

The Palestine Question: Heart of the Middle East Conflict

By Emile Touma

Commenting on his talks with his Soviet colleague Andrei Gromyko, the Canadian Foreign Minister Mitchel Sharp said that Gromyko emphasized the imperative need for Palestinian representation at the forthcoming Middle East Peace Conference at Geneva, and then added, expressing his own opinion: I consider the Palestine problem as the heart of the Middle East conflict and unless it is solved it will be extremely difficult to reach a fair and just settlement in the area. (UPI, November 20, 1973.)

That is a correct appraisal of the Middle East conflict, and the Communist Party of Israel, which had consistently fought to force the Israeli ruling circles to recognize the national rights of the Palestinian Arab people, could declare in the resolutions of its 17th Party Congress (held in June 1972): "Developments have proved how true our Party's stand regarding the impossibility of establishing a durable and just peace in our region, without ensuring the national rights of the Palestinian Arab people and those of the people of Israel." (Special issue, Information Bulletin, CP of Israel, 1972, p. 49.)

In fact it is possible to claim that the general consensus in the world holds that in order to solve the Palestine problem it is necessary to recognize the national rights of the Palestine Arab people and create conditions for their implementation, without encroaching on the rights of the Israeli people which have embodied their right to self-determination in the State of Israel.

Israeli Official Attitudes

Without going into the history of the Palestine problem we can state that one of the main objectives of the aggressive June 1967 war launched by the Israeli ruling circles against the neighboring Arab countries with the backing of U.S. imperialism was to achieve "territorial expansion and impose a 'settlement' that would liquidate the rights of the Palestine Arab people" (Resolution of the 16th Congress CPI, Special Bulletin 3-4/1969, p. 116).

However, events soon proved that this objective was untenable. Shabtai Teveth, an Israeli journalist close to the "establishment," had to admit that:

"In 1968 the 'terrorist organizations' (the Palestine national movement - E.T.) became a prominent factor; without them one could hardly hope to reach a peace settlement" (His book, The Cursed Blessing: the Story of Israel's Occupation of the West Bank, p. 284).

In the interim period between the June 1967 war and the October 1973 war, the Israeli ruling circles followed a double-edged policy changing the emphasis according to circumstances and specific objective conditions.

On the one hand they tried to establish a subservient leadership willing to form a so-called Palestinian entity under Israeli occupation, and on the other they launched an offensive both in the occupied areas (Western Bank and Gaza Strip) and the Arab countries to destroy the Palestine national movement under the pretense of fighting "Palestine terrorism." Generally speaking, emphasis on the first edge continued up to September 1970, and on the second in the period after.

The failure to establish a subservient Palestine entity in the occupied West Bank was due to two factors. First: popular opposition defeated any initiative by local quislings to create an authoritative body which could claim a representative character in the occupied areas. Second: expansionist Zionist ambitions excluded any possibility of a seemingly "honorable" compromise, acceptable to these quislings.

Shabtai Teveth, describing the attempts to conclude a separate peace with King Hussein and come to an arrangement with the West Bank Arabs, noted that the "Arab representatives" (those willing to compromise with the occupation authorities - E.T.) demanded a definite and binding declaration as to the Israeli government's final intentions concerning the occupied territories, and added: The cabinet, under the influence of the "Greater Israel" forces, could not do that (op. cit., p. 284).

Moreover, both the avalanche of expansionist statements about the Jordan river being Israel's security border and the extensive seizure of land and colonial settlement in the occupied areas made it abundantly clear that the Israeli ruling circles were oriented by the "Greater Israel" concept. Under the circumstances the "philanthropist"-inspired dialogues between Israelis and Arabs of the occupied territories became empty practices of oratory meant as grist for the Israeli propaganda for the outside world.

As has been noted, the emphasis on this edge was diluted after 1970. The choice of date is not accidental. For in September 1970 the Jordanian Hussein clique unleashed a murderous military campaign against the Palestine national movement, as represented in its military organizations, and the Palestine Arab refugee camps which were the backbone and buttress of this movement. During this month, which has become known as Black September, the centers of the Palestine national movement in Jordan were liquidated physically.

The Israeli ruling circles had from the first day of occupation instituted a

reign of barbarous terror against the Arab population in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Arab Jerusalem. Thousands were arrested, thousands of houses were demolished, because their owners or relatives became suspect of "terrorist" activities, and a dense climate of oppressive measures paralyzed opposition momentarily.

After the September massacres of 1970 the Israeli ruling circles considered the time ripe to intensify their onslaught on the Palestine Arab people--the word "people" here means the national organizations and the Arab refugee camps where the Palestine Arab people had settled and became a revolutionary reserve. The onslaught was escalated and intensified in the same measure as the conviction of Israeli ruling circles grew that their military superiority neutralized and overawed the Arab world, and particularly Egypt and Syria.

In 1973 the Israeli armed forces carried out savage air-raids and land mechanized intrusions against the Palestine Arab refugee concentrations in the neighboring Arab countries, Syria and Lebanon, under the pretense of fighting terrorism. Hundreds of Arab refugees lost their lives in these raids and the murder of the three Palestinian national leaders at their homes in Beirut (Lebanon) became a symbol of official Israeli impertinence that expressed indifference to world public opinion as formulated by Security Council resolutions condemning Israel.

Encouraged by their transient success, the Israeli ruling circles moved forward and the leading government party formulated a program for the 1973 Knesset elections, popularly known as the Galili Document (Israel Galili is an influential minister without portfolio), which concretized a massive colonialist settlement offensive in the occupied areas, designed to change their national character, produce established facts on a greater scale and pave the ground for the ultimate annexation of these Arab areas to Israel and in this manner institute "Greater Israel." The program was a practical, material negation of the legitimate national rights of the Palestine Arab people.

The October 1973 war transformed the whole complex situation in the Middle East. First, it demolished the many-sided structure of official Israeli concepts of their military deterrent--security borders, U.S. potentialities in the Arab world, and Israeli ability to be solely decisive in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Second, the sum total of the war--the end of which was formalized on the international level by the Security Council Resolution 338--showed that the Israeli ruling circles cannot hope to negate the rights of the Palestine Arab people.

Today the political scene in Israel is fluid. The election campaign and party loyalties disrupt the process of polarization between the ruling circles and the masses, as well as the process of differentiation within the various sectors of these ruling circles, whether in the government parties or the extreme rightist bourgeois opposition.

These two interconnected processes center not least around the rights of the Palestine Arab people. Increasingly more circles are reaching the conclusion

that no just and durable peace is possible in the Middle East without a resolution of the Palestine problem and specifically, recognition of the national rights of the Palestine Arab people.

However the upper echelons of the Israeli ruling circles are still adamant in their endeavor to continue the Zionist-inspired policy of expansion.

Not only is the extreme rightist bourgeois front (made up of the opposition parties Herut, Liberals, Free Center and State List) opposed to the recognition of the national rights of the Palestine Arab people. The government coalition, which declared its preparedness to implement the Security Council resolutions and carry out negotiations for a durable peace settlement in Geneva, does not show a constructive tendency and is apparently bent on continuing the old policy. The adoption by the Labor Party--the decisive factor in the coalition--of a 14-point program as their election platform on November 29, 1973 provided ample evidence of this posture.

Though there was a change in tone and a pledge to strive for a peace agreement, the program stresses that Israel will not return to the June 4, 1967 lines, proclaims united Jerusalem as the capital of the state--which means perpetuating the annexation of Arab Jerusalem--and rejects the idea of setting up an additional Palestinian Arab state to the West of the River Jordan. This in fact negates the right of the Palestine Arab people to self-determination.

Moreover, as an addendum, Israeli officials announce repeatedly that they are unwilling to negotiate with representatives of the Palestine National Movement--usually described as terrorists. And when they do recognize the existence of Palestinians--not the Palestine Arab people--they emphasize that their representatives should be part of the Jordanian delegation to the Geneva Conference (statement of Foreign Minister Abba Eban in Israeli press, December 2, 1973).

Developments in the Palestine Arab National Movement

One of the most important developments that emerged during the October war and its aftermath was the consolidation of Arab solidarity in the struggle against imperialism and aggression. There was general endorsement of Egyptian-Syrian policy as expressed in the two countries' acceptance of Security Council Resolution No. 338 which implies recognition of Israel, and insistence on the full national rights of the Palestine Arab people as a precondition for peace.

This idea was crystallized in the Arab summit conference held in Algiers at the end of November 1973. The conference further resolved to consider the Palestine Liberation Organization as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestine Arab people. This was no formal proclamation but a reflection of fact. The war and its consequences has galvanized the Palestine Arab people and they rallied around the Palestine Liberation Organization as their national leadership.

This was generally noted, and Newsweek described as an illusion the Israeli-diffused concept that the Palestine Arabs in the occupied territories had

acquiesced to the occupation and added that "the war and the chance that an independent Palestinian state might emerge has brought a dramatic change and even Israeli officials admit that the PLO has tremendous West Bank support" (December 10, 1973).

Facts in the occupied areas substantiated this claim. The Palestinian National Front in the occupied areas, the illegal militant organization in the West Bank, supported by the Jordanian Communist Party, issued a manifesto in the middle of November 1973 declaring itself part of the PLO and proclaiming the latter as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestine people. (Al Ittihad, November 20, 1973).

At the same time the "influential Supreme Moslem Council in East Jerusalem voiced its support for the decisions of last week's Arab summit conference in Algiers." The Jerusalem Post which reported the resolution concluded correctly that: "This clearly implies the Council's approval of the emphasis at Algiers that the PLO spoke for the Palestinians" (December 4, 1973).

The Israeli government Arabic paper Al Anba (News)--published to serve the policy of occupation--had to admit on the same day that the crisis of identity which tore and dispersed public opinion in the West Bank two months ago has practically disappeared and there is near-unanimity in public opinion, which turns around the concept of Palestine Arab independence.

In conjunction with these proclamations of attitudes, militants in the West Bank and Arab Jerusalem initiated a wave of violence against the occupation which took various forms such as bomb explosions and armed clashes. The violent response of the occupationist authorities--demolishing of houses, arrests and deportations (eight leading personalities were deported across the Jordan river to the East Bank on December 10, 1973)--sharpened the struggle of the Palestine Arab people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as can be observed in sit-down strikes and demands for the release of land seized by the occupationists (Al Kuds, December 4, 1973).

However the consolidation of the Palestine National Movement is facing a two-pronged attack.

On the one hand King Hussein of Jordan is trying to contain the Palestine National Movement by various means in order to create the conditions for restoring his rule over the West Bank once Israel withdraws, and on the other hand Israeli-inspired Arab quislings in the West Bank are arriving to establish a "Palestine representation" which would challenge the right of the PLO to sole representation and confuse issues.

King Hussein's attempts have taken the form of insisting on including the Palestinian representation as part of the Jordanian delegation, while at the same time flaunting the slogan of a plebiscite after Israel's withdrawal to allow the Palestine people in the West Bank to determine their future. In these endeavors

Hussein is working on both fronts. In the Arab countries he is trying to convince the officials of the validity of his claims by suggesting various formulas and in the West Bank his supporters are active in shaping a public opinion favorable to the Jordan monarch.

Significant in this respect was the fact that his emissary went to Beirut in early December 1973 and proposed to the Palestine Organization that he would re-shuffle his cabinet by including ministers chosen by the organization or acceptable to it, and that such a government would form the Jordanian delegation to the peace conference. The organization--according to the Palestine News Agency--has rejected the proposal and other similar proposals which were designed to prevent separate Palestinian representation (Reuter, December 8, 1973).

In the West Bank the Jordanian ruler met with a similar rebuff. Even such an old Hashemite henchman as Hebron mayor Al-Ja'abari, who before the October war had toyed with the idea of a reconciliation with the King, had to declare that he considers the conditions which prevailed before the 1967 war over. He requested the King to bring in the Palestine people and the Arab nation to solve the problem (Al Anba, December 7, 1973).

Al-Ja'abari at the same time was thinking in terms of a conference in the West Bank to discuss Palestinian representation in the peace conference. Though he said that the idea was premature, the fact that it was raised in an interview by the correspondent of Al Anba shows the tendency of the Israeli ruling circles. This is substantiated by articles of known Israeli stooges in that paper. Naturally the staying strength of the PLO, supported as it is today by the Arab countries and the Palestine Arab people, will depend on its attitude towards the Palestine problem. Hitherto the various organizations which make up the PLO, and PLO itself, had designated their objective as the establishment of a Palestine democratic secular state. The implication of such a program was the dissolution of the State of Israel.

Revolutionary forces all over the world, the Communist Party of Israel among them, regard this program both as unprincipled, because it negates the right of the Jewish people in this country to self-determination, and as impractical under the present conditions in the world and in the region. Moreover, not only do the countries of the world recognize Israel and subscribe to its right of sovereign existence, but the Arab countries in their Algerian summit implied recognition of Israel in deciding to attend the Geneva Conference and reach a durable peace with Israel.

In the absence of definitive official announcements, the world press is speculating over the attitude of the PLO; the Daily Star of Beirut wrote: "The Palestinians [in their organizations - E.T.] appear to have given up, for the time being, their demand for the creation of a democratic state in Palestine of Arabs and Jews" (November 1, 1973.) However as early as late October 1973 Yasir Arafat stated that the Palestine Revolution stands today on the threshold of an historic stage necessitating an historic decision. He added that all the leaders of the PLO but one agreed on these general lines.

One: Unanimity that the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Al Hamer district

(on the Eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee - E.T.) are Palestinian areas settled by the Palestinian people. It is not the subject of argument, neither is there a place for trusteeship; the people have the right to self-determination.

Two: Care that present rights should not be a substitute to historic ones but a step in the struggle for them.

(The statement was originally published by the PLO paper Al Muhrer - Alnida, November 1, 1973.)

These two ideas taken together imply that the PLO or its major component Fateh considers the time appropriate to accept present rights which would be implemented specifically by the self-determination in the Palestine areas mentioned after Israel's withdrawal. The PLO is opposed to any role for Jordan and stresses in its publications that the Arab League had not approved the annexation of the Arab areas of Palestine to Transjordan in 1949.

It is clear that the PLO is under various conflicting pressures. On the one hand the Arab states such as Egypt and Syria press the PLO towards realism and compromise while Iraq and Libya press it to reject the Palestine state in only part of the old Palestine (Alfajar, November 24, 1973). The PLO is also aware that certain Arab governments with the backing of the U.S. support Hussein's Jordan and would like to neutralize the PLO or if possible oust it from the Middle East picture.

This latter is becoming nigh impossible as the PLO gains support on all sectors. Of particular importance has been the consolidation of friendly relations between the PLO and the Soviet Union. The visit of a PLO delegation, headed by Arafat and other leaders to the Soviet Union at the end of November 1973 stressed this fact.

It is to be assumed that the Soviet Union, which is contributing extensively to the endeavors for a peaceful solution in the Middle East, and will play a leading role at the Geneva Peace Conference, will help the PLO to reach a principled and realistic attitude which would also respond to the legitimate national rights of the Palestine Arab people. One can gain this impression from Arafat's statement that the PLO visit to the Soviet Union was positive and constructive in the interest of the Arab nation and the Palestine people.

The Palestine Problem Today

The Palestine problem, despite all the claims of the Israeli ruling circles about its liquidation, never disappeared and was ever present internationally in the United Nations, in this form or other. The yearly UN decisions, reiterating the right of the Palestine refugees to choose between return to their homeland (in Israel) and compensation, was one such form.

After the Israeli war of aggression in June 1967 the UN, reflecting the

radical change in its structure, passed definite resolutions, in its yearly sessions, recognizing the legitimate national rights of the Palestine people. This year was no exception and a number of UN resolutions represented a paramount international outlook regarding the Palestine problem:

- One, reaffirming the right of the Palestine Arab people to self-determination, was passed by 78 votes against 6, with 35 abstentions. The U.S. voted with Israel against.
- The second noted that Israeli occupation authorities have persisted in adopting measures that obstruct the return of the displaced population to their homes and called upon Israel to carry out repatriation of these refugees. This resolution was passed by 101 votes against 4, with 14 abstentions.
- Two others called upon Israel to respect the Geneva convention on human rights of civilians in war time, and to desist from measures aimed at annexing Arab occupied territories.

Thus it is possible to say that three ingredients make up the Palestine problem today, as laid down by the international community.

1. The Israeli occupation of territories inhabited by the Palestine Arab people (West Bank, Gaza Strip, Arab Jerusalem, Hameh District) and the attempts by the Israeli ruling circles to create accomplished facts by colonial settlements as a prelude to their annexation.

2. Israel's rejection of the right of the Palestine Arab people to self-determination, with the backing of the U.S. and objectively in collusion with the Jordanian monarchy.

3. Israel's outstanding opposition to the UN resolutions on the Palestine refugees.

The solution of the Palestine problem can therefore be achieved by eliminating the three ingredients, i.e., by Israeli withdrawal from the Arab occupied territories, carrying out the resolutions on the refugee problem, and the implementation by the Palestine people of its right to self-determination. The conditions after the October 1973 war both regionally and internationally are favorable to such a solution.

We join with the many friends and co-workers of Michael Orman of Elsinore, California, in mourning his tragic death on February 27 at the age of 70. He was a staunch fighter for peace, equality and socialism. To his widow, Sylvia, we offer our deepest sympathies.

Editors, Jewish Affairs
