



THE CENTER
FOR POLICY
ANALYSIS ON
PALESTINE

The Palestinians: Fifty Years Later

Hisham Sharabi

Distinguished Lecture Series
Number 1

\$5.00

The Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine
2435 Virginia Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037
(202) 338-1290

THE CENTER FOR POLICY ANALYSIS ON PALESTINE

The Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine is an educational program of The Jerusalem Fund, a Washington-based non-profit organization. The Center was established in September 1990 and is dedicated to the study and analysis of the relationship between the United States and the Middle East, with particular emphasis on the Palestine problem and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Center seeks to bring into focus the implications of specific U.S. policies with regard to the Palestine question and to provide a much-needed Palestinian/Arab perspective that will address the political, academic, and media establishments in Washington, D.C.

In pursuing its goals, the Center sponsors forums and seminars to address these issues and publishes the proceedings as *Symposium Proceedings*. The Center also commissions independent studies and publishes these reports as *Information Papers*. This is the first publication of the *Distinguished Lecture Series*.

MISSION STATEMENT

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Hisham Sharabi, *Chairman*
George T. Abed
Naseer Aruri
Halim Barakat
George Hishmeh
Clovis Maksoud
Heidi Shoup, *Executive Director*

Distinguished Lecture Series
Number 1

The Palestinians: Fifty Years Later

Hisham Sharabi

The Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine
Washington, D.C.

May 1998

On March 25, 1998, Professor Hisham Sharabi delivered the Kareema Khoury Annual Distinguished Lecture at Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. This paper, adapted from that lecture, is the first in a series of lectures published by the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine.

The views, facts, and interpretations presented in this paper are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine. Unless otherwise noted, the material in this publication is attributable to the author and used with permission.

The Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine
2435 Virginia Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

Phone: (202) 338-1290
Fax: (202) 333-7742
email: jfcpap@radix.net
<http://www.palestinecenter.org>

H

isham Sharabi

Dr. Sharabi is Chairman of The Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development, which he co-founded in 1977, and Chairman of the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine. His commitment to the educational, cultural, and economic support of the Palestinian people in the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel has given impetus to many groundbreaking Arab and Palestinian initiatives in the United States and abroad. Dr. Sharabi is Professor of European Intellectual History and Omar al-Mukhtar Professor of Arab Culture at Georgetown University, and the author of many books and essays on Palestinian and Arab issues.

THE PALESTINIANS: FIFTY YEARS LATER

I n December of 1947, when I first came to the United States to study philosophy at the University of Chicago, Palestine was still an Arab country, with a Jewish minority composed mostly of East European immigrants, comprising about 30 percent of the total population.

Within a few months, by the end of the spring of 1948, most of the country was conquered by the well-organized, well-armed, and numerically superior Jewish force, while the ill-equipped, badly-trained (except for Transjordan's Arab Legion) Arab troops sent to defend the Palestinian civilian population were pushed back behind the lines that became the *de facto* boundaries of the Jewish state. Over half of the Palestinian population took flight or was expelled, creating the Palestinian refugees, who still live in temporary camps built by the United Nations in the surrounding countries of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan as well as in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

My hometown, Jaffa, fell on May 14, 1948. Salih Baranisi, a Palestinian fighter who took part in the defense of the city, tells the story:

I clearly remember when the Jews carried out their concentrated attack. They used what we called 'mine-throwers,' a sort of locally made cannon, with which they

THE PALESTINIANS: FIFTY YEARS LATER

bombarded Jaffa. The city held out for some time, but soon our defenses began to crumble in the face of the mounting attacks. The main group defending the city was mostly composed of local inhabitants, called the Arab demolition regiment, founded by Jamal al-Hout, a well-known figure in Jaffa. This group managed to construct a cannon of its own in the Bibi workshop. It was the only big weapon in our possession. There were four machine guns and a number of rifles, most of which were ancient. Most of the ammunition had gone bad. So our military capability was very limited...I remember one day walking in front of a hotel near Al-Hamra movie house, when bombs began to rain down on us. As I ran toward the hotel, I glimpsed a young man on a bicycle, hit in the neck; he was pedaling and his head was swinging on his chest. The bombardment continued for several days, with no response from our side. Then suddenly a mass exodus broke out...by sea to Gaza, on foot or by car to Ramleh, Ramallah, and Nablus.¹

Almost a year later, on April 11, 1949, Lowell C. Pinkerton, the U.S. minister to Lebanon, sent an official memorandum to U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson in Washington, containing an appeal from a group of notables from Jaffa, then refugees in Lebanon.² To my knowledge, this was the first formal appeal to a foreign government for help made by the Palestinians after being driven out from Palestine in 1948. In the years to follow, the same claims to right and justice were to be made in countless similar pleas to governments, East and West, the United Nations, and international bodies across the world. The document reflects the high moral tone and naïve credulity that characterized the attitude of many Palestinians in those early days of refugee status.

The signers of the document make four requests of the American government. The first request is to allow the refugees "to return immediately to their homes and lands," and not be made to wait

until a "political solution is reached," and they add:

[U]nless [the refugees] are effectively resettled in their own homes and lands, the peace sought for in this part of the world will never reign, even though it might appear on the surface that the trouble had subsided.

The second request relates to the Palestinian bank accounts in Palestine blocked by the Jewish authorities. The U.S. government is asked "to use its influence with the Jewish authorities, and recommend to them the immediate release of these funds...."

The third request concerns the payment of adequate indemnity to the refugees when they return "for such damage or loss as has resulted" from the war.

The fourth request centers on the citrus industry, which represented Jaffa's (and Palestine's) greatest wealth. "Now, already a year has elapsed since the people left their plantations, and in this period these plantations have gone without irrigation or care...If the trees are not given immediate attention in this spring, then most probably all the trees will have to be replaced, and the new trees will not bear fruit again for the lapse of at least six years."

In the last section of the document, the signers address "the final political settlement" of the conflict, maintaining that a lasting settlement can only be reached on the basis of partition. The UN partition plan of November 29, 1947, was rejected by a great many Arabs "because, as a Partition Scheme, it was not fair." It gave the Jewish minority more than half of the total area of Palestine, including 95 percent of the irrigated lands, and almost half of the Arab Palestinian population would have come under Jewish rule. And while the Jews were allotted all of Galilee, the Negev, and all the coastal plain down to Gaza, including practically all the citrus groves, the Palestinians were given the "arid mountains." Only "a fair and just Partition of the country...topographically, economically, and socially" can lead to a lasting settlement.

¹Hisham Sharabi, *Salih Barakat: The Silent Struggle* (Bar al Tall ah: Beirut, 1981), pp. 44-45.
²"Historical Document: Memorandum Submitted to the Government of the United States of America by the Jaffa and Districts Inhabitants Council," *Journal of Palestine Studies* (Spring, 1989), pp. 96-109.

THE PALESTINIANS: FIFTY YEARS LATER

The document concludes as follows:

If the United Nations Organization has proved so far so weak as to be unable to force the Jews into behaving in accordance with international law, it is enough reason for people like us to come to you, the Government of the United States for help. We feel that it would do no good saying that the Jews just would not listen to anyone... [M]ost of the small countries in the world look to the United States as the all-powerful generous nation, which has been and still is prepared to defend the rights of man and the freedom of peoples. We feel, therefore, that it would be most honouring for the United States and its people, to defend the rights of a people who have become homeless and stateless as a result of very sad circumstances, and of a rarely unjust treatment by their fellow men.

Since the end of the Second World War one half century ago, all the colonized people of the world have been liberated, including most recently the people of South Africa. As we enter the 21st century, only the Palestinians remain colonized, victims of a bizarre policy of racial discrimination and ethnic cleansing by – of all people – the victims of the greatest horror of the 20th century.

For most of the last 50 years, the Western discourse on the Arab-Israeli conflict has mostly reflected the version of history offered by official and mainstream Zionism, while Palestinian and Arab claims have been routinely ignored. Only recently has the Zionist version of what actually happened been put into serious question by a new generation of Israeli scholars, confirming what the Palestinians have been claiming all along.³ According to Ilan Pappé, one of the "new" historians at the University of Haifa, two major claims have been validated by the new Israeli scholars: Israel's and the Zionist movement's direct responsibility for the Palestinian Catastrophe (al-Nakbah), and the great powers' role (including the Soviet Union's in the late

1940s and 1950s) in preventing the Palestinians from realizing their national aspirations.⁴

II

In the fall of 1993, on my first return to Palestine since 1947, Amos Oz, the well-known Israeli novelist and Peace Now leader, a man I came to know and like well, told me as the two of us stood in front of my former home in Jaffa (now inhabited by an Israeli professor, his wife and grown son): "If the Palestinians did not fight us, they would still be living in their homes." If even compassionate liberals of Oz's stature and intelligence find it difficult to overcome the Jewish denial of what actually happened in Palestine, how can genuine reconciliation take place between the two peoples? But the problem goes much deeper. Even if there were readiness to admit the facts, as the new Israeli historians have done, would there also be readiness to assume the responsibility the facts establish? As Michael Warshawski, a radical Israeli writer and critic, put it, "Israel's new historians admit the facts, but not the guilt. This, perhaps, is the difference between post-Zionism and anti-Zionism."⁵

From the beginning, the Palestinians have been the great repressed of the Zionist consciousness. When Ahad Ha'am pointed out early on that there were Palestinians in the land of Palestine, the immediate Zionist response was to ignore the issue altogether. Later on, as Israel Shatah has shown, they mostly focused on finding ways to get rid of the Palestinians.⁶ Coexistence and accommodation with the Palestinians was never considered as a serious option, only a temporary strategy. We know that the idea of expulsion was rooted in Theodor Herzl's mind well before the turn of the century, when he wrote "we shall spirit them [the Palestinians] across the frontier." As the idea of expulsion developed into a practical policy, separation was seen as a necessary first step in its application.⁷ For the Zionist movement, and later for

³Ilan Pappé, "What Really Happened Fifty Years Ago?" *The Link* (January-March, 1998), p. 5.

⁴Michael Warshawski,

"Reply," *News from Within* (February, 1998), p. 38.

⁵Israel Shatah, "A History of the Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionism," *Journal of Palestine Studies* (Spring, 1989), pp. 22-37.

⁶Roberta Straus Feuerlicht, *The Fate of the Jews* (Times Books: New York, 1983), pp. 225-26.

THE PALESTINIANS: FIFTY YEARS LATER

Israel, the problem of another people living in Palestine was never seen as a moral problem. They only saw it (and I think they still do) as a demographic problem requiring a military-political solution. Some Zionists solved the problem by an act of mental annihilation of the Palestinians, by simply denying the Palestinians' very existence or identity, as for example, when Mrs. Golda Meir, former Israeli prime minister, declared that "there is no such thing as a Palestinian people," or when the writer Jane Peters went to great lengths to establish in a massive book that Palestinians were immigrants from the surrounding countries. In this light, it is interesting that, until recently, the word Palestinian was not used by the Israelis. The Palestinians inside Israel, though citizens of the state, were simply "the minorities," identified by religion or ethnic origin, as the Muslim minority, the Christian minority, the Druze minority, the bedouin minority. Sometimes the word "Arab" was used to refer to these "minorities" as a faceless, alien group, part of the faceless 300 million inhabitants of the surrounding Arab world who also happened not to be Jewish.

One of the important findings of the new historians, was establishing that the flight of the Palestinian population in 1948 was the result of a carefully planned Zionist policy and not the result, as was maintained by the official Israeli version of history, of Palestinian panic. The newly declassified documents prove that the Jewish Zionist forces routinely expelled the inhabitants of the villages and towns they conquered, sometimes massacred the inhabitants, and often systematically destroyed those villages to which they feared the refugees might return.

It is important to remember that the Zionist project always had in sight an Arab-free Eretz Israel. Thus partition, understood as a final solution based on sharing the land with the Palestinians, was never seriously considered. As Noam Chomsky reminds us, Ben Gurion in 1938 accepted the Peel partition plan only because, as he put it privately, it would be a

temporary arrangement leading to the establishment of a state: "[A]fter we become a strong force, as the result of the creation of a state, we shall abolish partition and expand to the whole of Palestine...."⁸ Ten years later, when the state was established on 78 percent of Palestine, Menachem Begin objected, declaring that that was an illegal partition of the "Homeland." "Eretz Israel," he said, "will be restored to the people of Israel. All of it. And forever." And in 1974, following the Yom Kippur War, Yitzhak Rabin supported the idea of separation not only, as he put it, to isolate the Palestinian population, but also to create "the conditions which would attract natural and voluntary migration of the refugees from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to Jordan."

III

Now the question I wish to ask is, why have the Palestinians failed after 50 years of struggle to liberate their homeland?

I shall attempt to answer part of this question by asking the more specific question, why has the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) been so utterly defeated, despite the vast financial and political support it received from all over the world, and despite the enormous sacrifices of the Palestinian people?

I was in Jordan in the wake of the Arab defeat in the 1967 war. I witnessed the emergence of the PLO as the umbrella organization of the major Palestinian guerrilla groups, including the two most important, the Movement for the Liberation of Palestine (Fateh), an ideologically mixed group headed by Yasser Arafat, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the major leftist grouping, led by George Habbash. In my view, the fate of the PLO was sealed when the leadership of the newly restructured organization was won by Arafat. For the next 30 years, the PLO was dominated by conservative forces linked to oil-rich Arab regimes and it was shaped by Arafat's patriarchal style

⁸Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle* (South End Press, Boston, 1983), p. 161.

THE PALESTINIANS: FIFTY YEARS LATER

and leadership. As for the Palestinian left, it was reduced to a subordinate role, though it continued to enjoy wide support among the intellectuals and the educated youth of the refugee camps.

Had George Habash been elected to the leadership of the PLO, would the organization have become a genuinely revolutionary movement, which it never was allowed to become under Arafat? It is difficult to tell. Looking back, a left leadership would probably have provided the PLO with the two essential ingredients Arafat, with disastrous consequences, could not provide: a political vision and rational organization and practice.

In the summer of 1969 I met Habash and Arafat separately, in the western hills of Jordan, where the various guerilla groups had been encamped after the 1967 war. They could not have been more different – in appearance, personality, education, and intellectual orientation. Habash was a medical doctor in his early forties, a secular Arab nationalist with a Marxist orientation, educated at the American University of Beirut, fluent in English, and a charismatic public speaker. He was a perfect example of the educated, modern, post-World War II Palestinian intellectual. We talked for hours about different subjects, about the current dangerous situation in Jordan, intra-Palestinian factional differences, U.S. policy, and the program of the newly created PFLP. Joining us at various points in the discussion were young men and women in khaki uniform, some of whom had recently crossed the river to join the PFLP. I came back convinced that a revolutionary Palestinian movement had emerged, one capable of mobilizing the great human and material potential of the Palestinians and probably of sparking a radical movement across the Arab world.

Arafat was in his late thirties, an architectural engineering graduate of Cairo University and a former successful contractor in Kuwait with strong ties to the Muslim Brothers. He met me warmly, speaking, to my surprise, with an Egyptian dialect. The meeting lasted

about an hour during which he amiably spoke on several subjects, giving only vague answers to the many questions I addressed to him. In the years that followed I came to know him quite well, well enough, at any rate, to allow me to make some observations about his style of leadership and its effect on the outcome of Palestinian struggle.

If Habash can be described as a representative of the modern Palestinian intellectual-activist, Arafat would be the representative of the opposite model. In many ways, he is a perfect example of the Arab (neo)patriarchal personality, one which is not quite traditional, nor fully modern. As a leader, Arafat reflected all the characteristics of the traditional father: expertise at ceremonial sociability, incompetence at dealing with technical and theoretical issues, inability to delegate power, and the consistent arrogation to himself of functions he is not qualified to handle. This accounts for his grave failure in mobilizing Palestinian talent and for the reduction early on of the PLO to an ineffective bureaucratic structure. In all his appointments, considerations of personal loyalty and blind obedience are more important than the qualities of competence and effectiveness. This is partly why the PLO, like most Arab patriarchal regimes, could not face up to Israel's modern instrumental rationality. In the modern world, patriarchy, as a social system, is ultimately dysfunctional; the only system more dysfunctional than patriarchy is neopatriarchy.

In retrospect, it is difficult to understand not only how Mr. Arafat could have survived all the mistakes he kept committing, but how he was never able to learn from these mistakes – tragic mistakes, as for example, the horrifying way in which the lives of thousands of young men and women were for years repeatedly sacrificed in the same so-called commando operations against Israel that almost invariably ended in disaster, making it easier for the Israelis to portray the Palestinian guerrillas as terrorists.

THE PALESTINIANS: FIFTY YEARS LATER

IV

The Madrid peace process initiated in 1991 produced what Arafat had dreaded most: the emergence of an alternative Palestinian leadership. The distinguished Palestinian negotiating team headed by Dr. Haider Abdel Shafi projected an image of Palestinians as rational, practical, and articulate, in sharp contrast with the image of Arafat and his group. He had every reason to fear Abdel Shafi, a respected physician, who looked like Nelson Mandela, with an impeccable political record and a long history of struggle, and who would have probably played a leadership role in Palestine had he been allowed to remain in the public eye. But Arafat's secret Oslo agreement not only enabled him to pull the rug out from under Abdel Shafi and his team, but to put himself firmly back in the saddle. Duly elected chairman of the Palestinian Authority in 1995, he emerged more powerful than ever. Now formally recognized by the international community as the democratically elected spokesman of the Palestinian people, he had the power to agree to any condition acceptable to Israel, and to validate any final settlement simply by affixing his signature to it.

In the eyes of many Palestinians, Mr. Arafat today represents the gravest threat to the cohesiveness, security, and national well-being of the Palestinian people.

But Mr. Arafat will not last forever. In the next few years, as the older Palestinian generation dies out and the younger generation takes over, fundamental changes are likely to take place in the political organization and goals of the Palestinian people in regard to action within Israel itself, within the West Bank and Gaza, and within the Palestinian diaspora.

What form will these changes take in each of the three arenas of future Palestinian action?

Within Israel, where political action will focus more and more on equality and civil rights, the younger educated generation entering political life will shed the

traditional ethnic and religious ties that were carefully cultivated by the Israeli administration since 1948 to divide the Palestinians, and begin to participate fully in Israeli political life as Israeli citizens with equal rights. As Palestinians become more integrated politically and economically, they will be in a position not only to influence significantly the outcome of national elections, but also to have an input in political decision-making. As a distinct political force, they will be able to enhance their effectiveness by forging alliances with the progressive and secular forces in Israel. There is little doubt that a prosperous, cohesive Palestinian community in Israel, as it acquires political power commensurate with its size, will bolster Palestinian identity and transform the Palestinians in Israel into important players in Palestinian and Arab affairs.

In the West Bank and Gaza, the failure of the peace process has revealed Israel's structural inability to accept a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict based on the UN resolutions and international consensus. The reason for this is that both the UN resolutions and the international consensus are predicated on the *partition* of Palestine. Both the former Rabin Labor government and the present Netanyahu Likud government sought to get around a partition solution by offering different formulas based instead on separation. While Rabin's formula was based on a streamlined version of the South African bantustan model with limited self-rule in the guise of a Palestinian state, Netanyahu's plan is based on an antiquated apartheid model, with local autonomy but without even a vestige of statehood. Thus, the disagreement between Labor and Likud is not over substance, as the mainstream media maintain, for both reject partition, but over a politically correct way of segregating the Palestinians within a framework that will preserve Israel's hegemony over all of Palestine.

If this is a correct description of the situation, and I think it is, then the central question is, what action can the Palestinians take in dealing with it?

THE PALESTINIANS: FIFTY YEARS LATER

The Palestinians have three options: accepting the status quo, opposing the status quo, or engaging in long-term struggle against it.

The first option, which some Palestinians consider the most realistic option, is based on the belief that the Oslo peace process offers the best chance to establish a foothold in Palestine, which could be transformed into a political entity that could in time become a state. This view bases itself on the experience of decolonization, particularly Tunisia's, where acceptance of limited autonomy eventually led to independence, the dismantling of the *colons* settlements, and the eventual repatriation of the *colons* themselves. This view ignores the fact that in Palestine radically different conditions obtain, most significantly, the fact that there is no mother country to which the Jewish settlers may one day be repatriated, and that the settlements in time will only continue to increase and expand.

The second option is *reformist* opposition to the existing regime in the West Bank and Gaza. Its goal would be to reform the Palestinian Authority and expand Palestinian autonomy, along the lines being attempted today by various groups and organizations in Palestinian civil society. In this reformist movement, the Palestinian Legislative Council, or at least certain members and groupings within it, could play an important role, firstly, protecting those democratic structures that still exist in Palestinian political life, and, secondly, preparing, when the time comes, for the orderly transition of power, and the replacement of the present patriarchal regime with a democratic one.

The third and probably most important option – and the one likely to be central in the next phase – is long-term national struggle to end Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, restore Arab and Muslim Jerusalem, dismantle the Jewish settlements, and establish an independent Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel.

What form would the struggle option take?

It would claim the right to all legitimate forms of struggle, from non-violent forms of resistance to classical forms of armed struggle. From a political point of view, however, non-violent struggle is probably the more effective one in the long run. Yet, if the present conditions of repression and humiliation continue, wide-scale violence could prove to be the more likely option. Opting for national struggle is bound to enhance uncontrollable individual acts of self-sacrifice, the ultimate power of the powerless.

Popular resistance, which is likely to bring back the *intifāda*, will simultaneously lead to building alliances and grassroots organizations, like the ones that emerged spontaneously in the early days of the original *intifāda* (which was snuffed out by the PLO leadership in Tunis). If this succeeds by the turn of the century, this new post-patriarchal liberation struggle will regain the human face of the first *intifāda* and win the support of progressive forces the world over, including the support of progressive Jewish forces in Israel and the United States.

In the next phase of struggle, a heavy responsibility will fall upon the shoulders of the diaspora Palestinians, the largest group of Palestinians. This group will have to carry out the task of putting together the financial and administrative structures necessary for extending all kinds of support to the Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, and in the diaspora as well, in economic aid, educational and social assistance, and broad political support.

Today, as Meron Benvenisti reminds us, the population in the area of mandatory Palestine is 8.2 million, of whom 4.8 million are Jews and 3.4 million are Palestinians; that is, despite massive Jewish emigration since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Palestinians are more than 40 percent of the total population.⁹ Within the next 10 to 15 years, it is quite likely that the proportion of Palestinians to Jews will equal or even exceed the 50 percent mark. The present confrontation between the two communities, alternating as it has been

⁹Meron Benvenisti, *Haaretz*, March 26, 1998.

THE PALESTINIANS: FIFTY YEARS LATER

over the past decades between violence and the search for a political solution, will necessarily shift to different grounds, to *demography* and *culture*. Thus, if in the next decade or so the Palestinians manage to transcend their present difficulties and succeed in building an educated, healthy, prosperous, and cohesive society in Palestine intimately linked to the Palestinian diaspora, the present balance of power will be transformed by becoming irrelevant. This is why, for the Palestinians, the strategy and the means of struggle are bound to change, with violence receding to the background and the social and economic process becoming primary.

Because of its human and financial resources, the Palestinian American community could play a large part in the transformation of Palestinian society at home and abroad. But to qualify, it must first prove itself capable as a community of building an institutional framework that will assure viable, systematic cooperation among the various existing groups and organizations. This will require a break with the past and the creation of new ways of thinking and organizing. If successful, the Palestinian American community will provide the catalyst that could bring together the larger Arab and Muslim communities in America and build a powerful, functioning Palestinian-Arab-Muslim coalition.

To be successful, this effort must not try to enforce total unity by creating yet another all-embracing Arab American organization. The practical challenge facing Palestinian Americans in the transitional stage is to discard the rhetoric of unity and find the proper means to accommodate difference and plurality within their community. If the Palestinians in the United States can provide a workable democratic model for making collective decisions and engaging in sustained cooperative action, they may supply the needed integrative model for the Arabs and Muslims in America and elsewhere in the diaspora.

Undoubtedly, the emergence in the United States of a cohesive and cooperating Palestinian-Arab-Muslim community will usher in a new era for effective political

action on a national scale. American citizens of Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim background organizing in support of a just and lasting solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, would not only allow them to exercise their constitutional rights as Americans, but also to influence a dangerously biased American policy in the Middle East. Such a role would help restore a badly needed direction and balance to U.S. foreign policy.

V

In Jaffa, one of my favorite places as a small boy, was the city's ancient harbor. I visited the harbor when I went back in the fall of 1993. The fall is the loveliest season of the year in Jaffa, when the perfume of the orange blossoms fills the air, the silvery-blue sea is calm, and the western breeze soft and caressing. But standing where I often stood so many years ago, I felt only the bitterness and anger all Palestinians feel when they go back to where they were born and where their grandparents were born and spent their lives before becoming refugees. As I stood there I could hear people speaking Russian, probably recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union. They were full citizens in my country, and I was there only on a limited Israeli tourist visa.

I try to remind myself of what sustained all Palestinian refugees over the long years of exile: this land is not a memory, it is not lost, it is out there where it can be seen and touched, a patrimony that can never be given up nor taken away.

Will the Palestinians be the Jews of the 21st century? Perhaps, but they will not be the Zionists of the 21st century, the oppressors of another people.

One wonders, how does Israel plan to deal with the Palestinians in the coming century?

Will it indefinitely keep the over one million Palestinian citizens in Israel (some 20 percent of the population) unequal, second class citizens, deprived of

THE PALESTINIANS: FIFTY YEARS LATER

basic civil and political rights?

Will it forever keep the two million Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza unfree subjects of a refurbished bantustan or under a reconstructed apartheid system?

Will it always deny the three million diaspora Palestinians the right to return and the right to self-determination?

How long will a 19th century colonial project of settlement and dispossession survive in a 21st century world?

What will Israel do when the strategic balance in the region shifts, as it is bound to do, and when the U.S. engagement in the Middle East begins to abate, as it inevitably will?

Netanyahu cynically tells the world that he is ready to negotiate a full peace with the Palestinians, while at the same time he declares that united Jerusalem will forever be Israel's capital, that most of the West Bank and Gaza will always remain under Israeli rule, and that the Jewish settlements will never be dismantled but will continue to increase and expand.

The Palestinians will have peace and reconciliation with Israel when Israel complies with the international consensus, agrees to implement the UN resolutions on Palestine, abides by international law, and lives up to its own commitments.

The Jaffa notables, who in that first spring of refuge appealed to the United States to convince the Jewish authorities to allow them to go back to their homes, were fully expecting to return to Jaffa in time to irrigate their citrus trees. Most of the tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees were equally certain that they would return to their homes with the end of hostilities.

This did not happen. No one was allowed to go back home.

My own grandfather, who had taken refuge in Beirut with the rest of my family, kept his suitcase packed and his house keys in his pocket as he waited for the day he would go back. He and my grandmother died without ever seeing Palestine again. Now, 50 years later, most

Palestinian grandparents are dead, without ever seeing Palestine again.

But their grandchildren and great grandchildren have taken their place; they are now waiting and preparing for the day when they will go home. You hear them say: if the Jews could wait two thousand years to claim a land they never saw, the Palestinians can wait another five, 10, 20, 50 years, but they will return; and they will return not as thieves in the night, but as legal owners of a land they know and love and have never abandoned.

Does this mean that there can be no peaceful solution to the conflict? Does the only solution lie in the reversal of what happened over the last 50 years and the destruction of Israel?

No, the clock cannot be put back, the past cannot be redeemed, Israel's destruction cannot be the goal.

The conflict's real resolution cannot be a zero-sum outcome, but only a political compromise, the fair partition of the land of Palestine. The legitimate struggle of the Palestinians will seek such a solution because it is the only attainable one, a solution based on justice, international law, and the imperative need for mutual accommodation and survival.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS BY THE CENTER*

PROCEEDINGS-\$7.50 each (except where noted)

Proceedings from Center symposiums/conferences

The International Role in the Peace Process, May 1998 **NEW**

After Oslo: Israel's Plans in the Middle East, February 1998

Oslo's Final Status and the Future of the Middle East, August 1997

Honest Broker? U.S. Policy and the Middle East Peace Process, April 1997

Beyond Rhetoric: Perspectives on a Negotiated Settlement in Palestine, Part One, June 1996, Part Two, August 1996 (\$9.95)

Palestinian Elections and the Future of Palestine, March 1996 (\$4.95)

INFORMATION PAPERS-\$4.95 each

Topic-specific studies commissioned by the Center

June 5, 1967: A Retrospective View, May 1997

The Palestinian Refugees and the Right of Return, August 1996

Palestinian Losses in 1948: The Quest for Precision, August 1996

Water and War in the Middle East: The Hydraulic Parameters of Conflict, July 1996

Jewish Settlements, Palestinian Rights, and Peace, January 1996

SPECIAL REPORTS-\$2.95 each

The View from East of the Jordan, Winter 1998

The Changing Face of Human Rights Activism in Israel and Palestine, Fall 1997

The Politics of Placelessness, Winter 1997

Redefining Zionism: Rebuilding the Ghetto Walls, Winter 1996

Netanyahu's Peace, Fall 1996

An Arab Perspective of the Anti-Terrorism Summit, Spring 1996

*For a complete list of Center publications contact (202) 338-1290