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Palestinian Politics in Crisis: A Trip Report

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Briefing by Dr. Ziad Asali, President, American Task Force for Palestine, sponsored by ATFP and FMEP

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Simply stated, crossing the bridge from Jordan to the West Bank is a hassle. However, it is also an orderly juncture over an established state border with nothing temporary about it. Traversing it gives the traveler a sense of his powerlessness in the dominant military presence of the officials of the State. The July sun scorches the lowest spot on earth and the forbidding arid and naked landscape makes you wonder how strange the Palestinians and Israelis must seem to others: Are these people serious in fighting over this barren land? The thought needs to be dismissed promptly because the answer is not in geography or topography but in history, theology, mythology and the human psyche. And the land does get better after you drive up the mountains. Rows of settlement houses dot the climb to Jerusalem, and the solid stretches of the affluent houses of Ma'ale Adumim are meant to give a sense of permanence and dominance, and they do.

Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of my childhood, is a disorderly island of unmaintained fading grandeur but with an authentic grounding in a reality I know and understand. Much of the city has changed but it is still the same. A mixture of culture and history takes form in houses, buildings, roads, alleys and shops that have changed hands as well as businesses, but it all remains familiar to me. People go about their business as if all is normal. Graffiti, crude and omnipresent, is splashed all over with political messages and names of 'martyrs and brigades.' The Wall, comprised of twenty-five foot tall slabs of concrete crudely winds its way around Abu Dis, Al Quds university campus, the road to Bethlehem, and the other road to Ramallah. It is an amazing medieval implement surrounding a city in the twenty first century and separating neighbors and families. Jerusalem, outside the Arab Jerusalem of old, is a

modern populous metropolis, with monuments, grand structures as well as ordinary buildings, spread about so many hills. This facet of the city is Jewish, established and permanent as if it has been there for centuries, unquestionably Jewish.

If one follows the wide road to Ramallah after the checkpoint there is the resumption of physical chaos. One half of the asphalt on the left hand is dug out leaving one lane for both directions of traffic. Long slabs of concrete lay to the side waiting to be erected as a portion of the Wall, which will cut through the median of this road. The shops on either side of this road are to be separated by a wall twenty-five foot tall with one lane remaining on the right side and none on the left. Traveling from one shop to the other right across the road will take fifteen minutes by car should this wall be erected. Shops would be left with no access and no customers.

Ramallah is a vibrant, bustling city, less clean than it used to be but much larger. Tall apartment buildings, many nice homes, and winding streets scattered across many mountains point the way to the future expansion of its phenomenal growth. Ministries and government department offices are dispersed all over the city. There is no room for such offices in Jerusalem, the future capital of Palestine. The Muqata'a, the office of Mr. Arafat, seems like a preserved demolished antiquity rather than a functional office where power is held and exercised.

The checkpoints are an exercise in humiliation and power. Israeli youth, with skin of all colors, hold their guns on the ready as they read your papers and ask inane questions.

The Palestinian people hold themselves in stoic dignity. They give the impression that they are leading their life normally under the most abnormal circumstances. They seem to take in stride a life of checkpoints, permits, restrictions, searches, air raids, and gunfire, personal physical insecurity and an uncertain hold on private property that is well documented and authenticated. The lawlessness of the occupation is aggravated by the emergence of gangs, thieves and robbers. It is made all the more bitter by the indifference of Palestinian public officials, some of whom are suspected not just of failure to protect and uphold the law, but also of being part of a network of corruption and gangsterism. One day while in Ramallah we were told the authorities removed five hundred stolen cars from the streets that day which made the traffic smoother. That left twenty five hundred to go. It seems that stealing cars is a flourishing joint venture between Palestinian and Israeli gangs. The law usually looks the other way.

What holds the Palestinian society together, under this extreme destructive constellation of forces, is a sense of decency and duty, the legacy of a centuries' old established social order. It is only this, which defines right from wrong, and decency from thuggery and unfairness. Without this cultural residue, and the challenge to face and beat down the occupation, it is hard to see how this society would have managed to hold together and survive. It has, however, frayed at the edges. When asked what they wanted many replied 'relief,' relief from the occupation that is. Their personal finances are mostly in shambles, their savings exhausted, and their living standard has plummeted. The urban refinements, and holding out in front of your peers, makes for a sense of dignity clashing with limited means.

Two thirds of the Palestinian economy is subsidized by foreign aid in one form or the other. In the Gaza district two thirds of the population lives on less than two dollars a day according to the World Bank. NGOs are a major source of employment with an uneven record of performance, some do outstanding work, and others are criticized for lack of effectiveness and for fostering dependency.

During our stay, my wife and I visited several cities and refugee camps, talked to leading political figures, businessmen and civil society activists as well as journalists and intellectual leaders. We also visited a couple of university campuses and major business outfits. I tried especially to get an insight into the education and preparation of the young generation for life after occupation. Specifically I tried to see what is being done to achieve an independent economy, free of subsidy and a mentality of dependence and entitlement. Two specific sectors were of interest to me as possible avenues for economic independence and prosperity: tourism and information technology.

The political discussions involved several one-on-one meetings with leaders as well as round table discussions with established think tanks and groups. The Young Turks, already in positions of leadership were especially interesting. Their toughened understanding of their country's realities and their shedding of slogans and ideological mantras was particularly refreshing. This group is ready to play its part and to prepare to take over responsibly. The United States needs to know these young leaders and they need to know the United States.

The political house of Palestine is not merely divided. It is fragmented and needs to be built anew. The fault lines between the "Tunisians" and the locals, the old guards and the Young Turks, the corrupt establishment and the reformers, Fatah and everyone else, the ideologues and pragmatists have all been bridged by one man, Yaser Arafat. Arafat has stood for four decades at the center of Palestinian politics. A leader that cajoled, defeated, silenced, intimidated, outmaneuvered and outlasted all competitors to become a legend and a symbol. He is the founder of modern Palestine. Credit for this achievement is forever due to him. No governance or position can be a greater accomplishment than this and it should suffice. He is a master tactician who played the role of the ultimate victim thus capturing the essence of the Palestinian psyche as he claimed a proprietor hold on it. And all others yielded as men do to legends. On his entry to Palestine after the Oslo agreement the Palestinians lifted him and his car as he crossed the bridge from Jordan. He has since held all the strings of power and to him is owed all the credit and blame for the decisions made on behalf of the Palestinians and the consequences of those decisions. As the quality of life deteriorated relentlessly after the second Intifada, with mounting sacrifices endured courageously and honorably by the people who expected deliverance from an oppressive occupation, the unspoken questions started being asked in private, tentatively and defensively in the beginning but ultimately more publicly, assertively, and courageously. Questions arose. Who is responsible for the strategic string of defeats from Black September in Jordan in 1970, to the catastrophic experience and eviction from Lebanon in 1982? Who is to blame for the support of Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War and thereby answers for the attendant expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Kuwait in 1991? Who facilitated the disproportionate power for the PLO "Tunisians" after their return to Palestine following the Oslo agreement and then tolerated unabashed corruption? Who is responsible for the mishandling of the negotiations with Clinton and Barak and the heavy-handed treatment of the political opposition as Sharon worked his iron and brutal will on the lives and property of the Palestinian people? Who allowed violence against civilians to continue after its human, moral and political consequences became so tragic and prohibitive? Whose is the failure to communicate with the public about strategy, or

worse, the absence of a strategy?

A lot of these questions would not have been asked by this generation of Palestinians had their prospects for independence under his leadership been within sight, had their fear of defeat and possible historic loss of the dream of a viable state been less real. President Clinton, referring to Arafat's penchant for making decisions only five minutes to midnight, as he accepted Clinton plan fully one year after it was presented to him, wrote that Arafat's watch must be broken. Arafat himself told Prime Minister Qurei last week after their reconciliation that he knows best what the Palestinian people want. If his watch is broken it may be more accurate to say that he knew what they wanted, but what they need now is a leader who understands not only the Palestinian people but also the world around them. A leader who understands the realities of the global power structure and knows how to navigate his way through it. A leader who understands that the only real asset of the Palestinians at this time is their moral and just right to a state of their own. A leader who will categorically reign in all the elements of force in his society and then rightly demand the state of Palestine from the world powers who have pledged to deliver it. A leader who quits giving mixed signals designed to confuse the enemy but resulting in confusing his own people. A leader who tells the truth to his people as to what it means to them to accept UN Resolution 242, what it means to the Right of Return, and to the actual recognition of the existence of the state of Israel and peace with it. A leader who knows how to establish a state, to delegate power and to build accountable and transparent institutions. A leader who abides by the rule of law and accepts the constraints it imposes on the governors and the governed.

The single most striking change in the last several weeks has been the outspoken criticism of Arafat by name, by members of the political establishment, in public. It is possible now to defy the leader in public. Ziad Abu Amr, Gaza MP and a former cabinet minister said: "Yaser Arafat is not concerned with issues of popularity and reform; he cares about control and political survival." Hanan Ashrawi, the well-known MP, said: "We should put this one-man show behind us. Instead of talking about individuals we should at last be talking about institutions and laws." The ex-Speaker of the House, Rafiq Natshe said: "We demand that Arafat carry out promises he has made, or explain why he can't fulfill them." Dr. Ibrahim Hamami, a prominent Palestinian physician, said that Arafat has become a liability to his people: "You treat the Palestinians like a pair of shoes to be worn or kicked outside as the mood strikes. The solution is for you to pack your bags, take your crooked friends and go somewhere else. Get out of here." Mohammad Dahlan, the ex- minister of Interior, a young leader with political aspirations, is quoted as having said that Mr. Arafat "is sitting on the corpses and destruction of the Palestinians at a time when they are desperately in need of a new mentality."

This language, publicly expressed at a time of an insurrection that started in Gaza and is spreading to the West Bank, illustrates the level of descent of the legendary leader to that of a leader forced under pressure to resort to intimidation, and perhaps more, to hold on to his fast-ebbing power. Spreading violence within a Fatah divided between his detractors and supporters; with both sides resorting to abductions, torching buildings, threatening the media and shooting at opposition, is not a climate that a legend can survive. An actual assassination attempt of Nabil Amr, an MP, a former cabinet minister and a Fatah stalwart, that resulted in the amputation of his foreleg is perceived as punishment for his courageous, eloquent, and outspoken criticism of the leadership. In a flagrant and crude show of force over this past weekend a gang of self-declared Arafat supporters fired in the air at a meeting hall where Fatah reformers convened a conference to discuss corruption, and tried to put an end to proceedings.

There is something sad about a seventy-five-year-old man refusing to relinquish power. It is hard for the Western people to understand the phenomenon of one-man rule that plagues the Arab world, but in this case it also must be understood in the context of a fight against occupation, where the leader of Israel has consistently and repeatedly tried to undermine and marginalize Arafat. Rallying around Arafat has become a tool of resistance to occupation. Indeed it is common among Palestinian political opponents to Arafat to say that Sharon keeps propping him up whenever his fortunes sag. Just at the right time, Sharon issues an edict to throw him out, or threaten his life, or send his tanks to poke into his Muqata'a after he reduced most of it to rubble. Indeed, this is one of the most common accusations hurled against Sharon. Israel has failed miserably to allow the Palestinian process to develop in order to have them take care of their own governance.

The question of governance (i.e. Arafat) has become central now because of the upcoming withdrawal from Gaza. The significant thing about this withdrawal is that it is an event in the future that is yet to happen, which means that the Palestinians have a chance to plan for it and get themselves organized. A failed Gaza after the withdrawal, descending into chaos, extremism, or violent confrontations will put an end to the possibility of a West Bank withdrawal in the near future. The extremists in Israel will point to Gaza to explain to the world why Israel should not withdraw from the West Bank. In this case, rather than reacting to a catastrophe or event, the Palestinians can in fact exercise a measure of control over their own destiny by planning seriously for it. It is unfortunate, but true, that there are no Palestinian plans for this withdrawal as I was told unequivocally by one of the most, if not the most, credible Palestinian official. The Arafat reign bodes ill for the people of Gaza in this regard and the insurrection in Gaza needs to be seen in this light. A significant segment of the population and leadership in Gaza see a light at the end of the tunnel in the withdrawal plan and some of them see no constructive role for Arafat in it. They see Arafat negotiating for his own personal freedom and legacy rather than their liberation from occupation and a chance to build a new order. It is not difficult to imagine a link between the reformers, the Young Turks, civic leadership in the West Bank and the insurgents in Gaza to settle for nothing less than a regime change. The neighboring Arab countries which have bet on Arafat, Israel which has consistently helped him out politically by demonizing and threatening him, and the United States, which has declared him persona non grata but negotiated with his proxies, have all to take note.

The Palestinian political fragmentation has resulted from years of a harsh occupation policy of systematic destruction of the security apparatus of the PA, followed by a similar dismantling of the Hamas military operation. Israel, it is to be noted, was much less concerned about

disposing of the political leadership of Hamas than that of the PA. A system of closures, checkpoints and settlement building led to physical separation and economic hardship for the Palestinians. The Palestinian leadership consistently refused to make clear choices to have total control over security in order to leave all options open. The population including the local and young leadership developed a growing sense of the failure of the national strategy. All these factors combined led to a fragmentation of authority and the emergence of city and village warlords accountable to no one. They might volunteer to pay homage to the Rais, or might not, with no great fear of retribution. That is preserved for national figures that raise uncomfortable issues. In the meantime Fatah, the vertebral column of Palestinian politics, has also fractured along many fault lines and its security wings are spread at cross-purposes. Hamas is lying low for fear of Israeli retribution leaving all to guess as where they will strike next. A Palestinian civil war, or more accurately wars, is a matter of time if a drastic change in direction and leadership will not take place in the near future.

What is to be done? An empowered prime minister, with a clear sense of strategy, who would consolidate the whole security apparatus under a competent interior minister, is the urgent answer to avoid disaster. The United States, Israel, the Egyptians and Jordanians must see the obvious benefits to all by achieving this objective. No effort should be spared to bring about this outcome. The first task of such a prime minister, after establishing security, is to shoulder the Palestinian responsibility in making the Gaza withdrawal work and to incorporate it in the Road Map.

An electoral framework, combined with a national referendum on the Road Map, whenever feasible, and at the earliest possible date, should be held. This, rather than the will of one person, would be the source of legitimacy for the leadership.

The Abu Mazen administration fell because of the negligence and tardiness of Mr. Sharon, the careless abandon by the US administration, and the policy of intimidation and reckless personal destruction of Mr. Arafat. Let not this tragedy be repeated. All, or most, players, including the Egyptians who have been playing a constructive role, should roll up their sleeves and work to forge new and reliable partnerships to go back and give life to the Road Map. Better late than never.

Questions and Answers

Question: Why doesn't the U.S. support elections in Palestine?

Answer: The United States, in particular, is concerned, I assume, about first having Arafat again being elected as president. Secondly, about the emergence of a Hamas support for representation and control. These, I think, are the main reasons for the opposition of the United States. Arafat, I think, is probably opposed to it because he's concerned he might not win. He's sitting pretty. He does not need to have another election for himself. He's already been elected once and that was in 1996.

The Israelis are opposed to elections, I think, because of all the above reasons put together, and for the possibility that they really have not made up their mind to have a legitimate partner to talk to on the other side when they're ready to do real business. One answer to all such concerns is to run a Referendum on the Roadmap at the same time to define the political will and parameters of the Palestinian people's position.

Question: Are the Palestinians planning any options should the Gaza withdrawal not take

place?

Answer: This was something that we raised with the Palestinians several months ago repeatedly - in writing and conversation. And we were told, yes, we're doing this and we're doing that. And I know of one non-official and non-governmental effort of a commissioned work by a strategic group that put together some kind of tentative plan. However, the most credible person in the Palestinian hierarchy that I know of said we have no plans whatsoever -- no contingency or otherwise.

Question: With all the corruption that's taken place that we hear of everyday, what should we do?

Answer: This question was raised at the Legislative Council. There was a great deal of outrage about the corruption. It was very blatant and some of the highest officials were involved with shenanigans that involved especially the wall and cement and stuff like that. It was resolved, I want to reassure you, by referring the issue to the Attorney General of Palestine, so we'll wait for the results and see what happens.

Question: Some of the rebels who attacked the officers of the Palestinian Authority in Jenin and security officers have said that they did so because the Palestinian security forces are cooperating with Israelis against perpetrators of Palestinian acts of violence against Israelis. While criminals are running amuck and there's no security whatsoever for Palestinian communities.

But suppose there wasn't this kind of moral dilemma for a Palestinian Authority to cooperate with Israelis, given what the Israelis are doing, suppose that wasn't the case? Would it at all be reasonable to expect the Palestinian security forces to really be effective at all in fighting terrorism when they can't really travel two miles without running into an Israeli checkpoint?

Answer: There's a question of capacity here. Israeli - the first couple years of Intifada has consistently replied to each and every act of violence or provocation or suicide bombing by destroying more and more and more of the official PA security system. So these people were officers forced out of uniform and out of clothes sometimes - underwear actually sometimes. There is a disintegration of the enforcement agencies - all 13 of them. And what happened in places like the one you mentioned, specifically Jenin, is particularly tragic. Because a few Israeli-prison graduates, with the legitimacy of the revolution, have pretty much ganged up together as a group of friends who work for their leader.

Now, there is a 28-year-old man, who is pretty much controlling Jenin, he doesn't read the newspaper. He doesn't care about what happens in Nablus, let alone Ramallah or anywhere else. He torched the governor's mansion - but first took out the pictures of Arafat. That's the extent of loyalty that you have. These people are not subject to any kind of control at this stage of the game because there is no national security apparatus that is effective here. And to put that together, this has to be part of the political understandings that will emerge. It is a very complicated situation. Israel, which has been exceptionally capable of destroying the security apparatus, has not shown any willingness or readiness or seen the wisdom of letting a new security order emerge. And I suspect that this will be part of the negotiations if they ever take place.

Question: What is the significance, if any, of the Yossi Beilin and Abed Rabbo "Geneva Accord" and the "Peoples' Voice" alliance of Ayalon with Sari Nusseibeh at this point? Are

they still significant? And could you also comment on your observations in Israel?

Answer: I don't think in the near future that these peace proposals are going to be playing a central role. I think the main game in Israel now is trying to put together a unity government. It seems likely that this will happen. What is called a peace camp or at least the fringe of the peace camp like Yossi Beilin's, for instance, is not a party to the power sector that is emerging. The difference between the Geneva Accord and the Nusseibeh-Ayalon plan is principally that Ayalon is more credible for the Israelis. The previous head of Shin Beit is not going to sell out the Israeli security. But on the other hand, this plan extracted a higher price from Nusseibeh, who gave up the right of return altogether.

On the other hand, the Geneva Accord was done by the peaceniks on the left, and it was clearer about the substance of the issues. But it does not have much support in Israeli. They stand at 20%. The word Geneva, amongst the Palestinians itself, costs 25% support. If you present to the Palestinian the content of Geneva under another name, it gets greater support, so " Geneva" been partially discredited. But significantly and, more seriously, these plans have stirred the pot. We also should be watching what's happening in the formation of the next Israeli government.

Peace plans have been dismissed often by the Israeli right wing point who say that they should never want to give up anything - one inch- while this war is going on. But I still can say that Sharon, the man who has historically found two answers to any Palestinian problem that he's ever confronted since the age of 16, one was to kill them, the other was to take their land- he has, in fact, been the very same man who just recently decided on withdrawing from Gaza and took political heat in his own party and country for it. I mean, fine, everything can be dismissed as a trick, but this is still a fact. There are groups in Israeli - a lot of people in Israeli - who are opposed to the withdrawal from Gaza for ideological, metaphysical, religious, whatever reasons. And they are significant, and they are significant in numbers. There is going to be a problem for any compromise, even for a Sharon and his credentials to do that.

Question: I'm not trying to absolve Arafat of responsibility. What I want to point out, though, if the Israeli withdraw from Gaza is not supported by a majority of Palestinians because of the conditions of it - sealing the borders, the seaport, the airspace. I mean these are issues that have to be discussed between Israeli and the Palestinians. There's no doubt about it. The U.S. has been sitting - you know where - not doing anything about this whole issue. Arafat is to blame but so is Israelis to blame, so is the U.S. to blame. So we need a new formula. I do think that the roadmap is dead. Have you seen during the trip any new elements in Palestinian strategy? Answer: I think the Palestinians' opinion has not been solicited on the withdrawal from Gaza. The whole thrust of it is that Mr. Sharon said, I'm leaving, good-bye, I have no partner. I don't want to talk to you and don't talk to me and I will do it. And then he gathered up his own forces within Israel to do it. So it's not whether the Palestinians support it or don't support it. But Peres is pushing for it, Shinui is pushing for it. I think that this has irreversible momentum in Israel - they're going to withdraw. Maybe it will take a year.

The question for the Palestinians is how do we plan to run that place after they withdraw, whether they negotiate this thing with us or not is a different question. But there is going to be a reality. There are three options for the Gaza after withdrawal.

One is internal chaos. The second is that extremists take over - non-compromising people. The third is persistent wars and sustained Israeli-Palestinian violence. None of them are appealing and all of them are to be avoided by planning. And the planning has to be done by

the Authority that is in charge now So it's not the question of negotiating the pullout; it's the question of how do you run the place. The other question that I may just briefly say is, you asked whether there were any positive things. There were several positive elements. The young people - the young Turks who are graduates of the prisons of the first Intifada, and have long-standing relations with each other, are not very confident that they can run the place. But these people do not feed themselves the kind of nonsense that you read often in the papers or watch on al-Jazeera all the time. These people know the realities. They know the consequences of words and the consequences of acts committed and they want to save Palestine. They're serious and taking high-sounding positions. Playing for theater is not part of their game anymore. That's very refreshing I think.

Question: Is there any conceivable combination of Palestinian personalities and factions who could go to the Chairman and say the time has come for you to genuinely step aside to go into long overdue and well-earned retirement? And is any such scenario imaginable in the near future?

Answer: There is, and it's not going to happen. Actually one of the saddest comments that you can make is that pretty much everybody tells you the same thing in private discussions. And when they go and visit officially and are in the presence of the legend they melt away.

Question: You know the big problem is occupation and that the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza has no authority. You know they are occupied by the Israelis so we cannot ask them to do a lot of things when they are under occupation. Who refused to elections? The Palestinian Authority asked twice for elections, but Israel said no, it is not the right time, so what can they do? The occupation has to go and then the rest of the problems we can handle by ourselves.

Answer: It is hard to forget about the occupation, let me tell you. It is the central problem. How would you deal with that central problem brings in the leadership and then the other issues we've been talking about. There cannot be a possibility of peace in the Middle East or in the world until the state of Palestine is established alongside Israeli on the borders that we all talk about.

Okay. This is the rough outline of the historic compromise. There cannot be peace. Walls and crazy devices and all things that will delay this will just prolong the pain. What we're talking about is procedures that prolong the pain basically. What has happened in the last few years is just delaying the inevitable. How else can peace be achieved?

The people who talk about the one-state solution expect Mohammed and Shlomo to live lovey-dovey as equals with each other tomorrow and we'll forget about everything that happened. But you have to separate these two peoples geographically for a period of time - 10 years from now or 20 years from now. You know, if they later want to do what Europe has done for the last 50 years, that is fine. But right now you have to separate them in order to keep the peace. The question then is how do you do that? How do you do that with the powers that are here? You have to challenge. You have to challenge the people who are set in their ways who see nothing but evil in the other side and cannot trust the other side no matter what - everything that it says or does is a lie. You have to build on something. But we have now, between the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership - and I make no distinction - a complete and total lack of trust with each other. And that mentality has to be eliminated. We need to have people who are willing to take a little chance on peace on both sides. And certainly this is where this country can play a more constructive role than it has so far.

Question: Two questions - did you, by any chance, have a chance to meet with the prime minister or the president during your time there? And what would you think Bill Clinton would do if he were nominated by Kerry to be the peacemaker, shall we say, his representative there? How would he renew relations with the Palestinian leadership in view of the awkward situation with Arafat?

Answer: I read his book, at least that section about Palestine. I don't know what he'll do. And I don't know whether he'll be given that position, but I think the United States' policy vis-?-vis Palestine is set by an establishment that is not going to show a great deal of difference with the change of administration one way or another. That is my opinion. There is an unfolding of policy that will take place. And in my estimation, I think the Palestinian issue is on the agenda to be resolved within this decade, whether in the next administration or the administration after. The world cannot tolerate this nonsense forever and eventually, the United States will act like a grown-up and assume its global responsibilities and bring these people together and say, look at what Clinton did the last week of his political life over there, this is what the end game looks like and instead of saying, what do you think? The United States is capable of doing that and I think it's eventually going to do that but not now. Let's not fool ourselves.

At this point in time, the U.S. is not going to come to Israel and say, look, this is what you're going to do. This is a process that has to evolve.

Question: I want you to reexamine one of your observations or comments. You said that as far as the situation in Gaza after withdrawal that the only hope for planning has to come from the PA. And I want to offer a suggested alternative and get your opinion on it - maybe it's farfetched. But given that the alternative to planning is chaos or warfare or some kind of disaster, is there no chance that the factions within Gaza can, foreseeing this, be persuaded to get together and start working out a plan, however tentative and however.

Answer: Yes. There is a great fear on the part of many Palestinians in Gaza and in the West Bank that this may end up being Gaza first and Gaza last and put an end to the national dream of the Palestinians. Some people say so what, let's build Gaza. There is some thinking in Gaza that the Palestinian Authority is a creature of the Oslo Agreement. It was formed to manage the occupation after Oslo. It's under the PLO but it is designed to prolong the occupation.

When the Israelis withdraw from Gaza there is, at least, the possibility in theory that this will be a sovereign place. It will not be under occupation so the PA is not legally authorized to deal with it. And let us come up with a new entity and start afresh and get through all the corruption all that kind of thinking. There are some serious people who are pushing for that direction. In my opinion it's not going to fly, precisely because a new political entity, separated completely from the West Bank, flies against the whole dream of a Palestinian Nation and Palestinian State. The other, more likely, option would be a cleaned-up Palestinian Authority that would deal with these issues seriously in serious coordination with the people in Gaza.

They have to tolerate criticism. What is really at the core of this is that there is no tolerance of criticism or dissent or anything. Let's listen to serious various options. There is no way that the Palestinian people, after all the sacrifices, all these decades, will accept the possibility of not having a state. If this is not achieved, it will lead to a catastrophe for the rest of the world.

Question: I've been working with some Palestinians over there and over here, too, on non-

violence. And there's a plan to hold a conference in about six months or so, probably in Bethlehem, to try to come up with a long-term strategy on a non-violence grassroots kind of thing with religious leaders and secular leaders and so on. Do you think something like that could work? Do you think it would have any effect on the Palestinian Authority and, perhaps, even Sharon's government if it was really systematic and comprehensive?

Answer: I think the more voices that speak for peace and tolerance and reconciliation globally, the better off we are. The political reality, however, is that there has to be a political force to back up any kind of a position. And in this conflict pressure has to be applied on governments everywhere to mend their policies. In the United States there has to be a more serious push by the people to say, look, this problem has gone for too long and it's a problem for us. So let's get to it. That would be useful. Now it's fine and symbolic to have interfaith in Bethlehem, and I know something else is brewing in Ramallah for this month. These are good things but I think we should put them in the right perspective.

Question: It seems like it's unrealistic and naive to ask a question . . . I know the interfaith non-violence movement is not big on grassroots and it has no potency in social change but what about the Palestinian poets and visionaries. Is there any alternative for civic resistance, which is different from interfaith negotiations, that have no grassroots connection? Where is the role of civic resistance? Where is the Palestinian Mandela?

Answer: Well, there are voices and they are not very loud. There is probably a reflection of the accumulated legacy of authoritarian governance in the Arab world that does not tolerate dissent. The authority is defined by an elite structure. And the people at the top have exceptional powers. They are very allergic to criticism. If you voice the opposing opinions and approaches that are remotely saying, you know, you guys are doing things wrong, then there is a penalty involved. And I think this is part of the problem right now in Palestine. I think there is a resistance to making other voices heard.

Mind you, a great deal of the criticism against corruption is itself made by corrupt people, okay. This is part of the equation. Many of these people live in these gigantic houses ostensibly benefiting from their political experience. But the fact is, if there are people who are suspect individually, there must be room for criticism and opposition. . . Question: As you know there's been no shortage of voices in the Congress explicitly critical of Arafat and critical of corruption in the Palestinian Authority. As we do advocacy, we are often pressed on the issue of why aren't you advocating changes in the Palestinian leadership? And I'm asking what might be suggestions of constructive things that might be said or done by the U.S. government to help bring about positive change in Palestinian leadership?

Answer: They might start up by paying some attention to the United Nation's resolutions that they so courageously uphold elsewhere. They might think of leveling criticisms at violations that are flagrant and obvious for all to see that are exercised by Israeli day in and day out because the routine death of a few Palestinians don't make the news. They're not even in the 17th page. So the Congress should value human life it seems to me - all human life, everywhere. And the Congress should look seriously at the economic deprivation that the Palestinians are exposed to by direct policies of Israeli occupation, closure and checkpoints. The per capita income of two dollars a day per person in Gaza and the malnutrition and anemia in children is not Arafat's fault or any Palestinian's remote fault; this is the result of policies exercised by an occupying power. The most delicate thing about standing here and saying that we must have reform in the Palestinian Authority is that you expose yourself to the charge that you are supporting all of these enemies of the Palestinian people who have

nothing to say about it except that the leadership is bad. The central sin, the original sin is the occupation. What we criticize the people for is how are you dealing with it? How are you having a strategy that can actually get rid of it other than making pronouncements and going to the Arab League? Question: You said that there will be a plan to solve this conflict in this decade. Yet you mentioned groups of pressure in the U.S., whether it's the Evangelicals or the pro-Israeli lobbies. What do you see would be the trigger for a change in U.S. policy in this conflict and a more balanced kind of approach to the whole problem?

Asali: One of the positive things about the situation in Palestine and Israel is that people are unhappy everywhere. They can't stand it - to different degrees. Your degree of tolerance, if you really live on two dollars a day, is different from your losing your computer business. But, nevertheless, the Israelis are not happy and the Palestinians are not happy and the situation is flux and unstable. And if anybody can come up with a solution, other than a two-state solution that's compatible with peace, please come and show us how can it work. Since it is the solution that has been agreed upon internationally, this is where I go back to the Roadmap. The Palestinians in my opinion should hold onto the Roadmap with hands and feet and toes and stick their tongue in supporting - attaching themselves to the roadmap. This is international legality translated and updated The Arab 22 governments support the same. The Palestinians have supported it officially. And what it does call for a Palestinian state. The Roadmap is defective, but it does call for Palestinian state. So we should be telling people just to wake up and hold onto this and don't dismiss it. The fact that it has been bludgeoned by several forces, for whatever reason, does not mean that the Palestinians can or should give up on it.

A few statistics may be of help here - 70% of the American public is in support of a Palestinian state, according to polls. Interestingly, 70% of Jewish Americans also support a Palestinian state. I suspect that the Palestinians probably support it more than 70% over there and, depending on whomever you listen to, the majority of Israelis support the Palestinian state alongside Israel. The degree of pain for the Palestinians and the Israelis, and the ramifications to the international community, with an ever increasing threat of religious war and clash of civilizations demand that we must address the Israeli-Palestinian problem if we want peace. Now, of course, there are ideological and metaphysical people and greedy politicians and non-politicians who would want to win everything because they can. That's what Clinton said. But sometimes you should refrain from doing something because you can. This is why it is exceptionally important not to be racist, not to be anti-Semitic, not to be anti-Arab, not to be anti-religion or anything at this point in time. Anybody who polarizes at this point in time is guilty of making a terrible situation worse. And what we owe ourselves is the honesty and integrity to speak up and criticize our own tribe gently in order to show the rest of the world there are people who have one yardstick and do not accept a double standard. Double standards are everywhere.

So this, I think, is a pragmatic and peaceful way of dealing with situation that is getting worse by the day. And if people think that terrorism is an Islamic monopoly they're wrong - they're dead wrong. And if this trend continues we will see how the world is not going to go on being such a beautiful place, and we won't have the luxury of talking about these issues in conferences like civilized people. So it is a must, and we need to apply pressure on politicians - all of them, in Palestine, Israel and here, and look for mechanisms to resolve this thing.

Question: You mentioned the dilemma of Yasser Arafat, this tenacious stubborn proud man who seems to stand in the way of internal Palestinian reform. Even if there is not a marked

change in American policy in the next administration, Republican or Democrat, even if the current Israeli leadership more or less remains in power for the next three years, is there something the United States could do on a more modest level to help reenergize Palestinian politics to require Arafat to be more accountable? Is the process of alienation, demonization, and humiliation a successful policy or should we reengage with Arafat? And would that oblige him to be more accountable to his own people or would it only strengthen his worst instincts?

Answer: I'll be very subjective from now on because it's my own personal opinion and take it for whatever it's worth. Just anyone of us could express a personal opinion about this. I think that Arafat has to be given an honorable way out of the position that he's in. And I think there is room to create a position as president for him that is like the Israeli president. He would be doing ceremonial things and be called president, but he would not be playing an active role in the running of affairs, like the queen of England. There is a possibility of putting this together. I think this is as reasonable a way out of this as any. I think talk about killing Arafat is so terrible and dishonorable and humiliating not just to him, but also to the Palestinian people and to all the people. This is not the way out. What we need is to have a more practically minded way of doing things - not an ideological way of doing things. What we have in him is a long history of struggle. He really has not been able to transform himself from a revolutionary to a man who just wears a suit and takes care of business like prime ministers or presidents do in other countries. He continued symbolically to wear the clothes of a revolutionary. And he can always be a symbol and a legend, but I think it is probably a good thing to have an honorable way for him to have an exalted position without exercising authority.

Question: I wonder if all this talk about Arafat's corruption by the U.S. and Israel is not so disingenuous, considering that Arafat has always been corrupt. He was corrupt when he was doing nothing, looking the other way, while the land grab was going on throughout the '90s and so on. And now the Israelis have really locked into this idea of saying there is no partner. There's no partner for peace as a ploy, a euphemism to continue this land grab. So I wonder really, in light of this reality, if the two-state solution has not become a doomed fantasy. I'd like your take on that.

Answer: Well, first off, on the corruption issue I think what is of concern now is not just this corruption stuff - it's been there forever and, God willing, it will continue for a long time until things get better. The real acute problem now is the withdrawal from Gaza. This needs management. This does not need more-of-the-same type of approach. There is little doubt in anybody's mind, in serious people's minds, that the Israelis are withdrawing from Gaza.

I read today that some official, it may have been even the Palestinian Authority, said no, this is all a farce and they're lying, they're not going to withdraw. I don't know if they're being disingenuous or misleading or whatever. The Israelis are withdrawing from Gaza - the Israeli political establishment, not just Sharon, is committed for strategic reasons. So we need to have some kind of a Palestinian plan to deal with that. And if the mentality to deal with that is to say this is phony and is not going to happen, then we will end up with the options we were talking about.

Question: You've spoken in general terms about the various forms and manifestations of opposition to the present regime. But I wondered if you could speak in more detail and more specifically about the contours of the topography of a kind of emerging opposition because there are many puzzles. There's an Islamic opposition. In Palestinian politics there has been a left-wing nationalist opposition. There has been a communist party. There are many political tendencies. This is a sophisticated political society going back a long way. Could you tell us a

little bit more? Can you name names or identify groups or columnists, writers, editors, civic leaders, NGO leaders who you think are really in the forefront of this kind of emerging opposition? Can you tell us is there really a young guard versus an old guard or is that an oversimplification? Are they able to get along with one another if some are Islamic and other are secular, nationalist and communists?

Answer: The traditional opposition within the PLO, the left wing, PFLP, The Popular Democratic Front etc., still has some public presence but it is not very effective on the ground. Hamas has emerged strongly, especially in Gaza in the last few years. There is no question that one of its main and most effective tools has been the social welfare programs. It had a lot of money at its disposal and was able to give social work support in the hospitals and schools and etc., etc., and it has stayed away from the PLO. It has received a very serious set of setbacks in the last year or two with the decimation of its upper tier leadership. But they also have been having problems with decreased funding recently as a result of the United States and other Arab governments' stricter control over the money.

But what I'm talking about is a new opposition that presents a new and serious kind of situation. It is an opposition within Fatah itself. Fatah has been the central core of the Palestinian polity itself. What we see now is fracturing within Fatah including the Aqsa Brigades. The Aqsa Brigade in Gaza are rebelling against Arafat. The Aqsa Brigades in Nablus are supporting him; it's not the same organization. It is the fragmentation of the young and old, the warlords and the young rebels, the reformers and the establishment etc., etc., and there is an element of just making a living out of this. Unfortunately, this is also a fact - this is what some of them do for a living. The voices that have been raised in criticism, especially from within Fatah, have been significant. And the Legislative Council recorded that, and still does, of a conglomeration of what they call reformers and independents who are saying this thing cannot go on.

I view what happened to Nabil Amr very seriously. Maybe for those of you who know him, he was in this town for a couple of months - a few months back - and he is a Fatah leader. He was the Ambassador to Moscow for five years. He was in Beirut, went to Tunis, had all the credentials. He comes from a big tribe in Hebron. He was minister of Information. He's a fantastic writer, eloquent, and has a keen sense of humor. As of late, he has been more critical of the leadership in general. As a savvy political operative he keeps in touch with Arafat. He now is in the hospital in Germany with an amputated leg. Arafat called him and talked to him.

What happened to him was that he was making serious inroads within the Legislative Council and within the political elite in Ramallah. Unfortunately he was attacked - nobody knows who attacked him because it can obviously be one of those tricks that people want to blame this or that party for. But it has had a chilling effect on everybody and I don't know what impact that will have. But two days after that attack people on the Legislative Council - members of the parliament - were very strident, actually more than before, in their call for reform. This is a very fractured situation. I think one of the saddest things is that the legend of Palestine - the only name and face that is known abroad in a serious way about Palestine - is now at the center of the controversy.

I have to agree with several people here that this was initially a political game by the Israeli government to demonize him and have everybody distracted and busy talking about him and in the meantime Israel will just do nothing but keep on building settlements. It is not clear to me now that legitimate criticism against Arafat should not be voiced because of that. And

secondly, if this was current Israeli policy, it is just wrong, and they will live to reap the consequences of that kind of policy because their salvation also is a credible two-state solution.

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