



The Palestine Center 2006 Annual Conference
“The Palestine Question since Oslo: Current Options and Future Strategies”

“Post-Oslo Predicaments and Paradoxes: The View from Within”
Edited Transcript of Remarks by Dr. Lisa Taraki

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It has become commonplace for political analysts, intellectuals, activists and ordinary Palestinians to attribute the malaise of the Palestinian condition to the Oslo process. The loss of national purpose, the collapse of the “Internal Front,” the disintegration of the political center and corruption at all levels are only some of the manifestations of this state of affairs about which great disappointment is expressed. The Palestinians have let themselves and the world down. Their historic leadership presiding over a bankrupt entity at the mercy of Israeli and American *diktats* is unable to protect Palestinians’ basic rights let alone realize any of their legitimate national aspirations.

How do we understand this rapid deterioration of the Palestinian condition, this process of unraveling that continues unabated, complicated more recently by the dangerous confrontation between Hamas and Fateh? We need to understand why, in the space of barely a decade, a society often depicted as highly mobilized and over which a national liberation movement exercised considerable hegemony began to change dramatically and its infrastructure of resistance crumbled.

Analyses of the situation understandably focus on political events and turning points, namely the Oslo accords, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and the marginalization of non-Fateh political forces and organizations among other factors. A great deal has been written already on the reasons for the failure of the Oslo process but not much light has been shed on the social and cultural aspects of this rather rapid process of unraveling. In particular, there is still a lot we need to know about the social, cultural and ideological underpinnings and consequences of this transformation. I wish to focus on this issue in my presentation.

In retrospect, it is clear that by the beginning of the 1990s there were social forces in place ready to embrace the promise of a political settlement. And these social forces did not consist only of Fateh and PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] politician-bureaucrats in the diaspora and the Occupied Palestinian Territory or of expatriate investors and the local bourgeoisie eager to reap the profits of peace. They also consisted of the more influential members of a growing social category that for want of a precise label I shall call the new middle class. This class consisted of the not inconsiderable numbers of leading and middle-ranking political cadres in PLO-affiliated fronts and organizations who were witnessing the steady erosion of their organizations’ popular base with the dissipation of the first *intifada*. Even before the establishment of the PA, they found themselves increasingly marginalized by Fateh, robbed of the familiar routines of organizing, mobilizing and politicking which had been their bread-and-butter for more than a decade. These cadres were augmented by the increasing numbers of university-educated Palestinians, themselves products of the “state-building” project of the PLO through its support of higher education institutions in the West Bank and Gaza and scholarships abroad.

What is crucial here is that a new generation of educated Palestinians came of age in the early 1990s; they had matured in the national movement through their experience in mass organizations, political parties, Israeli prisons and the student movement in local universities and colleges. But at this juncture in their lives, they found themselves facing the responsibilities of family, career and the future of their children. With de-mobilization and de-radicalization launched by the Oslo process underway, the members of the new urban middle class—many of whom were from very recent peasant pasts—were amenable to the growing impulse towards what we may call societal “normalization.” In fact, their intellectuals and other influential spokespersons were its principal agents and among its more enthusiastic promoters. In addition to structural and institutional features, societal normalization entailed the cultivation of new sensibilities, dispositions, values and practices in many areas of life, from politics to work to education to everyday discourse.

Briefly, the new ethos includes the naturalization and legitimation of social disparities and expressions of rank and hierarchy; the emergence of a de-radicalized and de-nationalized form of politics practiced by NGOs and elements within the private sector and the proto-state bureaucracy; the collapse of the national consensus (*al-ijma' al-watani* including the much vaunted *thawabit*); the pursuit of global commodities linked with social distinction, the most important of which is education; and new forms of cultural expression devaluing the hegemonic discourse of the liberation movement of the 1970s and 1980s.

Before I explore some of these issues, I should like to stress that an explanation of the disposition and outlook of the middle class cannot be sought at the local level alone. I believe that these trends are taking hold in Palestine at a time when in the Arab world as a whole middle class individuals are faced with the various consequences of the failure of the state to execute its national project. Under growing pressures from global financial institutions and their agencies, the state has withdrawn subsidies and guaranteed employment for university graduates and has failed to deliver quality education and health care, among many other vital services. This has created a situation where the middle class finds itself forced to deploy private strategies for survival and social mobility, pursuing the kinds of agendas and life projects that will increase its members' cultural and material capital and enable them to compete in the increasingly globalized market.

Palestinian middle class sensibilities are part and parcel of this trans-Arab urban middle class ethos. In fact, increasing exposure through satellite television, electronic communication and regional travel (despite the difficulties) means that the more affluent strata of the Palestinian middle class are partaking of the culture of the Arab middle classes and through their practices and pursuits providing a model for the less privileged but aspiring sections of this class at home. I do not have time to go into the material expressions of this phenomenon, but one of the starker social realities in Palestine today is the preoccupation of the educated middle class with the symbols and markers of distinction and the determined distancing from a less distinguished past and from those less fortunate than oneself. I would only stress here that this is an issue fraught with contradictions and tensions for individuals whose lives began in rural, refugee and poor urban families.

To return to our exploration of the post-Oslo ethos, I have time only to touch on a few of its aspects focusing on some of the deep contradictions inherent in this situation. Let us begin by the practice of politics. Upon the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, there was a realignment of the political field into several arenas: that of official PA politics and diplomacy; factional politics including Islamist politics; and a new arena that of a new “normal” politics dominated by middle class professionals, former members of parties and mass organizations and professionals. Since then and under the banner of the new global slogans such as advocacy, good governance, development and democratic rule, middle class individuals—many of them veterans of political parties and mass movements—have recast themselves as “the voice of civil society” and have begun to organize themselves in new formations and lobbies. It should be noted briefly that this new political arena is the only one in which women have gained visibility through the network of women's NGOs working on issues of legal reform, protection of women from violence and the many other issues on the women's global agenda as articulated in the activities of UN bodies and other international commissions and forums. It is interesting to note in this regard that some of these organizations started out as arms of political parties in the 1970s and 1980s refashioning themselves in the 1990s into “developmental” or “apolitical” women's NGOs.

Nevertheless, it is ironic that the reform and democratization agenda of “civil society” organizations is executed in an atmosphere of deep skepticism and cynicism about the efficacy of political work as a whole. Large sections of the population—perhaps with the exception of Hamas’s hard core supporters—look upon politics, both old and new, with suspicion. This is reflected in the brisk circulation and continual renewal of political satire and jokes, rumors and stories of corruption, abuse of power, the imagined or real lavish lifestyles of the political elite and the NGO-ization of public life. I would venture to say that the cynicism about the new politics practiced by NGOs is shared by its practitioners as well, even as they pursue their busy schedule of workshops, international conferences and training sessions. One would be tempted to say that NGO work has become a way to make a living by a segment of the educated urban middle class not a means for pursuing an agenda for social and political reform that its proponents are passionate about.

Before leaving this subject, I think it is important to note that the NGO phenomenon has to be put into perspective. The size of the NGO “population” does not really warrant the prominence accorded to NGOs both by the media and by the critical public. Nevertheless, NGOs have been the relatively more visible champions of the agenda of the new middle class in terms of lifestyles, values and aspirations. But they are not alone. Their counterparts can be found in the upper echelons of both the private and public sectors. They all rub shoulders at the private school PTA meetings, the gym, the democracy workshop and at international conferences.

Another feature of politics as practiced in Palestine is the demonstrated effectiveness of co-optation, particularly of middle-level cadres and leaders of the various near-defunct or struggling political fronts, parties and mass organizations of the pre-Oslo era. Faced with the erosion of their political base after the first *intifada*, they have pursued different avenues of employment and personal advancement. Aside from absorption into the private and NGO sectors, many were co-opted into the Palestinian Authority system where we witness a hierarchical bureaucratic structure top-heavy with posts of varying prestige, influence and income: advisor, minister, assistant minister, general director, director A, director B and a plethora of other titles and posts. The granting of these posts not only provides income to these individuals in recognition of their “service to the cause,” it has served to neutralize many potential critics and opponents. In the face of this nepotistic system, it is no wonder that resignation and cynicism are so rampant in Palestinian society. It is one of the ironies of the situation that many of the co-opted individuals, in effect reduced to ineffectual functionaries, can often be fierce critics of the very system that sustains them. They can distance themselves from this system in newspaper articles, conference presentations, workshop interventions and personal conversation, yet they are active agents in its reproduction.

I have tried to show in this necessarily short presentation that the Palestinian predicament today entails living with many contradictions and paradoxes, especially on the part of the political and intellectual elite—those who have played an important part in creating the new political and cultural hegemonies. It would be unfair to claim that members of this group are unaware of the contradiction between state building and “development” (a favorite term in the new discourse) and a deepening occupation or that they are not grappling with the serious questions raised by the electoral victory of Hamas concerning diplomacy versus resistance. Indeed, many members of the middle class struggle to balance their desire for “normalcy” and the drive for social mobility with the perceived duty not to slide into political complacency or to abandon the national cause.

It may be appropriate to insert a note here on the shifting significations and expressions of “resistance,” “national duty” and “steadfastness.” We will recall that during the first *intifada*, the national movement endorsed a culture of austerity. Only particular forms of artistic expression were permitted, largely infused with a peasant ethos and presented as “folklore.” Few dared to put forth alternative forms. But hardly a decade later, new ideas began to be articulated and intellectuals and other culture workers began to put forth new conceptions of “culture,” of the place of art in resistance and of the meaning of steadfastness (*sumoud*). These ideas have been highly attractive to the middle class as they serve as an affirmation of their life projects, their way of life and their newly-acquired sensibilities.

However, it remains to be said that middle-class sensibilities are not embraced as enthusiastically by all members of society. Intellectuals, professionals and other articulate members of the new middle class find that the new definitions are continuously in need of justification, especially as it pertains to their relation to the continuing national struggle. A new discourse of resistance is emerging with different implications for social practices and conduct, both public and private.

After all I have said I would like to note that I do not believe that the national cause is dead, lost or forgotten. The sheer enormity of the facts on the ground—the deepening Israeli grip on the land and the unwillingness of Israel and its powerful patrons to redress the profound injustice done to Palestinians—ensure that history will throw up a new generation of social and political actors able to carry the struggle forward. The current configuration of social and political forces is fragile and fluid in the extreme with no prospect, either political or economic, for stability. The grip of the political elite of today is not eternal. Just as the PLO (and later Hamas) put new actors onto the political stage to challenge the traditional urban leadership, so it can be expected that a new generation of activists will be waiting for their moment to make history.

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