

## Chapter 2

# Barriers to Resolution of the Conflict with Israel – The Palestinian Perspective

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“For our reservoirs of pride have run dry...”

Nizar Kabani (Al-Aharam 1995)

### Background

More than 30 years have passed since the signing of the first Camp David Accords (1979), which removed Egypt from the cycle of conflict with Israel and established calmness and stability along their mutual border. The Arab League’s boycott of Egypt following the signing of the Accords as well as Egypt’s alienation from inter-Arab institutions were retracted after a few years and, not unexpectedly, additional Arab states and organizations embarked on a path of political negotiation and also withdrew from the cycle of conflict. The Palestinians, who had watched the developments with Egypt with concern and had been among its boycotters, understood within a few years that their problems could not be solved only by force or “armed struggle” but had to rely on new routes that would draw external support and translate into political language the changes that had already begun to take place in their sphere a few years prior to President Sadat’s initiative.

This process, which was starkly apparent during the first *Intifada* (1987-1994) and concluded with the signing of the Oslo Accords (1993-1995), essentially opened a new chapter in the blood-drenched Israeli-Palestinian history. The PLO and Israel formally recognized each other, and Israel withdrew from many parts of the Gaza Strip and West Bank, transferring them to Palestinian control as part of a gradual process that was intended to bring the two sides to a permanent arrangement, providing for Palestinian independence and putting an end to the conflict.

Although Israel's agreements with Egypt and Jordan introduced the motifs of self-examination and mutual blame into the intra-Arab discourse, established stability along the borders, and generated collective interests, Palestinian opposition members tried to sabotage Israel's agreements with the Palestinians from the outset through terrorism and the instigation of frequent crises between Israel and the leadership of the Palestinian Authority. These efforts undermined the trust between the two sides, created powerful internal pressures, and sparked anger that made progress on negotiations extremely difficult. This shaky relationship experienced one wave of violence after another, with attempts to advance the process during the breaks between such waves. Events reached a peak with the confinement of Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to the *Mukataa* (headquarters) in Ramallah (2003-2004) and with the destruction of the Palestinian Authority's security apparatus and parts of its civilian institutions, thus undercutting its ability to rule, weakening its position in the public eye, and rendering it irrelevant.

How is the Palestinian arena different from the other arenas? Why is it not possible to apply what succeeded with Egypt and Jordan to the Palestinian arena? In order to explain this phenomenon, is it enough to note that these two political entities have clearly delineated territories of their own, while the Palestinian entity lacks sovereignty and seeks to be freed from "foreign" rule, or are there additional explanations? The Arab satellite channels, which first appeared around the time of the signing of the Oslo Accords, have contributed significantly to our understanding of this issue. They shed light on the content of the internal discourse taking place in the intra-Arab arena, its common denominators, the problems that preoccupy it, and the many weaknesses it exposes. Alongside many other weighty problems, the Palestinian problem apparently serves as a uniting factor in the intra-Arab arena because it is shared by all, preoccupies all, and serves as an intra-Arab test of solidarity. Those devoted to the concept of pan-Arabism fear that resolution of the Palestinian problem will hurt the cause of Arab unity because that problem has been a central factor in the formation of this unity since 1948. From their point of view, reaching a settlement with Israel over this problem could break down all barriers between Israel and many Arab countries, especially the wealthy Gulf countries, and provide legitimacy for normalized relations. On the opposing side are proponents of particular state nationalities, who view resolution of the Palestinian problem as the removal of

a heavy burden that has made it difficult to address internal Arab problems and the backwardness of Arab societies. This is a highly emotional discourse, which exposes all of the intra-Arab divisions and presents two opposing sets of claims: One approach does not tolerate the laying of blame for failures, backwardness, and defeats on “the Arab People” and does not accept any rummaging through the roots of the culture and history of Arab society and Islam. These views are presented in strident and angry voices, with antagonism, and with the laying of blame on Arab regimes that maintain relations with the West, alongside voices that lament, bemoan, and weep for the bitter fate of this People. The second approach takes this reality as leverage for change and an unrelenting push towards a new state of affairs in which every society would take responsibility for its own fate,<sup>5</sup> freeing itself from the ideological fervor that has fuelled these societies for many years and was responsible for their backwardness.<sup>6</sup>

The most indicative characteristic of this debate is the verbal exchange of blows between conservatives, fundamentalists, radicals, and keepers of the faith, on the one side, and change-seeking liberals who challenge the old establishment and the clerics whom they blame for the backwardness, on the other. The former, who enjoy majority status, see themselves as representatives of an oppressed, underprivileged, and neglected public, and they seek to channel the rage of the masses against the regimes and winds of change and modernization coming from the liberals and the Arab regimes of “oppression” that are forever being accused of submission to Western states and Israel. These, they claim, are selling out the Palestinian problem, driving a wedge within the Arab nation, and exposing its weaknesses. The second group floods the media with statistical facts, with efforts to “expose the truth,” with reflections of and on the conservatives, as if to say: “this is how we appear,” “our situation is most bleak,” “this not because of Western influence,” “the root of the problem is within us,” “we must be strong and look closely into the mirror” because “if we do not work quickly we will become

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the discussion on Al Jazeera, 11 May 2004:  
<http://www.aljazeera.net/channel/archive/archive?ArchiveId=92932>.

<sup>6</sup> See also the first UNDP report (2002) prepared by Arab sociologists, presenting a very bleak picture of all Arab societies in the region. The researchers sought to present to pan-Arab and pan-Islamic authorities a picture of the condition of the Arab individual, his backwardness, and the backwardness of the Arab society generally. In doing so, they provoked a highly charged intra-Arab debate.  
<http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2002e.pdf>

irrelevant in the international arena, thereby nullifying those fundamentalist aspirations to return to the Golden Age of Islamic caliphates.”<sup>7</sup>

This chapter will focus on the principal barriers that affect Palestinian decision-making in finding a solution to the conflict with Israel, and on the judgment of the Palestinian leader who is interested in solving this problem. These barriers are indeed similar to the barriers that Egypt and Jordan faced as they prepared to sign peace agreements with Israel, but they are harder to dismantle in the internal Palestinian arena.

## **The Palestinian Barriers**

The character of these barriers is shaped by the character of the Palestinian problem – a problem that has undergone many changes, developed a dependence on many factors, has attempted to be freed of them, but has yet to find its way to a solution. These barriers have varying characters, each of which influences the Palestinian decision-making process in its own way. Some of these are structural, and their origin is in the uniqueness of the Palestinian problem, its place in the inter-Arab arena, and its implications for this arena. Some of these are religious and national, intertwined with each other, extending the problem to distant geographical areas, drawing in the entire Arab world, intensifying the divisions and internal struggles, and at times even causing paralysis that prevents any action. Some of these are cultural and represent patterns of behavior and reaction that have developed over the years and taken hold among Arab and Palestinian societies and groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Many similar expressions of opinion are voiced frequently on satellite stations with high ratings. See for example:

- Debate on Al Jazeera, 11 May 2004:  
<http://www.aljazeera.net/channel/archive/archive?ArchiveId=92932>
- Another debate on “the causes of the Arab individual’s frustration,” 12 August 2003:  
<http://www.aljazeera.net/channel/archive/archive?ArchiveId=92210>
- A different debate dealing with intra-Arab struggles under the headline “struggle between protégés (the West) and oppositional forces,” available at:  
<http://www.aljazeera.net/channel/archive/archive?ArchiveId=1034319>
- Debate on the significance of the first U.N. report, 13 August 2004:  
<http://www.aljazeera.net/channel/archive/archive?ArchiveId=90935>.

In the following I will detail the barriers, examine the extent of each barrier's influence, and attempt to propose ways to deal with them.

## **Structural Barriers**

One of the factors that shape the identity of a population, community, or people, whoever or wherever they are, is territory, especially when it is delineated by clear and recognized borders. In Arab countries, the state-territorial identity has developed since the First World War, when the Western powers of the time divided the Middle East into states. The borders that were then demarcated, to a large extent arbitrarily, came to have the status of something sacred with time, and they influenced the formation of the identity of the society living within the state borders: Syria for the Syrians, Saudi Arabia for the Saudis, Jordan for the Jordanians, and of course Egypt, whose identity as a natural and territorial entity was recognized going back to the time of the Ottoman Empire. This identity is indeed subject to internal pressures, the aim of which is to undermine it in favor of aspirations towards Arab unity, which, in the past – when it was dominant – stirred the hopes of the masses. But with time these aspirations faded, and the Six Day War put an end to them. Despite its fragility, the particular state identity overcame the Pan-Arab identity, and many of those who settled within known geographic borders made their homes there and often sought to be freed of the demanding Palestinian burden. In this context, one can cite the following barriers:

## **Uniqueness and Commitment**

The Palestinian territorial identity is not limited to the borderlines of 1967 and is not focused only on the territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. International boundaries delineating the Palestinian territorial area were never determined.<sup>8</sup> The conflict with Israel cannot end or begin with the 1967 boundaries, as was the case with Egypt and Jordan, which relinquished responsibility for the fate of the Palestinians when King Hussein announced disengagement from the West

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<sup>8</sup> See also: Susser, A. (2006). "Collective Identity, the Middle Eastern State, and the Peace Process." In D. Menashri (ed.), *Religion and State in the Middle East: A Tribute to Prof. Shamir*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, pp. 201-202.

Bank at the height of the first *Intifada* (1988). The conflict with the Palestinians is rooted in the borders that were established in 1948. This means that Palestinian identity cuts across the 1967 boundaries, permeates the core of the state of Israel, and creates a reality in which disconnecting the two sides of the border might generate an identity crisis and difficult internal problems. In other words, the *Nakba* is not just loss of territory, home, or property, but loss of the capacity to achieve national coherence, to consolidate national identity, and to return to the agenda that was interrupted in 1948. Moreover, Palestine and the Palestinians are, in the eyes of many in the Arab world, the “frontline” – they are at the center of a clash between different worlds that have yet to find a way to co-exist. This is a clash between East and West, among two rival monotheistic religions and a third (Christianity), which also has ties to this territory and sees it as a Holy Land, although the relatively small number of its adherents in the region makes it a lightweight contender within the struggle. The situation creates a reality in which engaging with the Palestinian problem is often the business of every entity with ties to the Arab “nation” and often of those with ties to the Islamic “nation” as well.

For these reasons, a serious crisis was created within the national Palestinian movement in November 1988, when the Palestinian National Council signed a declaration of independence and accepted, with reservations, Resolution 242, the essence of which is recognition of the 1967 lines as borders of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. This decision marked a turning point in the nature of the struggle with Israel from an existential struggle into a struggle over borders. When the PLO signed the Oslo Accords (1993), it encountered the very same barriers that the uniqueness of the Palestinian problem generates.<sup>9</sup> These are matters of

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<sup>9</sup> The decision of November 1988 led to the withdrawal of many of the organizations that make up the PLO from its Executive Committee, including the Popular Front of George Habash and the Democratic Front of Nayef Hawatmeh – the two largest organizations after Fatah. Within the internal Palestinian discourse, this decision was never seen as an achievement but as a compulsory move that was forced on the Palestinians because of their weakness. The significance of this decision, however, extends far beyond the context of the Executive Committee’s member organizations. Even Hamas, which defines the 1988 declaration as *Nakba*, cannot ignore it. It is highly doubtful that it would have announced, following its 2006 elections victory, that it is willing to accept the 1967 borders for the time being were it not for the 1988 declaration. In other words, the huge chaos created by this declaration clearly illustrates the difficulties faced by Palestinian decision-makers when they seek to address cardinal questions. See, for example, a paper published on the Hamas website on the occasion of the 61<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the *Nakba*:

emotion and impression that expose the weaknesses of the Palestinian sector, and the Arab world generally, as a result of the unbearably difficult engagement with burdensome questions of identity and belonging, questions that were forced upon the Palestinians. Even the status of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people has not enabled it to overcome these barriers.

## **Geographical Dispersion**

The experience of exile and detachment has been one of the identifying marks of the Palestinian people since the 1948 war. The war scattered Palestinians throughout the Middle East into refugee camps, leaving them without the status of regular citizens. Rather, their status was that of visitors who usually receive a restricted type of citizenship that strictly limits their ability to work, earn a living, and – in many cases – to travel. The question of representation of this scattered population generated harsh divisions of opinion within the Arab world since the end of the 1948 war. When the PLO was formed and recognized as the “sole representative of the Palestinian people,” it acquired most of its power from the Palestinian diaspora. The leadership in territories that were under Israeli control, defined as “internal residents,” was viewed with suspicion by the leadership of Yasser Arafat’s PLO because of the former’s contacts with Israel and its resulting power in relation to the local population. The situation threatened the status of the leadership abroad as the sole representative, and for this reason Arafat worked hard to establish the principle of unity within the population. It was a very successful gamble, at least for a while, because the PLO’s many failures in Jordan in September 1970, leading to its expulsion to Lebanon and from there to Tunisia in 1982, raised questions about the PLO’s leadership ability but not necessarily about its status as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Indeed, the internal leadership, which had many opportunities after these failures, maintained the status of the organization and did not undermine unity even when Israel sought negotiations with it to establish an alternative leadership to the PLO and to discuss various approaches to settling the conflict without relying on the Palestinian diaspora or recognizing the PLO as the sole representative of the

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<http://www.palestine-info.info/ar/default.aspx?xyz=U6Qq7k%2bcOd87MDI46m9rUxJEpMO%2bi1s7tn3CFaf1CNzMvAFZLpo8OWBLFwnKJjepqem2daJMxgF3%2bmJC78vYo5lgg4%2beHoa7zj1zYCoU1FOFI%2fYA2SHulItr7bD%2bI4fGw4UONnqlR3Q%3d>

Palestinian people. The Oslo Accords created a new reality. Israel recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, although this raised concerns among many in the Palestinian diaspora that the PLO would ignore their needs and focus on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These concerns were among the sources of strength of the Palestinian opposition, and they gave the Islamic organizations preference over other opposition forces. The failed attempts to implement the Oslo process led to loss of seniority status of the PLO in its current form as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. The question of who represents the residents of the diaspora and who represents the internal residents is more relevant today than it ever was. Can leaders with a questionable ability to represent in fact make decisions regarding an arrangement with Israel, without resolving these questions internally? The answer is affirmative, but conditional on a serious and extensive Palestinian discourse that would submit the various alternatives to the Palestinian public. Abu-Mazen has managed this discourse with unprecedented effort since his election as president, and if we consider all of the weaknesses of the opposition, which does not actually offer an alternative and does not accept the existing international rules of the game, then it would appear that the PLO does have a good chance.

### **Inter-Arab Intervention**

As noted, the Palestinian problem was originally expected to be solved by those Arab states that were founded before 1948, states on which the Palestinian refugees pinned their hopes. In the early stages of their formation, the Palestinian organizations' leadership rarely stressed the Palestinian identity. Originally they defined themselves as Arab first and Palestinian second, and they sought to be counted as part of the Arab People. The aspiration for a Palestinian state was not explicit before 1967. After despairing of the Arab states, Palestinians tried to find a way to be freed of their need for, and dependence on, these states.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The establishment of the PLO (1964) was apparently an Arab attempt to take control of the Palestinian issue and to subsume it within the interests of the Arab states. Yasser Arafat and his cohorts, who formed the Fatah movement around this time, challenged this organization and Ahmet Shukeiri, who headed it. They saw it as a puppet controlled by Egypt in order to control the Palestinian problem to a certain extent without fomenting unrest within the countries themselves. After the Six Day War, Arafat and his cohorts reached the conclusion that there were no benefits for them to be had from the Arab states and that they should develop independent Palestinian capabilities.



Yasser Arafat, the undisputed Palestinian leader, knew how to “tiptoe through the tulips,” knew the limitations on freedom of maneuverability within these states, saw himself as the last symbol of historical Arab leadership, and submitted his own will to the restrictions that this status demanded. His weakness was the result of his complex personality, which damaged his credibility in the eyes of those who came into contact with him. His capacity to maneuver was also limited in comparison to the capacities of other Arab leaders, as the Palestinian issue comprises a vast array of pan-Arab problems that place a burden of responsibility on the Palestinians and expose them to a wider range of pressures.

The lines of division among Palestinians follow the contours of intra-Arab divisions. In other words, the salient question is: does resolution of the Palestinian problem depend on submission to the West, or agreement with it? Does it depend on abandoning national and religious principles, or on actualizing them by way of compromise? Is defeatism or is negotiation while “standing tall” the appropriate way to act? Should concession or intransigence be the attitude? Should one adopt a Realpolitik approach or escape from reality? Should the *Nakba* be maintained or abandoned? All of these indecisions are often heard in the internal Palestinian discourse, and to nearly the same extent, in the pan-Arab discourse as well. This is a dialogue of the deaf, paralyzing and preventing any action aimed at escaping the harsh reality in which the average Palestinian – and his Arab brother in many parts of the Middle East – finds himself. It was this phenomenon that also undermined those bold leaders who sought change and swam against the currents, such as Sadat, who instigated highly significant changes in the Middle East with his visit to Israel, and later King Hussein and Yasser Arafat, who – after taking the bold step of recognizing Israel – unfortunately tried to play it both ways.

Any Palestinian move towards Israel, therefore, can have far-reaching ramifications for intra-Arab struggles. Moreover, some of the Arab states – especially the radical ones – use the Palestinian problem as a bargaining chip and are able to influence the achievability of an agreement or its implementation after signature. Syria, for example, views non-resolution of the Palestinian problem as key to maintaining the potential to have all its demands of Israel met with regard to the Golan Heights and to maintaining its interests in Lebanon. Resolution of the Palestinian problem could weaken Syria and the radical stance it represents.

This infuriates the PLO leadership, given the obstacles Syria raises and the pressures it places on Hamas and the other resistance movements it backs, lest they reach an agreement with the PLO or compromise their principles. On the opposing side, some Arab states have for years been expressing impatience with the Palestinians, and they see lack of resolution of this problem as a yoke on the neck of the Arab world.

### **The Demand to Remedy Historic Injustice**

The demand for justice has been central among Arab and Palestinian demands since the beginning of the conflict. This demand portrays Israel as a foreign implant brought to the region by Western imperialism, and it calls for the elimination or expulsion of Israel from the region as the only way to achieve justice. No compromise whatsoever is acceptable in this view. Until 1967, Arab rhetoric regarding Israel used demonic terms such as defilement, crime, racism, colonialism, fake Judaism, international conspiracy (Harkabi: 67-80), greatest land-snatcher in history, and the like. Any Israeli initiative or concession was seen as insufficient and as a partial and unacceptable remedy. When the 1967 war concluded, and the extent of defeat became apparent, additional weaknesses were revealed. When the Palestinian leadership sought compromise agreements, various Palestinian and Arab weaknesses were exposed in all their severity, exacerbating the painful probing into national and pan-Arab wounds and intensifying these weaknesses. In other words, the change that took place after 1967 was manifested as a coming to terms with a Middle Eastern reality of which Israel was now a part, but it did not eliminate the need for remedying injustice. In fact, this need was perhaps increased by the defeat, as it served as an expression of continuing weakness, allowing the other side to generate further injustices. With the onset of a negotiating process that requires compromise, the question of remedying injustice becomes a barrier in the path of the Palestinian leadership because of the divisions that such compromise creates.

### **Religious and National Barriers**

The religious character of the Israel-Palestinian conflict grows more intense as efforts of the national camp to resolve the conflict fail. When the process reaches

the critical stage – at which point it is no longer possible to delay dealing with the cardinal questions of borders, holy sites, refugees, and other sensitive issues – then as a matter of course, religious leaders and a broader range of concerns enter the picture. These additional players and concerns all require consideration, as do the implications that spill over from the Palestinian issue to the Islamic sphere and place further obstacles before decision-makers. If we add to this the already visible public loss of faith in the national leadership that maintains relations with Israel – whether this loss is because of corruption, because of the way Arafat managed the Palestinian Authority and its relations with the Palestinian public, or because of the success of Hamas and religious authorities in demonstrating their incorruptibility and in fostering some sense of national pride – then we may conclude that not only is the range of considerations more complex, but that it is not yet possible to resolve the dispute, or even negotiate its resolution, without including or involving these factors. There is a certain parallel on the Israeli side, where the religious factor is more significant than in the past. The strengthening of religious-national forces on both sides of the conflict has a significant influence on its character. At times, this strengthening serves as a mirror, reflecting for the religious sectors how reality appears on each side. In this context, one can cite the following barriers:

### **Inter-Organizational Rivalry**

Inter-organizational rivalry has become one of the most salient barriers within the Palestinian decision-making process with regard to all of the issues on their agenda, and particularly the conflict with Israel. For the first time in the Arab world, two political forces that are more-or-less equal in size and influence faced off against each other when the Islamic opposition movement, Hamas, ran against the veteran and experienced Palestinian liberation movement, Fatah, in elections of an unprecedented nature. An Islamic opposition movement challenged a ruling national movement and offered an alternative, downplaying failures and leading to a victory that none disputed, and some even envied for the democratic process that enabled it.<sup>11</sup> In other words, unlike Arab countries in which one

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the study published on Hamas's internet site shortly after elections to the Legislative Council in January 2006. According to this study, the election results were of an unprecedented nature in the Arab world and serve as proof that Arab nations can establish democratic rule: [http://www.palestine-info.info/arabic/books/2006/5\\_2\\_06/5\\_2\\_06.htm](http://www.palestine-info.info/arabic/books/2006/5_2_06/5_2_06.htm), pp. 2-5.

party or group rules for generation after generation, within the Palestinian arena a balance was created between two groups, each of which prevents the other from operating independently and even puts obstacles in the path of the other. This is a reality with far-reaching implications for the possibility of resolving the conflict with Israel and for the Middle East as a whole. Many Arab states and companies are watching closely to see how this internal Palestinian rivalry develops. Will a cooperative mechanism be found, allowing these two central streams – the likes of which there are many within Arab countries – to dwell together and to unite Palestinian society, or is this impossible? To date, Palestinian society has failed to find such a mechanism. The conflict with Israel is a litmus test. On the one hand, it operates as a barrier to finding such a mechanism, but on the other, it could serve as a catalyst precisely because it amplifies the need to overcome this internal Palestinian division.

### **The Sanctity of (Armed) Resistance (*Moqawama*) Against the “Occupation”**

As the Oslo Accords were about to be implemented, Hamas thoroughly rejected the claim that the PLO leadership and Yasser Arafat had committed to preventing armed struggle (resistance) in Israel. They asserted that it is inconceivable that a nation under occupation be denied legitimate resistance to this occupation. This assertion had many supporters within Fatah. Abu-Mazen himself, who consistently opposes the use of violence, reiterated this slogan of Hamas in his broadcast speech at the opening of the Sixth Fatah Congress (4 August 2009), although drawing a distinction between popular resistance and armed resistance: “It is inconceivable that resistance to occupation be denied. It is guaranteed by international law.”<sup>12</sup> Even after signing the Oslo Accords, Arafat believed in maintaining the military option, as Abu-Mazen claimed in an interview after the death of his predecessor. In his words, Arafat did not believe that it was possible to achieve the desired independence by political means alone, and he feared that Israel would take advantage of Palestinian weaknesses.<sup>13</sup> Today this issue takes central place in the inter-Arab discourse and is one of the distinguishing dividing

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<sup>12</sup> Radio London, BBC, 4 August 2009, 11:00.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.alhayat.com/special/dialogues/03-2006/Item-20060301-b7421a5d-c0a8-10ed-001e-064ced0586fe/story.html>.

lines. The struggle within the Arab world today is not between moderates and extremists but between those who oppose resistance and those who support it. The resistance against Israel in Gaza and Lebanon, against the United States in Iraq, and against other foreign forces in Afghanistan is very damaging publicly in the eyes of those who object to it. It leads to anarchy, disrupts daily life, hurts the economy, and in the end, does not yield any benefits. Supporters of resistance, in contrast, make frequent reference to *karama* (national pride), to neglecting the “future” of the “nation,” and to the defeatism of those who oppose resistance without demonstrating that their way is more successful. In this context they cite the Oslo Accords as an example.<sup>14</sup>

This perspective, although rooted in early Islamic and Arab tradition, in fact reflects the weakness of the side propounding it. Supporters of resistance maintain their position despite awareness of its futility because it is an expression of “not giving in” and maintaining a strong position, a complete antithesis to the continuing defeatism. Even when supporters of resistance are criticized, they come across as prouder and more honorable precisely because they are transferring the burden of action onto the other side. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, two sides can be identified. One side is well-resourced and has power, but is subject to international moral rules of the game and is preoccupied with secure stability and quiet along its borders and lines of friction with the other side; it therefore finds it difficult to use, and is even fearful of using, all of the resources it has at hand. The second side is angry, unsatisfied, busy bemoaning its bitter fate, oppressed, and aware that the first side is not meeting its demands or understanding it. Its anger therefore swells, and its resistance (*moqawama*) continues, with the aim of provoking a reaction from the other side and making itself appear heroic. Islamic tradition also plays a part here, as the Prophet also displayed tolerance towards the enemy originally, waited patiently, did not break down, and in the end succeeded. Indeed, if the Prophet demonstrated tolerance and succeeded, there is no reason for his followers to act any differently. These voices have a galvanizing effect, even if they are not acceptable to all supporters of resistance, because they offer strength during times of distress and a way to seek relief from frequent crisis. It is noteworthy that in the Palestinian context, an intense dispute developed at the very beginning of the Al Aqsa *Intifada* between Fatah and Hamas members,

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<sup>14</sup> See the debate on this issue on Al Jazeera (16 June 2009): <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/B85B0155-B266-48FA-BB07-9F8F7819F24F>.

and within the Palestinian public generally, regarding suicide attacks. Many members of Fatah and the public claimed that this approach should be avoided because it hurts Palestinian interests, does not advance a solution to the problem, and creates a situation in which one's contribution to the national struggle is measured by one's willingness to commit suicide. At the same time, Hamas justified this approach with claims of revenge and deterrence, saying, "Israel uses the Apache and we use suicide bombers; this is the first time that not only we cry, but the Israelis do as well."<sup>15</sup>

The current armed resistance in the Middle East against non-Arab forces is led almost exclusively by Islamic organizations – Hamas, Hezbollah, Sunni and Shiite organizations in Iraq, and Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. National forces that once used resistance in their struggle against Israel, such as Fatah, have come to the conclusion that it does not serve their pursuit of national objectives and have now come to prefer the political approach, even if they did not entirely abandon the option of armed struggle. Resistance thus became the specialization of Islamic organizations, who gave it a holy status. This fact, combined with the legitimacy ascribed to resistance in the national discourse as well, means that it is impossible to prevent or eliminate resistance altogether. It will continue to be adopted by new or renewed entities that will profess a deeper loyalty to Islam and greater patriotism. These entities thus challenge any leader with a history of such resistance, forcing him to waffle and make tricky excuses that expose his weakness and often make him appear absurd and, thereby subjecting him to ridicule.

## **The Tension Between Loss of Identity and Achievement of Independence**

This tension is largely a product of the gap between the sanctity of resistance on the one hand and its failings and damages on the other. If the approach chosen embraces the sanctity of resistance, how is it possible to achieve independence through negotiation? Is negotiation compatible with the revolutionary slogans that the Palestinians propounded since the formation of their national movements? If so, how will this shape the formation of national identity? Will we not lose

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<sup>15</sup> See *Al-Ayyam*, 26 May 2002; *Al Hayat Al Jadida*, 14 June 2002; *Al Quds*, 29 May 2002.

our identity, come across as defeatists, or adopt the values of the other side by following this route? These are the questions posed by the conservatives. Thus, even when they have abandoned the path of resistance and terrorism, or have formally declared their intentions to abandon it, they have felt submissive and frustrated and have sought to conceal the fact out of shame, out of a sense of weakness in the face of internal rivals, and out of fear of undercutting the glory of heroism and sacrifice that has become part of the formative identity of the younger generation. Negotiations with Israel, one of the litmus tests of this tension, thus place the Palestinian side under the spotlight in a position of weakness from the outset and generate widespread international support for Israel. How is it possible, therefore, to speak of independence? After all, negotiations are no more than a prescribed solution that the other side generously provides – they are not negotiations between competing equals. This is a situation whereby the Palestinian weakness is exploited in favor of the other side’s interests. That is the feeling that continues to generate resistance to any initiative or political process aimed at bringing the Palestinian problem to a resolution. Ahmed Yassin, the most visible of Hamas’s leaders until his assassination in 2004, was asked by many media sources to comment on the Arab Peace Initiative when it was first announced at the Beirut Summit (March 2002). He replied that any initiative generated by Arabs anywhere is an expression of defeat. Arabs should avoid proposing initiatives altogether, he claimed, because “they [Israel] stole, murdered, and expelled – so let them propose the solutions and ‘we’ will decide whether to accept them or not.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Erosion of the Concept of Two States for Two Peoples**

The concept of two states for two peoples has long been the slogan for those who seek territorial compromise on both sides of the conflict. The abovementioned decision of the Palestinian National Council of 1988 essentially anchored the concept as a Palestinian commitment. In fact, however, this had been an externally prescribed concept, a demand of the international community that was based, among other things, on the PLO’s interest in being accepted as part of that community. Since Yasser Arafat’s first appearance in the United Nations (1974), the PLO has tended to view international decisions as granting legitimacy

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<sup>16</sup> *Al Jazeera*, 28 March 2002, 22:00.

to every process and every demand directed at Israel. Arafat frequently spoke of the importance of “international legitimacy” since that time. It is because of this that international legitimacy was also a source of crises within and outside of the PLO. It is highly doubtful that Hamas would have recognized the 1967 lines as the borders of a Palestinian state in its long-term *Hudna* political plan, were it not for the PLO’s 1988 decision. In essence, that decision obligated the PLO’s opposition as well. In practice, however, Israeli negotiators who have interacted with the Palestinians during the Abu Mazen era have sensed that the two-state solution does not “burn in their belly”<sup>17</sup> as it does for Israel, nor are the Palestinians going out of their way to actualize it.

It is possible that this impression reflects the erosion of the two-state concept on both sides since the onset of the Al Aqsa *Intifada* (September 2000). The difference is that on the Israeli side, the number of those who support this solution has grown because of loss of faith in the possibility of a permanent solution, interest in preserving Jewish sovereignty, and fear of the demographic threat, while support has declined on the Palestinian side. Since the Hamas uprising, life in the Gaza strip has entailed both a sense of crisis that paralyzes political life and a loss of faith in Israeli willingness, following disengagement, to freeze and dismantle its settlements. Is there still a Palestinian commitment to the two-state concept? Palestinian Authority representatives respond to this question in the affirmative, but the number of voices calling for its rejection is increasing.

The power of the two-state concept lies in the international support it receives and in the absence of any alternative at this time. The concept of a bi-national state is seen as unrealistic because of each side’s adherence to its own national identity and because of the potential for violence implicit in this concept. Realization of the two-state concept depends, therefore, on overcoming the sense of paralysis that has taken over the Palestinian side since the split between Gaza and the West Bank.

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<sup>17</sup> Haim Ramon, who served as a minister in the government of Ehud Olmert and was involved in negotiations with Abu Mazen at that time, said this during a conference at Tel Aviv University in response to a question about expectations of the two-state concept on 9 December 2009.



## Cultural Barriers

This broad range of barriers reflects a deep sense of weakness, frailty, and inferiority, gradually contributing to a culture of “poor and oppressed people” expressed primarily through the parameters by which it measures itself. Progress, new construction, individual development, the state, the national interest, and society – none of these is at the forefront of this culture’s interests; rather, it is the preservation of unity in face of external forces that seek “to take advantage of our weakness, of our resources... to extort concessions from us... to make us a pawn in their hands ... to control us...” and so on.<sup>18</sup> The term “*sumud*” (strong stance) is one of the prominent expressions of this culture. It regards as an achievement the ability to absorb blows without collapsing, as opposed to weakening the enemy and actualizing tired slogans about “banishing the occupation,” “destroying the enemy,” and “liberating the land.” According to this mindset, weakness is a matter of fate and, in the course of time, things will turn around and it will be possible to realize what now appear to be empty slogans.

This culture thwarts the efforts of those of its members who try to take charge of their own fate and break away from the harsh reality that they see as the source of backwardness and paralysis imposed by the culture itself. Adherents of this cultural attitude will forever charge with defeatism, excessive concession, submissiveness, and betrayal anyone who tries to think differently or to reach an agreement with the “other,” whom they view as responsible for their weakness and suffering. In this way they block any leader who tries to take the fate of his people into his own hands and enter into negotiations with the non-Arab other. In this context it is possible to cite the following barriers:

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<sup>18</sup> This is a salient claim on the part of Palestinian opposition members, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others of the secular left, aimed at preventing a flood of concessions relating to important national principles (*Thawabat*). In this context it is worth noting a letter, exposed by Hamas, sent by Muhammad Dahlan (2003), former minister of defense in the Palestinian Authority and overseer of the Ministry of Interior, to Shaul Mofaz, minister of defense at the time. In the letter Dahlan promises to do everything possible to eliminate opponents of co-existence with Israel and to isolate and weaken Arafat: <http://www.palestine-info.info/arabic/palestoday/reports/report2003/dhlan.htm>.

## The Defeatism Complex

The sense of defeatism is a leitmotif appearing throughout the statements and expressions of every Palestinian and Arab speaker who comes in contact with non-Arabs, even in debates between supporters of pan-Arabism and its detractors. The context for this is to be found in hundreds of years of failures: 200 years since Napoleon captured Egypt (1798) or, according to some, over 800 years, since the victory of Salah Ad-Din over the crusaders in the Horns of Hattin Battle (1187).

Even the terminology that Palestinians themselves use to describe their condition reflects this sense of defeatism. The *Nakba* is the catastrophe marking the end of the 1948 war, while the *Naksa*, which marks the defeat in the 1967 war, expresses recurring suffering or catastrophe. All of this reflects the culture of the poor and oppressed (*istiz'af*) in which weakness is seen as an integral part of the internal dialogue, making it a tool in the hands of the other, who exploits it to his advantage. In the context of the Oslo Accords, the claim is that Israel consistently exploited Palestinian weakness. Not only did it have massive leverage to apply pressure, it also continued in practice to control the Palestinian way of life. The Palestinians, who feel extremely humiliated in the face of this power, do not have even one bargaining chip that would enable them to respond in a way appropriate to their condition.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, during the first year of implementation of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority was already being portrayed by the opposition, and sometimes even by itself, as a “Lahad Army” (referring to the South Lebanese Army which collaborated with Israel in southern Lebanon), that is, a “collaborator” or “yes man” for Israel rather than a partner to a balanced agreement. The rhetoric of Hamas in its public confrontations with the Palestinian Authority up to the time of the 2006 elections and in their aftermath was also infused with expressions of this sort. According to Hamas, Israel is misleading and deceiving the Palestinians, has no intention of fulfilling even one of its obligations, is conducting a dialogue that corrupts and sells out national principles, and so on.<sup>20</sup> These assertions fall

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Rishmawi, M. (1995). “The Actions of the Palestinian Authority Under the Gaza/Jericho Agreement.” In *The Palestinian Authority: A Critical Appraisal*. Washington: the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine, pp. 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the accusations leveled by Hamas against Fatah during the anarchy that erupted following the January 2006 elections:  
<http://www.palestine-info.info/Ar/default.aspx?xyz=U6Qq7k%2bcOd87MDI46m9rUxJEpMO%2bi1s7GnBcnYKBxMhRCu0L%2fD%2bAVIlcpenSyaqOSkjxN%2f3vHVqEaCPYsdibbhNukUil3WqzwGZ7HF5cdbvumICVoz4BXz3YO%2bSUITuVsCiHKGN8yPg%3d>.

on eager ears and reflect the speaker's fear of having his weakness exploited or of not receiving any compensation for his demands.

## **A Culture of Denial**

Because the sense of defeat carries with it feelings of shame, it generates both aversion to the failures and a culture of denial. During a debate with the Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish, the Lebanese author Elias Khouri, who dealt with the Palestinian problem extensively, claimed that the Palestinians have not written their own history because they do not want to recognize what has happened. In his opinion they have denied the reality that came to be after 1948.<sup>21</sup> Darwish, in contrast, claimed that history is usually written by the stronger side and in this case by Israel.<sup>22</sup> The memory that came to be entrenched in Palestinian public consciousness is that the defeat occurred because the Palestinian side was not organized, and it continues to be disorganized; thus, the *Nakba* continues to recur: “*Kibia Nakba*,” “*Samu’a Nakba*,” “the *Nakba* of 82,” Sabra and Shatila, and others.<sup>23</sup> In order to prevent *Nakbas* of this sort it is necessary to be organized. In other words, this is not a problem of structural foundational problems but a situation that can be changed. By the same token there are those who claim that the Palestinian refugees cannot relinquish the right of return because they continue to deny the defeat and have not come to terms with the irreversibility of reality. Even Arafat, after arriving in Gaza in 1994, preferred not to deal too much with the implications of the Oslo Accords in his appearances before the Palestinian public, perhaps because he sought to maintain the military option of armed struggle, or perhaps for fear of the Palestinian opposition's reactions, which would expose his weaknesses as a leader and the weakness of the Palestinians as a party to these agreements. When Abu Mazen appeared in Gaza soon after the signing of the Oslo Accords, he asked his audience not to take for granted everything that Arafat said, and he claimed that the Oslo Accords placed a heavy and difficult burden

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<sup>21</sup> Hadidi, S. (1999). *Bab Al Shams, Al Hikaya Al Taarihia Wa'al Riwaya Al Palestina Al Kubra*. Haifa: Al Karmel, 85, 9.

<sup>22</sup> “Interview with Abbas Bithun.” (1990). *Masharif*, 3, 86.

<sup>23</sup> These refer to military retaliations carried out by Israel in Palestinian villages in the years after Israel's founding, when the Palestinians suffered heavy losses. Sabra and Shatila are two Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, where Christians carried out a massacre (1982) following the assassination of Bashir Jamil, who had been a candidate for president of Lebanon. At the time Israel control the area where these camps were located.

on the Palestinian side.<sup>24</sup> This was an open secret, known to all, and exploited by Hamas in order to sabotage the Accords and to gain legitimacy for continuing acts of terrorism against Israel.

## **Divisions and Rifts**

The roots of division within Palestinian society are as deep as the rifts between similar groups in the other Arab societies in the region. As long as the national sector maintained prominence and enjoyed hegemony, however, these divisions were not a very salient aspect of Palestinian weakness. The appearance of Hamas as a competing political organization at the start of the first *Intifada* (1988) can be said to mark the stage at which the division became a dominant cause of inter-Palestinian weakness. With its appearance, Hamas offered a new element that had not been present in the platform of the Muslim Brotherhood, to which it belongs ideologically. Hamas created a new synthesis, previously unknown in Arabic, Islamic, and Palestinian terminology. It defined itself as a movement based on compound ideology: national-Palestinian and Islamic. In other words, Islam is the context but the focus is Palestine. “We have no aspirations beyond Palestine,” Hamas leaders reiterate, thereby making clear that they do not in fact intend to serve extra-Palestinian causes, despite continuing loyalty to the widespread Islamic notion of pan-Islamic statehood (Litvak: 160-162). The contrast with organizations that had comprised the PLO until then was clear. Fatah defined itself as a national, non-ideological movement composed of those who seek Palestinian self-determination, while the Popular Front, Democratic Front and other PLO member organizations identified with theories of socialism or Marxism, or with certain Arab countries. Hamas in essence proposed a new alternative that challenged the PLO and made clear to the masses that these approaches can co-exist and that it is not necessary to submit blindly to the rhetoric of the PLO leaders whose verbosity exceeds their loyalty to Islam and its values.

During the years of the first *Intifada*, however, the Palestinian public did not accept Hamas’s political plan, which called for a Palestinian state from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, because it largely reiterated a concept that had eroded and proven itself as unrealistic. The majority of the Palestinian

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.alhayat.com/special/dialogues/03-2006/Item-20060301-b7421a5d-c0a8-10ed-001e-064ced0586fe/story.html>.

public, though heavily influenced by Islam, was convinced that reality is stronger and thus continued to respect the seniority of Fatah and the PLO as leaders and representatives of the Palestinian consensus when it came to resolving the Palestinian problem.

This division reached its peak during the early years of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* when Israel destroyed the structures and mechanisms of the Palestinian Authority that had been established following the Oslo Accords. That development was seen in the eyes of the public as unequivocal evidence of the failure of the political approach of the PLO and Fatah and as proof of the validity of Hamas's approach, which consistently stressed the connection between the Palestinian Authority's corruption, the unjust Accords, and Israel's lack of credibility, thus greatly undermining the credibility of the Authority and its status in the eyes of the public.

Hamas members took great joy in this development and asserted that the approach based on negotiations had failed and that "Islam is the solution." This was also the stage at which Hamas's interest in membership in the ruling body and participation in elections to the legislative council increased, reflecting self-confidence and faith in power on the one hand, and erosion and loss of support for the opposing side on the other hand. Matters reached a peak in the elections to the legislative council (January 2006) when Hamas achieved what it could not have imagined: a majority of seats in the legislative council.

At this point the struggle took on the character of a fight for survival. The questions on the agenda are existential in nature. Fatah fears that transferring control to Hamas will effectively bury the democratic process, foil all of the PLO's political achievements, including United Nations recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, appointment of ambassadors to the United Nations and to several other countries that had recognized the PLO, and the Oslo Accords, which Hamas announced it does not intend to honor. These concerns preceded any discussion of internal societal matters, social lifestyles, the status of women, family, and tribe, and the role of Islam in daily life.

The gulf between the two sides steadily increased. Attempts at mediation that required concession on the part of Hamas regarding matters of principle with religious implications were not successful. Fatah members feared that Hamas

would not honor its commitment (Mecca Agreement, February 2007) to the letter of appointment for a unity government, which called for adherence to previous agreements and decisions of the PLO. Therefore they held on to their positions of power and resisted transferring them. Hamas refused to accept this resistance. Its leaders saw it as an inter-Arab and international plot to prevent their accession to power and thus instigated the Gaza Strip uprising (June 2007). Given their experience and superior power, Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip within hours, expelled the Fatah members, and became sole rulers of Gaza.

The territories of the Palestinian Authority were thus divided into to separate entities. The rift was deep and obvious. Contact between the two organizations, through Egyptian mediation, began several months after the uprising. Two sister entities were created, each blaming the other for the uprising and accusing it of not respecting the rules of the game of democracy and of refusal to relinquish power. Caught in the middle, the residents of Gaza fell victim to the long-term isolation that was forced upon them.

Mamoun Fendi, a Washington-based Egyptian publicist who is frequently sought out on matters of inter-Arab divisions, is certain that these divisions are one of the greatest obstacles to internal conciliation, all the more so to a peace agreement with any non-Arabs. For these reasons it is necessary to clarify and resolve these divisions before “we subject ourselves to ridicule and disgrace by entering peace negotiations with the American, Israeli, or Western other.”<sup>25</sup>

### **The Lack of a Procedural Mechanism in Cases of Disagreement**

At this time and in the current reality it is not possible to reach agreement, even on procedure under conditions of disagreement. The rift created following Hamas’s takeover of the Gaza Strip reflects one of the more complex barriers facing the two Palestinian leaderships at this time. This is a case of longtime divisions and crises that have never been solved through mediation and understanding. Since the start of the first *Intifada*, when Hamas appeared, clashes and confrontations between Hamas and Fatah activists have taken place with varying frequency, against a background of struggles over centers of power. Some of these clashes

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<sup>25</sup> See the newspaper *Al Sharq Al Aoust*, 1 December 2008:  
<http://www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=497139&issueno=10961>.

were violent and bloody. In all cases investigation and reconciliation commissions were established, but they never published their conclusions as obligated and never managed to prevent the next crisis. This is the result of a loss of faith that prevents the formation of a mechanism for managing daily life when there is no agreement.

When Hamas announced its intention to run for the most recent elections to the legislative council (January 2006), all hoped that such a mechanism had been found and that from now on the public would determine who was to handle its affairs. Reality, however, made clear that this would not be the case, even though no one – not even from the defeated Fatah – questioned the election results. But Hamas's consistent refusal since that time to recognize both the Oslo Accords and the PLO's decisions on the one hand, and Fatah's fear of loss of its status and power centers on the other hand, sabotaged everything. Although Hamas announced prior to the elections that it was not obligated to abide by these Accords, Fatah claimed that one of the principles of democracy is continuity and that it is impossible to guarantee continuity if those elected dismiss commitments made by their predecessors. Moreover the system of international relations does not accept dismissal of previous decisions, and if Hamas seeks to be part of the international community, as it claims, then it has to accept the rules of the game. Hamas continued to insist on its position and demanded political rule based on the assumption that they could prove the viability of their alternative. Fatah had difficulty coming to terms with loss of political rule and their accomplishments over 45 years of existence. They saw in the Hamas position the intransigence and amateurishness of those whose international and political understanding is extremely limited.

At this point Hamas's status did indeed begin to erode because all of the other players involved made clear that the international rules of the game cannot be ignored. Loyalty to the principles of Islam, however, as interpreted by Hamas, reject recognition of foreign sovereignty over land considered to belong to the *Waqf* or areas defined as "*Dar Al-Islam*" (territory ruled by Islam), and Hamas's dependence on radical Islamic states and groups such as Iran and Hezbollah makes it extremely difficult to indentify a mechanism for managing such crises. Egyptian efforts to mediate and arbitrate in order to identify an agreeable mechanism have not yet borne fruit because, among other reasons, the Egyptian regime for the

most part represents the interests of Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah in the eyes of Hamas. The result is a deepening rift. The basic needs of the residents of the Gaza Strip are being met, and even if a political solution were achieved it would not be implementable. In practice this exacerbates the deterioration of Palestinian society and with time might also demolish the dream of an independent state.

The Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip (“Cast Lead,” December 2008 – January 2009) exposed the magnitude of internal Palestinian division and the extent to which it reflects division within the Arab world. No Fatah member condemned Israeli action at the onset of the operation in Gaza. The voices coming from Ramallah at the start of the operation ascribed responsibility to Hamas and underscored the advance warnings that the latter had received regarding possible Israeli attack in response to the firing of rockets at Israeli cities and communities. Egypt and Saudi Arabia acted in a similar way. Efforts to convene an Arab summit under the initiative of radical Hamas-supportive states to deal with Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip also failed. In the end two separate summits took place: one in Doha for extremist states, where Hamas leaders represented the Palestinian side, and a second in Saudi Arabia, where Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Saudi King Abdullah met. These separate conferences illustrated the extent of the rift that had formed between the two sides in the Palestinian arena and between the two blocs in the inter-Arab arena.

### **Strident Rhetoric and Slogans**

Given that a solution is not within reach and that the overall context poses many barriers, each of which blocks progress from a different angle, words have come to take the place of action. Words have become the principal bargaining chip in the struggle against Israel and in the dispute between the two hawkish forces in the internal Palestinian arena.

In the Palestinian arena, Hamas and Fatah showed us how reality in all its complexity translates into symbolism of this sort for them as well. A few months after IDF operations in the Gaza Strip (July 2009), Hamas convened a special conference in Gaza under the title “Culture of Resistance.” It dealt with the question of how to preserve a culture of resistance in a reality where everyone



wants to eliminate it – not only Israel but Arab and Palestinian brethren as well. The substance and recommendations that emerged from the conference all dealt with culture, art, literature, and the question of how to express resistance through these channels. There was not one word about continuing attacks against Israel, not one call for armed struggle; nor was there any explanation of how the culture of resistance would fuel armed resistance.<sup>26</sup> The newspaper *Al Quds*, which is published in East Jerusalem, reproduced the impressions that had been published in the American “International Herald Tribune” of a journalist who had followed the conference discussions and noted that the leadership of Hamas was emphasizing new means of struggle. It was starting to use a new idiomatic phrase: “cultural resistance,” the purpose of which was to instill in the public the notion of resistance through literature, art, and culture. As evidence he cited a number of plays performed at the conference; one of these even regarded suicide attacks with a certain amount of cynicism. As further context the newspaper cited a series of quotes from Hamas leaders making clear that this is the proper approach at this time.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not there is validity to this report, it is clear that the context for the conference included Israel’s operation in the Gaza Strip, which cast doubt on the value of continued armed struggle. This is the lesson that Fatah learned in the years preceding the Oslo Accords, and at this conference Hamas gave indications of the start of a process whereby resistance maintains its status as a sacred slogan while losing some of its status as an effective means to advance national aspirations. The purpose of this new terminology is to make clear that the movement does not intend to submit to demands to “abandon the path of resistance,” to infuse the public consciousness with tools for expressing a culture of standing firm (*sumud*), without submission or defeatism, or to serve as an obstacle to any political process that seeks compromise and the turning over of a new leaf.

Fatah also has difficulty freeing itself of these weaknesses, and it uses words to express its anger towards Israel for the latter’s superiority, and towards Hamas for accusing it of abandoning the path of resistance. The spirit and style of recommendations that participants in the most recent Fatah conference (4-13

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.palestine-info.info/ar/default.aspx?xyz=U6Qq7k%2bcOd87MDI46m9rUxJEpMO%2bi1s7wM6wV5%2b1c5rqT7WF%2b8BcqL9pxbUFTwQ9vOieUjGmdfm4Pi4Y3fssinNHkRk1yLhLWIW6YJMm1Au4Nh4mR1cSseRffzun4l7QuKme%2bimnO2A%3d>.

<sup>27</sup> *Al Quds*, 25 July 2009.

August 2009) tried to dictate illustrate this point. One of these decisions asserted that the sanctity of resistance “in all its manifestations, using all available means” is to be preserved. The opposition within and without, both inside and outside of Fatah, argues vehemently that these are no more than words, and that this formulation actually gives resistance the opposite meaning: no more armed resistance.<sup>28</sup> This is lip service for the masses, the main purpose of which is to say: we have not abandoned our sacred principles. But in practice, this was the demand throughout the political process. Israel and Western countries demanded words and declarations from the Palestinians and Arabs in all their negotiations: “recognize Israel,” “relinquish terrorism,” “put an end to all forms of violence.” It is much easier to engage in processes that accord with these demands than to declare so publicly because an explicit statement indicates change, and change indicates coping with all of the barriers noted above, that is, paying a huge price at home, possibly amounting to an existential threat. For this reason there is a tendency to gloss over the issues: to say one thing as well as its opposite, and to use rhetoric as a substitute for inability to act or accomplish the goal.

### **Loss of Faith in the Leadership**

The result of these cumulative obstacles and barriers is the Palestinian public’s loss of faith in their leadership. From the perspective of the ordinary citizen, resident of Ramallah or Gaza, the routes of both leading movements – Fatah and Hamas – have reached a dead end. This is particularly apparent after operation “Cast Lead” (January 2009), but there were indicators even before that. Hamas failed to advance the Palestinian cause, and the more than two years of its exclusive rule in the Gaza Strip have proven that armed resistance is not able to provide even the most basic needs to the ordinary citizen. For his part, Abu Mazen repeatedly expresses his disappointment with the political process, announces that he will not run in the next elections, threatened to resign, and persistently blames Israel and accuses the United States of not doing enough to advance the political process. The burst of joy in Gaza sparked by Israeli disengagement and

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Abu Mazen’s opening remarks at the conference, on the Hamas website: <http://www.palestine-info.info/ar/default.aspx?xyz=U6Qq7k%2bcOd87MDI46m9rUxJEpmO%-2bi1s7LDPQCH%2fJlQHOiJKwYYCv9FQdpiOVwwiHihHSanu71magA2yo2xiNAFEomxFfzQl cBnzaeengs%2b9izhZha7SUwmAlzL44sUMQTJj25a0jUs%3d>.

withdrawal from Gush Katif (Summer 2005) was short-lived. It lasted a few weeks, but then the hard questions about the future resurfaced with even greater force, accompanied by unprecedented anarchy until the takeover by Hamas (June 2007). The blow that Hamas suffered during “Cast Lead” and the drastic decrease in rocket launches that followed prove what its rivals, particularly Abu Mazen, have long claimed: this resistance is useless (*abathiya*) and serves only to destroy and embitter the lives of the citizens.

Hamas even admits that it is convinced that, in the aftermath of “Cast Lead,” this is not the time to continue with armed resistance and that it is time to allow “rest for the warrior” and to “respect the needs of the public.” Hamas even prevents other organizations from launching rockets into Israel or planting bombs. This exposes Hamas’s weaknesses in the eyes of the public because it validates Abu Mazen’s claim that resistance is useless, but for the time being it has not significantly reduced public support for Hamas. The situation also exposes Hamas to further pressure from Iran, which sees “resistance” as something sacred that should not be forsaken for too long.

Whose approach, therefore, is the right one? Is the right political approach that of Abu Mazen, Fatah, and the Palestinian Authority, an approach that sees reality for what it is and speaks openly to the public but is perceived as having undergone Americanization and Israelization – polite terms for collaboration – or is the right approach that of Hamas, which brings about catastrophe and destruction but provides a shred of national pride, which is so lacking at a time of weakness, exploitation, and division?

Does the national common denominator, which has united Palestinian society to date, continue to exist, or are we witness to societal collapse and the loss of uniting common denominators? In such a reality, is there a Palestinian leader who can offer his people some way of resolving the conflict with Israel and win popular support? Within the Palestinian population there are voices, which are not heard publicly, that long for the day when Israel will again take control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip because of Israel’s relative accessibility under those circumstances, in contrast to current difficulties and heavy dependence on Palestinian bureaucracy. Is unification not a precondition for reaching agreement with Israel? Is it not an Israeli interest?

## Coping Mechanisms

Israeli-Palestinian relations have undergone many changes since 1948, when the founding of Israel was declared. Throughout these years Israel sought individuals, public figures, and groups with whom to negotiate an end to the conflict. Israel saw the Arab ruler as a public figure who holds the key to everything, and it attributed to him capabilities that the leaders of Western states and bodies do not have. The opinions of the public and the opposition were seen within Israeli discourse as a negligible factor with marginal influence. This perception was also the proffered explanation for historical intelligence failures, such as the start of the Yom Kippur War (1973), Sadat's visit to Israel (November 1977), the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1988), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990), the outbreak of the first Palestinian *Intifada* (1987), and others. After all, if the ruler has full control, does not tend to draw on many advisors, and sometimes even takes decisions on his own, then clearly significant developments such as those noted cannot be foreseen.

The first *Intifada* proved, however, that a public with its own viewpoint exists and is capable of expressing itself in its own unique way. The *Intifada* was revolutionary from a societal perspective. Opponents of Arab regimes and pan-Arabism supporters saw this uprising as proof of the power of the people, something they had been preaching all along. In contrast to early expectations, however, the people were guided in other directions by the leaders of this *Intifada*. They were led not to increased conflict with Israel but to a new type of struggle, the aim of which was discussion rather than confrontation. Paradoxically, Palestinians prisoners who had been released in the Jibril Deal (1985), which was condemned in Israel, contributed to changing the character of the Palestinian struggle with Israel. At the core of this struggle there was a process of intense inquiry and analysis regarding the causes of Palestinian failures, Fatah's weaknesses on the eve of the *Intifada*, and other possible options. In due course two guiding principles of the instigators of the *Intifada* became apparent. One of these was loss of faith in the effectiveness of armed struggle (terrorism) – known today as resistance (*moqawama*) – as the exclusive means of advancing a solution to the Palestinian problem, both because of the nature of terrorism, which triggers contempt throughout the world, and because of Israel's power and international backing. The other principle was recognition of Israeli public opinion as a

weighty factor, which can be decisive and can bring about significant changes in support of the Palestinian issue. This was the outcome of extensive study of Israeli social trends, the issues that preoccupy Israeli society, Zionist history, and the roots of Jewish existential fears, which the Arab world still had difficulty grasping. This struggle was also influenced by the frequent interaction resulting from unmediated contact between Israel and residents of Gaza and the West Bank who were exposed to the Israeli job market. For Gaza residents in particular, this contact delineated the path they needed to follow and the model by which they wanted to shape the future Palestinian state. In other words, in contrast to other Arab countries, this state could succeed only if it maintained contact with Israel, received its assistance, and emulated it. This combination of discussion and non-violent struggle, at least in its early states, brought the leadership much international approval from the international community, enabled the start of wide-ranging dialogue with the Israeli public, generated international pressure on Israel, and imposed historic changes on the veteran PLO leadership, including the aforementioned declaration of independence of November 1988.

Behind all of these developments, however, there was a hidden message from the Palestinian public, a message that Israel and many in the Israeli public either did not absorb or refused to accept. The message sought to relay that there is cooperation between Gaza and West Bank residents on the one hand and Israel on the other hand regarding preparation for a future Palestinian state. Such an entity could only succeed if Israel provides assistance and education so that it does not follow the path of other Arab states. As long as it did not break its “contract” with Palestinian public opinion, Israel was expected to guarantee the existence and prosperity of the Palestinian state and society.

With that, many in Gaza are convinced that Israel once again gambled on the solitary ruler as someone who could “provide the goods.” It forgot about the existence of the Palestinian public as an entity for which the Palestinian Authority is responsible and it abandoned this public to the hands of leaders who did not see the growing closeness with Israel in the same light as the leadership of the first *Intifada* saw it, but sought to minimize the increasing familiarity with Israel and to set limits on it. As a result, the territories under control of the Palestinian Authority became subject to a ruling culture similar to that of Arab countries, characterized by doublespeak, corruption, nepotism, protectionism (*mahsubiya*)

and, above all, absolute dependence on rulers who made life for the population worse than it had been before the agreements.

The victory of Hamas in the 2006 elections and similar events preceding the elections raised fundamental questions for Israel regarding the priorities of Palestinian public opinion, which had originally been regarded as supportive of the peace process and as seeking to emulate Israel. These questions were accompanied by a sense of contrition and harsh criticisms of Israel for abandoning the Palestinian public and forgetting that it had supported the changes brought about by the first *Intifada* to the position of the PLO and the Palestinian camp generally (Schiff, *Haaretz*, 27 January 2006). This popular position would have gone a long way towards marginalizing many of the aforementioned barriers. Without this collective backing, which had infused hope among the masses throughout the Arab world, it is highly doubtful that the change, which had begun but was cut off in its infancy, would be possible.

Is change possible? Can Israel reconnect with the Palestinian public? Or have Islamic movements taken over the public and infused it with a culture identity of being poor and oppressed, along with lack of faith in Israel? Does the spirit of the first *Intifada*, which sought to place the fate of the Palestinians in their own hands, no longer exist? How is it possible to cope with these difficulties, and are Israelis and Palestinians fated to continue paying the price of violence? Does the failure of negotiations towards a permanent solution teach us that these barriers are insurmountable? Will there always be someone who removes the solution from our grasp whenever we approach it? After a failed military action, many observers tend to claim that more force is needed. After a failed political process, many tend to assert that the failure proves that there is no partner on the other side.<sup>29</sup>

Israel's widespread use of force during the last *Intifada* greatly exacerbated the phenomenon of suicide bombings. In its efforts to overpower Palestinian violence, Israel disregarded previous restraints, re-occupied towns that had been turned over to the Palestinian Authority, destroyed most of its infrastructure, brutally struck Palestinian terrorist organizations, and eliminated many of their activists and, tragically, many innocents as well. The Palestinians, for their part,

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<sup>29</sup> See also Steinberg, M. (2008). *Masters of Their Own Fate: Palestinian National Consciousness 1967-2007*. Tel Aviv: Miskal, pp. 400-401 (Hebrew).

were not able to withstand the massive force that Israel inflicted on them, and they succumbed to the propaganda of the extremist organizations during the first two years of the *Intifada*. According to this propaganda, Israel was determined to physically eliminate the Palestinian problem.<sup>30</sup> The many funerals, which took place almost daily, intensified the urge for revenge. Revenge became a central factor shaping the Palestinian response. Many Palestinian organization, include secular ones, participated in the trend of suicide attacks despite their principled position opposing such actions. The culture of the poor and oppressed was reinforced. The suicide bomber came to be seen as a hero who has succeeded, even if partially, in enabling his people to stand firm in the face of the “Israeli war machine.” The mythology of the weak individual who stands up to more powerful forces took hold, and it became a key factor in motivating many young Palestinians to approach various organizations and seek to carry out suicide attacks.

When this escalation passed, however, the search for solutions began. The two sides were exhausted by violence and suffering. The Palestinians collapsed under the weight of the heavy price they had paid, and Israelis felt soul-struck by the violent confrontation and by Palestinian rage, which forced them to resort once again to force and to fear that their security was still in jeopardy.

Israel opted for a unilateral approach and initiated a widespread public debate on its advantages and disadvantages. The Palestinians, whose internal affairs are largely dependent on Israeli developments, entered a phase of internal struggles and conflicts in which the unilateral approach took center stage. From an internal Palestinian perspective this approach validated, at least initially, the arguments against negotiations with Israel – the position of Hamas and its supporters and the failings of the national mainstream that had accepted the path of negotiations before the signing of the Oslo Accords. From this perspective, the grave implications of that process were that Israel was once again violating the Palestinians’ right to determine their own fate. The struggle was accompanied by two phenomena: first, the dramatic weakening of the ruling power; and second, severe anarchy that greatly undercut the security of citizens.

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, comments by Ahmed Yassin in 2003:  
<http://www.gazapress.com/arabic/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=4855>.

This process accelerated the growth of Hamas's power, beginning with the second *Intifada* when Israel announced that there is no Palestinian partner. The Palestinians interpreted this claim as an assertion that a partner is someone who accepts the dictates of Israel. Destruction of the governing infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority, Israel's "partner," added force to that interpretation. The unilateral disengagement following the death of Arafat further reinforced the interpretation, and it culminated with Hamas's election victory (2006), which allowed expression of this interpretation in the voting booths.

What, then, is the value for Israel of the iron fist it employed during the first years of the *Intifada*? Would Israel have maintained this approach had it known that it would eventually lead to Hamas's accession to power? The answer is most likely yes, because the tendency during crises of this sort is to repel every threat. Self-examination takes place later, when the fires have died down.

Is a situation possible whereby Israeli deterrence can provide the hoped-for quiet and prevent rocket launches and terrorism against Israel permanently? In other words, is it possible to count on the results of the operations "Defensive Shield" (Jenin 2002) and "Cast Lead" (Gaza Strip, 2009) as a response to the Palestinian threat? What is the lifespan of this deterrence and for how long is it effective? Most likely, it is limited. A reality of neither peace nor war is not viable – as the Egyptians taught us prior to the Yom Kippur War (1973) and all the more so in the Palestinian case, which continuously preoccupies the Arab world and international community. Moreover, the voices of frustration and dissatisfaction that seek to escape the stalemate and daily tribulations and to work towards a solution to the problem are clear and visible. The governance void in this case attracts foreign intervention by outsiders such as Iran, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and global *jihad* organizations that would never accept an agreement or ceasefire in the region. These players usually bolster one side at the expense of others and seek to establish a permanent reality of terrorism and *jihad*. Add to this the demographic trends indicating that within about two decades the population balance between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River will shift, and we can only conclude that Israel cannot rely on Palestinian weakness as a permanent source of Israeli strength and security unless it adopts the stance of right-wing Israeli groups that believe the status of non-Jews in the region is that of guests who do not have rights of sovereignty or ordinary citizenship. This would mean



engaging in dangerous internal disputes based on a clash of values between a Jewish morality that sees human beings as equal creatures formed in the image of God on the one hand, and the attitude towards non-Jews, the political instability, and the international pressure that would result from grappling with an immoral attitude on the other hand.

The Israeli side – which enjoys political and economic strength, relative stability, and the status of a free and democratic society with relatively stable mechanisms for managing disputes and disagreement – cannot ignore the many barriers facing the other side. Negotiation in itself serves as a source of support for the Palestinian side in its struggles with rivals from within. When the rivals claim that Israel has no intention of reaching an agreement and that Israel’s sole interest is in leading the Palestinians astray, the reality of negotiations is proof that it is possible to pursue a solution to the Palestinian problem.

## **What Should Be Done?**

The salient characteristic of the barriers described above is the way that Palestinians and Arabs view the “other” and the patterns of behavior that developed as a result of interaction with the “other.” Here are a culture and a local religion that have developed a relationship of double standards towards the West, which controlled the region for many years and of which Israel is an integral part. The result is a sense of humiliation and inferiority alongside an uncontrollable urge to emulate.

Israel cannot ignore these heavy burdens that the Palestinian carries in his heart. At times it would appear that internal Jewish barriers prevent Israel from properly seeing what is happening on the other side. For example, while conducting negotiations with the Palestinians, Israel did not take into account the significance of those social and national changes brought about by the first *Intifada* – changes that included the experience to cope with all of the barriers described above. Arafat and the PLO would never have come to sign the Oslo Accords had the leadership of the first *Intifada* not imposed upon them the 1988 declaration of independence, which, as noted, changed the nature of the struggle with Israel. Arafat’s arrival in Israel was supposed to be part of the process and not its essence. Palestinian society continued to need Israel even after his arrival. From their perspective, Israel was the key to preventing unwanted developments

within the Palestinian Authority as well as “crooked” implementation of the Oslo Accords, if it would only take into account the Palestinian public. If Israel had only been less forgiving and if it had only held Arafat to account for all his doublespeak regarding the commitments he accepted under these Accords, then he would have been forced to speak the truth to his own public and to deal with the barriers and obstacles posed by his opponents from within. Public support would have increased if Israel had regarded the corruption as a threat to continued implementation of these Accords.

The Arafat era came to an end. Arafat himself personified most of the aforementioned barriers but there was apparently no avoiding him. With the end of his era came the transition from internal politics of “divide and conquer,” doublespeak, and lack of transparency, to the politics of truth, where two opposing and rival worldviews openly compete with each other, and the public knows of and participates in this competition. This reality is in itself the result of contact with Israel or of the Oslo Accords. Indeed, except for the Palestinian case, the Arab world has no example of such a balanced, egalitarian, and popular relationship between two rival political forces. As noted, the geographic disconnection between Gaza and the West Bank since the Hamas takeover in 2007 created, alongside the internal rift, a political paralysis as well and possibly even a mutual dependence on the part of both sides regarding weighty, cardinal, national questions.

Israel, despite its “otherness,” was and remains a central player in the Palestinian arena, particularly relating to the question that has been on the Palestinian agenda since Abu Mazen’s election as president: whether to follow the political path of negotiation or the military path of resistance and *jihad*? Which will allow the Palestinians to realize their aspirations? Israel’s position can bolster or weaken one of the sides of the issue. Negotiation with Israel is a key to continuation of the internal Palestinian dialogue and a challenge that forces the Palestinians to deal with complicated internal complexes and barriers.

From the Palestinian perspective, it is not clear what Israel wants. For years, Hamas has asserted claims that often have an element of propaganda – though they reflect a widespread Palestinian sentiment – that to this day, Israel has not clarified what its borders are. Does it intend to continue occupying additional territories? If it is so interested in a permanent solution with the Palestinians, why is it not prepared to declare the 1967 borders as permanent? Even Abu Mazen,

in response to assertions that he rejected the generous offers of Ehud Olmert in late 2008, explained that he had tried to clarify where Israel's borders are on the map.

In other words, there is an expression of lack of faith in Israel that – even if it is not sincere and its sole purpose is in fact to cope with another Palestinian barrier – relies on a reality that gives it popular backing. Israel did not show respect for the 1988 decision of the Palestinian legislative council. Although Israel could not ignore its substance, it continued to express lack of faith in the sincerity of this decision and to regard dismissively, at times even with scorn, the sense of concession that the Palestinians felt as a result of this decision regarding a large part of what they see as their land. Israel is also unclear about the framework for a permanent solution, and it demonstrates weakness when it comes to clearing or removing illegal settlements and freezing the construction of settlements. The combination of these two factors creates a most problematic reality from the Palestinian perspective, shifting the balance within the internal debate in favor of the supporters of armed resistance.

It becomes apparent, therefore, that the extent of credibility and willingness on Israel's part is extremely important to the other side. Credibility without willingness and willingness without credibility lead to the unraveling of any system that is intended to handle the impressions and emotions described above, in addition to rights and lands. To this day, many in the Jewish community do not accept the term “nation” in the Palestinian context. Palestinians view this as an effort to blot out the Palestinian or Arab presence that existed in Israel when the first waves of Zionist immigration took place.

The way to overcome the Palestinian barriers is by having a fixed strategy for sincere pursuit of an agreement, a strategy that includes the public on both sides, prepares it for the agreement, and is accompanied by a sense of initiative and creative ideas. Prime Minister Menahem Begin and President Anwar Sadat changed the face of the Middle East when they cooperated sincerely, often transmitted identical messages in joint public appearances, and signed a peace treaty in 1979. This process compelled the Arab side to confront a wide range of questions dealing with internal barriers relating to identity, culture, and Arab common denominators that could enable them to cope with internal Arab problems. Jordan and the Palestinians further developed the internal Arab discourse on these

questions in the mid-1990s, when they signed peace agreements with Israel. Jordan reached its finish line and abandoned the cycle of conflict, but the Palestinians have yet to be freed of the negative impressions that Arafat left behind.

Today the Palestinian Authority is headed by Abu Mazen, whose credibility is not in doubt among Israeli decision-makers, despite his weaknesses. He has proven his ability to stand before his people and speak the painful truth. His governance could yield many benefits for Israel if it leads the discussion towards questions of substance, i.e., what is meant by agreement, what is the framework it seeks at the conclusion of negotiations, and what sort of relationship might develop between the Palestinian and Israeli people? To this end, however, Israel must lay a three-part foundation that will dispel Palestinian concerns regarding its intentions:

Public acceptance of the principle of the 1967 boundaries as the borders between Israel and the Palestinian state, alongside a demand for negotiations on exchange of territories where there are blocs of settlements that Israel is interested in keeping, in exchange for other areas within its sovereign territory.

Israeli preference for unification of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, recognition of Hamas as an inseparable part of the Palestinian people, who are subject to its leadership, and cognizance of the political paralysis and mutual neutralization that the disconnection imposes on both sides.

Adherence to the principle of consensus, i.e., providing popular backing to every agreement that is concluded, in order to avoid a situation in which a signed agreement is acceptable to only part of the Palestinian people. Abu Mazen did in fact frequently promise to put relevant questions to a referendum, but an Israeli demand along these lines could bolster this commitment and kick off an important public debate in both arenas, Palestinian and Israeli.

An honest debate of this sort would reduce doubts regarding Israel's intentions and would pose challenges to the Palestinians, requiring them to deal with the many barriers that they generated for themselves or that were placed before them over the years. To date, Abu Mazen has demonstrated that he is able to put to public debate many issues that were considered taboo from an Arab and Palestinian perspective in the past. Since his election as president, he has brought about an internal Palestinian discourse that has no parallel in the Arab world.

In this way, his contribution is likely to be significant in overcoming the main barriers:

**The Sanctity of Resistance:** This is the main barrier from Israel’s point of view. An Israeli announcement of the sort described above could nullify the sanctity ascribed to resistance because it would make clear where the borders lie, and Hamas has already announced its willingness, even if temporary, to accept the 1967 boundaries as the borders of a Palestinian state.

**Political Negotiations or Armed Resistance:** This debate could be settled by the aforementioned Israeli announcement. It would give Abu Mazen a big advantage over the tactic of resistance because in the internal discourse that would develop, the Israeli move would bolster his position.

**Loss of Identity vs. Achievement of Independence:** This concern would vanish in light of the bargaining that would accompany negotiations and the public debate that would provide a sense of struggle, without casting the Palestinians as being at the mercy of the other side, and in light of the independent policymaking of Abu Mazen and his prime minister, Salam Fayyad, regarding the planning and construction of institutions in preparation for an independent state.

**Divisions and Rifts:** These could intensify during this public debate, but this time the claim that Israel does not mean what it says would be neutralized, possibly leading to disputes over “new” problems such as the character of the Palestinian state and the place of Islam in the state, i.e., engagement in questions of which Israel is not necessarily part.

**Agreement Mechanism:** Such a mechanism is likely to form as a result of the Israeli move because otherwise both sides would have something to lose – the Palestinian Authority as the responsible body and Hamas as its senior partner. The interest in sharing the “pie” that Israel puts on the table is likely to pose challenges to the Palestinians but also to encourage creativity and agreement.

**Loss of Faith in the Leadership and Internal Decay:** An internal debate of this sort, within a changed reality, has the potential to unite Fatah and Hamas and compel them to compromise and reach an agreement. Since the takeover in

the Gaza Strip, and all the more so since “Cast Lead,” the Palestinian public has increased its demands for reunification of these two sides.

These moves also require an honest and probing public debate in Israel regarding the future of the state. Can the Jewish character of the state be guaranteed “forever” when Israel continues to rule over a Palestinian population in Judea and Samaria? If so, what would be the status of this population? This debate has been going on for years but in the form of wrangling between one internal camp and another – a process that does not lead to any conclusion and repeatedly casts the ball into the court of the political rival, as if matters depend only on the other camp. A real debate, managed by the senior political level, could provide answers to politicians and party leaders who are hesitant to take a public stance on this issue for fear of the effect on elections, which take place in Israel quite frequently.<sup>31</sup>

A debate of this sort is likely to encourage a debate on the Palestinian side as well. It would reinforce trust in Israel and make apparent the magnitude of the process that Israel is undergoing. It is likely to provide more substantive angles to the internal Palestinian debate and to deal also with the root causes of the barriers to which Palestinian society is subject as well as efforts to overcome them. This would be a lengthy process that could continue for years, not months, and there is no guarantee that the outcome would satisfy both sides. With that, in light of the state of Israeli-Palestinian relations, it is clear that there is no escaping such a debate and that the initiative for it has to come from Israel, which holds all the bargaining chips, including control of territories subject to dispute and a cultural, democratic foundation that has an established mechanism for decision-making and open, honest, and aware public debate.

If, in parallel, Israel coordinates its approach with moderate Arab countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf states, then the process would lay a solid foundation for the formation of a regional coalition, of which Israel would be part. This coalition could provide support for such a process and more

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<sup>31</sup> In a debate of this sort, each side would expose itself to a reality that in the past it cast in sharper colors and now forces it to look at the other side not in terms of the enemy but in new terms that require overcoming impressions of antagonism, demonization, hate, and many other emotions that result from the generalizations it had made regarding the other side. In this context, see Bar-Siman-Tov, Y. (1994). “The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Learning Conflict Resolution.” *Journal of Peace Research*, 31(1), 78-79.

easily handle the Iranian threat and the sabotage efforts of extremist organizations that object to resolution and settlement of disputes and would no doubt do all they could to disrupt the process.

These ideas are based on an examination of the trends and developments that Palestinian society is undergoing and on the substance of its internal discourse and that of the Israeli population. From the Palestinian point of view, the major concession took place in 1988. Israeli recognition of this concession is the Palestinian litmus test for the sincerity of Israeli intentions. Today, therefore, words and declarations on this issue have added importance in relation to the past because of the significant time that has passed since initial contact between the two sides and because of Palestinian concerns about exploitation of its weakness, as well as the Palestinian need to know what Israel is trying to achieve in the end.

These ideas will not be of use for anyone who is unwilling or unable to consider the unambiguous delineation of borders for the Jewish state or for anyone who does not see the value of Palestinian unity for Israel. They require new thinking and the ability to view Palestinians as a neighboring nation rather than a population represented by leadership that is to be evaluated in terms of whether it is “good or bad for the Jews.” The process described here is aimed at grounding negotiations in new notions of trust and consideration of internal Palestinian problems as well as Israel’s needs. It does not necessarily guarantee that negotiations would indeed result in a speedy resolution of all the complex problems on the agenda, given that coping with the existing barriers could take many years, but it would challenge the Palestinians to deal with the barriers that prevent their reaching agreement and embarking on a process of finding a solution to their internal divisions and their conflict with Israel – two fronts that have a clear interdependence.

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