whom they had to make peace, but friends who were their allies. So they were shocked to realize that in certain circumstances and at certain specific stages, our visions must diverge. Which, all things considered, is quite normal.

Personally, I am never shocked when Israeli pacifists adopt positions contrary to mine, because I have always perceived them as the enemy with

whom I must achieve peace. I nevertheless believe that the peace camp may have drawn lessons that will help them be more realistic in the future.

Today, the dialogue has resumed, but with more precaution and less enthusiasm for fear of new setbacks. Certain Israeli pacifists are nonetheless carrying out acts of defiance. Abie Nathan has just begun a hunger strike which he plans to maintain to the end if the law banning contacts with the PLO is not abolished. This type of dramatic action will, I hope, win more and more support and with time give proof of the seriousness of this fight for peace.

Moreover, certain groups such as Yesh Gvul, old leftist formations like the Israeli communist party, which were relatively marginal, are working to be less cut off from their society and to move forward the dialogue with us.

Finally, we have established a dialogue with certain members of the Knesset during the crisis. It resumed on new bases, more pragmatic and less media-oriented. Thus, our meetings today smack less of "spectacles" or shows. We have also held recently several meetings with the Mashov group of the Labor party.

REP: What is happening with the intifada today?

Husseini: The first year of the intifada was to transform Palestinian opinion and work out a new strategy. We achieved these goals, as can be seen from the Palestine National Council (PNC) resolutions in 1988. The second year was to win over international opinion, and we succeeded up to a certain point. The third was the struggle to convince Israeli opinion, and we were progressing along that path when the Gulf crisis broke out.

I think that the Gulf crisis has confronted us with challenges of a new type. My feeling is that the fourth and even the fifth years of the intifada will have to be devoted to reconstruction, as much within our society as within the organizational structure itself.

Today we are trying to take stock of the intifada, its achievements and failures. We must win the economic battle as well as the battle for social and cultural reconstruction. Many of our institutions are threatened, not so much at the level of their means as of their field of action. For example, education. Its content and level today are seriously affected. We are trying to gather qualified people within specialized commissions in the fields of social sciences, economy, education, and so on. We are hoping that a similar restructuring will take place among our brothers on the outside, so that we can together build an education ministry that can supervise our educational system, including all our schools, whether private, public, or those connected with the religious endowments (waqf).

Another example. We must today rebuild the neighborhood committees and the popular committees. And when I say "neighborhood committees," I am not speaking of the "strike forces" but of the social committees that were active at the beginning of the uprising in the camps and villages as well as in urban neighborhoods. These committees should meet the daily needs of

people, help them innovate in the local and domestic economies, for example. A little like they were doing at the beginning of the intifada—which earned them the fierce opposition of the occupier. And then, from our part, we increased their difficulties by failing to establish a clear distinction between the “popular committees” and the “strike forces” which were supposed to coordinate clashes with the occupying troops. Up to the present, the calls to create the committees have always come exclusively from UNLU, which considered that the implementation of such directives was its own responsibility. But that’s a mistake, because the “very militant” bodies of the intifada naturally establish committees in their own image, with the most combative “front line” elements. So the effect has been that other elements, other groups, other categories of society—people who are not always ready to go as far as the “shock troop” type of militant but who still want to take part in the struggle—thus remained outside the committees. So it’s these categories of people that we need most, and it is to them that we must entrust the tasks of the neighborhood committees.

Today, we are beginning the new stage with an intense internal debate, which we also want to be open. We want to consider all kinds of criticisms. We want the neighborhoods and their committees to express their viewpoints, their plans, their experiences, their criticisms, and we want all this to be heard by the leadership so that the leadership in turn can formulate lines of action in keeping with the needs, the means, and the possibilities of the base.

The committees need to serve the citizens. For instance, the “consumer defense committees” should concern themselves with local industries, encouraging them to compete with imported products by improving the quality of our own products—we cannot allow things to take their own course, as has been the case recently. These same committees could play a role in setting rent ceilings in housing and businesses, and in following up on these measures. We need several types of popular committees—committees for social affairs, health, production, and so on. And we could establish them through combining two modes of recruitment—people from the neighborhoods themselves and technicians who could come from other places. The important thing is to make sure that the local committees do not lose touch with the daily lives of the people, and the only way to do that is for the committees to be run by those directly involved—mothers, economic representatives, lawyers, doctors—in short, by local society. People should not, for example, boycott Israeli or foreign products out of fear of the committees, but out of conviction. The masses are ready to respond to our appeal, and they are perfectly aware of the dangers threatening the intifada. If these principles are not firmly accepted, the future will be bleak.

REP: How do you see the question of Palestinian use of force or violence in the intifada?

Husseini: What I have just said in no way diminishes the fact that the struggle with the occupying forces constitutes one of the advanced practices of the intifada. A people under occupation can legitimately use whatever means are at its disposal to resist. On the ground, things have followed a certain course. If we were to put the duration of the Palestinian people's struggle at one hour, then I would say that from 1967 to 1987 was equivalent to the first quarter hour of battle. That is, after 20 years, we were still at the stage of skirmishes. We hadn't yet reached the guerrilla warfare stage, to say nothing of the people's war. Then, all of a sudden, we passed in one leap from the first quarter hour to the last 15 minutes of the battle. The entire people descended into the streets, generally the final stage in a war of liberation. But with this nuance: our masses were uneasy because we had not passed like other peoples through the intermediary phase of the armed struggle. That is why many believe that we will be obliged to pass through it, that we cannot skip over it. My conviction is, on the contrary, that we skipped it from the very fact of our particular history, in order to go directly to the stage of the generalized popular revolt.

This tendency—even this wish—on the part of some to take up arms in pursuing our resistance is always present. But as long as the popular movement managed to impose itself, this wish was like slow burning embers. The minute it seemed that the popular movement had receded and the repression intensified, the elements favoring violence began carrying out the type of action that in reality did not come from any organization or belong to any strategy. This was the case of the “war of knives,” or the attacks against Israeli civilians or Palestinians presumed to be collaborators. This practice is absolutely immature and, to our great regret, sometimes involves criminal behavior. What could one call the killing of the French tourist in a Bethlehem restaurant? There is no way I can justify such an act. All I can say is that occupation engenders illnesses. I categorically refuse that such attacks are carried out in the name of the Palestinian struggle. What we are seeing today is the result of despair, feelings of rage, and the effects of the repression to which the Palestinians have been subjected. Some people react without being able to control their own acts. But the more conscious among us should indicate the right direction. These actions completely contradict the values of the Palestinian people. We must say so clearly and courageously, otherwise our people can become confused between right and wrong.

REP: *What about the relations between the organizations of the intifada and the Hamas movement?*

Husseini: One result of the Gulf Crisis is that it led to coordination among all kinds of activists—secular, Islamist, nationalist. The crisis gave them all the sense of confronting the same danger. The result has been a new maturity, contrary to what many believe. The stage that is beginning now will see a positive and constructive evolution of relations between Hamas and the various groups of the Unified Leadership.

REP: Do you have the feeling after your meetings with Secretary of State Baker that the Americans have defined their plan and their vision of what a Middle East peace settlement should look like?

Husseini: The American vision falls within the framework of resolution 242 and the land-for-peace principle. I think the United States likewise has an idea of another Middle East which, by becoming a sort of huge open market, would be an economic base. American interests need a certain regional stability, but the Americans unfortunately do not seem ready to exert the slightest pressure to achieve it, notably because the party that needs the most pressuring is none other than Israel.

The Gulf war brought to light certain new points. Israel, for example, is not a strategic ally capable of defending American interests regardless of circumstances. During the crisis, Israel was even a burden for the United States. It likewise became clear that in the light of new military technologies, territory is no longer necessary for security. The huge military technology gap that was revealed between the United States and the rest of the world has henceforth changed the conduct of any war, making war almost like an electronic game at any point of the globe. Such changes make Israel's ambitions to continue developing a gigantic on-site military force obsolete, extremely costly, and in any case less efficient, given the techniques at the disposal of the United States.

This being said, I believe that the present American initiatives are handicapped by false analyses according to which the war's outcome and the new alliances forged make it possible to get around what was previously perceived as the main obstacle, that is, the PLO. It seems unfortunate that the Arab members of the coalition have lent themselves to this maneuver. American diplomacy is thus off and running, convinced that it can satisfy both Israel and the Arab states while ignoring the Palestinians, "weaker than they have ever been." We have continually attempted to warn against these illusions, endlessly repeating that the position of the Palestinians, the Palestine factor, remains an essential element that cannot be avoided. American diplomacy itself has realized this in recent weeks. Thus it is facing an impasse—it cannot go forward before satisfying the Palestinian demands, and it cannot satisfy Palestinian demands as long as the Shamir government monopolizes the keys of any political solution.

REP: How do you feel about these repeated attempts to bypass PLO and to eliminate the Palestinian leadership?

Husseini: How do I feel? I feel self-confidence. Confidence in the representativity and legitimacy of the PLO, confidence in the Palestinian people and in its leaders wherever they are, confidence in the capacity of the PLO to meet the challenges at all levels, on the ground and in the political arena. The dream of the Americans, Israelis, and even, to a certain extent, certain Arabs is to find a substitute to the PLO. This dream was broken here

in the occupied territories. What can one conclude about who exercises the political leadership when, delegation after delegation, men and women present themselves at the request of the PLO, insist unequivocally that nothing can be done without the PLO, that nothing can be agreed to if it does not take into account our principles and our demands?

This time, we succeeded in meeting the challenge, and our action was fruitful. Especially since we did not brandish slogans, but spelled out our positions. In other words, we did not say simply “no” to James Baker, but “why? when? where? how?” And by putting the Americans in the position of having to explain the Israeli position and moves, the Palestinian side led the American side to recognize that the Israeli proposals can only lead to failure.

Thus, just as some people were deluding themselves that the PLO had weakened “on the inside,” the PLO stood up to impose itself on all its interlocutors. And it is here, under occupation, that it was affirmed that no one can replace the PLO, that anyone who thinks they can must begin by annihilating us. The PLO is an integral part of our struggle. It’s up to our adversaries to prove that we are not the representatives of our people.

REP: Parallel with the attempts to eliminate the PLO from the diplomatic arena, are the efforts to deny the unity of the Palestinian people through plans that include the inhabitants of the occupied territories but totally ignore the Palestinians in exile. How can such efforts be combatted?

Husseini: Exactly as we are doing. By tirelessly affirming that we refuse to be approached otherwise than on the basis of the fact that we are a single people. We have a structure here that was born of the intifada and which preserves the unity of the Palestinian people, which safeguards this unity between the “inside” and the “outside.” We reject the Israeli allegation that wants to make of us simple residents of a given region. We refuse to be defined as minorities, as some are trying to do. We refuse that our cause continue to be seen as a refugee problem. We are one people, and an accomplished people. And every political step made by whichever category of this people is made within the framework of the PLO.

The meetings with James Baker, for example, were decided by the PLO. Both the United States and Israel know this perfectly well. James Baker met with the PLO envoys. We have clearly and publicly affirmed it. The United States and other parties know today—we proved it to them—that if we are not strong enough to impose a solution, at least we are able to block any plan that does not take into account our legitimate rights. This is our main strength today. We should realize this fully, and be confident and on the offensive. We, and we alone, hold the keys of peace and stability in the Middle East.

Hence our permanent insistence that any initiative, any peace plan, be subject to precise rules and unfold in a well defined juridical framework. That is the question we asked James Baker: What are the rules of the new game? If the rules of the game are international legality, let us see the princi-

ples that guide it and the positions it imposes. It is this same approach that leads us to demand an effective role for the UN and for Europe, that makes us demand that the negotiations unfold under the twin banners of international legality and the implementation of UN decisions.

Moreover, we Palestinians, we the PLO, are strong when the game is governed by rules. That is why the other parties try to impose on us an ensemble of rules based not on law, but on the strength of each party on the ground, which needless to say is completely to Israel's advantage. We will not go to negotiations without preconditions, and then the only body that can go will be the PLO, fully representing the whole of its people.

REP: How would you feel about the possibility of a transitional stage for the occupied territories as part of a settlement?

Husseini: If we are told that we must go through a transitional stage, it must be an integral part of a comprehensive solution and inscribed within a very specific time table. Then there is something to talk about. If I am told, for example, that this stage will last 15 years, then I can ask why it can't be 15 months. But what is not possible is to tell us that there will be a transitional period of so many years and that after that "we will see . . ."

We also cannot accept a solution to the occupation that excludes our people in exile. Any solution must take into account the unity between the inside and the outside. At one point during our meeting, James Baker said to us "You will obtain a little less than a state and more than autonomy." We replied: "We don't want to exchange slogans, but to discuss the substance. This entity you refer to, will it be able to apply the 'right of return' for the Palestinians scattered and persecuted around the world? If so, we can talk, because you will have admitted the reality of the ties between the inside and the outside. If, on the other hand, you grant us an entity and even if you call this entity a 'state,' but if the Palestinians from the outside are deprived of their 'right of return,' then we will refuse."

REP: Israel is counting a great deal on the massive immigration of Soviet Jews. But for the Palestinians and the neighboring Arab countries, this immigration is a source of deep concern. How do you see this problem?

Husseini: Our struggle is about land and people. The danger of Jewish immigration is where it affects these two elements—seizing the land and upsetting the demographic reality of the people.

A Jewish immigration, whatever its size, which did not attack these realities would not constitute, strictly speaking, a danger. But it happens that the Jewish immigration that we are witnessing is leading to the expansion of the settlements in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, to the pillaging of our waters, to the dismantlement of our economy. Therefore it holds a grave danger. There should be no illusions on this point. The entire question of peace and stability in the Middle East is threatened with collapse by Israeli policies on Soviet Jewish immigration.

If a million or so Soviet Jews arrive in Israel in the coming years, a mortal blow will be struck to the peace process. Such an influx of immigrants will increase Palestinian and Arab fears and will lull the Israeli public and certain officials into the grave illusion that they can realize Greater Israel. Thus we will be moving, on both sides, towards preparations for the next war.