

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=68337>

Will there be a third intifada?

Olivier Pironet.

10/5/6/2014

West Bankers feel trapped between Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority's capitulation to the status quo in its unsuccessful quest for peace. And while some profit outrageously, most Palestinians are poor—and some are banking on a third intifada.

As we arrived in Nablus, towards the north of the West Bank, there was a smell of burning car tyres. Billowing clouds of acrid black smoke and stones in the road forced the driver of our shared taxi to slow down. Several dozen Palestinians, mostly shebab (young boys), had gathered to protest about the death of Alaa Awad, two days earlier. Awad, 30, a shopkeeper with two children, had been shot by Israeli soldiers as he walked past the military checkpoint at Zaatara — one of a series of checkpoints built by Israel on the approaches to Nablus to “protect” the Israeli settlements that surround the town — on his way to collect a delivery of mobile phones. “They say he shot at them and they shot back, but it’s a lie. They say whatever suits them. It’s always the same,” said our driver. My fellow passengers nodded in agreement.

Israeli soldiers watched the demonstration from the safety of their heavily armoured jeeps, parked a few hundred metres up the road, well away from any

stones that might be thrown. Eventually, they fired tear gas grenades to disperse the crowd.

Some of the young protestors came from Balata refugee camp, where we met Fayez Arafat. Arafat, 50 and a father of nine, is a camp official and runs the Yafa Cultural Centre, which, he says, “provides social, educational and psychological support to young people in the camp, and tries to raise their awareness of the issue of Palestinian refugees’ right of return.” Built in 1950 to house villagers expelled by Israel from the Jaffa area, near Tel Aviv, Balata is in Zone A, one of the three administrative areas into which the Oslo accords divide the sector of the West Bank nominally governed by the Palestinian Authority (PA), but where the Israeli army does as it pleases, in spite of the accords. The camp is a microcosm of the problems facing Palestinian refugees. Almost every household suffers from poverty (55%), lack of hygiene and unemployment (53%, of whom 65% are young people with degrees). Nearly 28,000 people — of whom 60% are under 25 — are crammed into a square kilometre, the highest population density of any area in the West Bank. They live a half-life in cramped concrete houses, lining dusty alleys so narrow — sometimes only tens of centimetres wide — that there is almost no daylight.

Balata has been known for its active fight against the occupation ever since 1976 — the Israelis call it a terrorist stronghold — and has paid a heavy price in the last few years. “Around 400 dead since the start of the second intifada [from September 2000] and thousands of wounded. Nearly 300 of our residents, most between 18 and 40, are in jail in Israel,” said Arafat, who has himself been imprisoned in Israel several times. The Israelis keep a close watch on Balata and regularly raid it to “arrest people who have taken part in demonstrations or are wanted for being political activists, or even just to ‘ensure the security’ of the area, because it is close to Joseph’s Tomb,” a site venerated by both Israelis and Palestinians. The Israeli army moved out in 2000, after occupying the site for nearly two decades, but Israeli settlers visit each week, under heavy escort, provoking the local residents. Two days before my visit, the settlers had once again occupied the site, leading to clashes, just an hour before Alaa Awad was killed.

Local Palestinians, harassed by the Israeli army and the settlers, are now at the end of their tether, according to Arafat. “We can count only on ourselves... When the Israelis suddenly appear, to search our houses or capture political activists, we try to intervene but we’re powerless. There are still weapons here, but people don’t use them. The Palestinian police should be protecting us from the settlers — there are many of them in the Nablus area, and they are some of the most aggressive — but they do nothing. They even withdraw when the Israeli army deploys in areas that should be under their jurisdiction, like this one.” Under the 1993 Oslo accord (Oslo I) the Palestinian police cannot use force against settlers if they attack Palestinians, and must refer the matter to the Israeli authorities. They must also cooperate with the Israelis in identifying and

arresting Palestinian militants who could present a threat to Israel — basically members of the Islamist movements Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the leftwing Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and dissident members of PA president Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah. "We are under constant pressure, not only from the army and settlers, but also from the Palestinian security forces. So it's easy to understand why people are angry," said Arafat. "We're like a volcano that's ready to erupt. The leaders of the sulta [Palestinian Authority], which has lost all credibility in our eyes, could find themselves on the receiving end of that anger, too."

'How can we trust the police?'

The problems are the same at the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, a 700-square metre enclave up against Israel's Separation Wall, which runs around a large part of the city and reaches eight metres high in some places. The camp has around 6,000 residents, more than half of them under 25. "A hundred and fifty of our young people — including a boy of 13 — are currently in Israeli jails, and that's not counting prisoners who have been rotting there for decades. A number of political cadres and resistance fighters were also arrested during the second intifada [2000-05]," said Nidal al-Azraq, activities coordinator at the Aida refugee centre and brother of an activist freed by Israel in 2013 after 23 years in jail. The Israeli army, one of whose watchtowers overlooking the camp was burned down by the shebab last year, "carries out operations almost every night." A few months ago, in contravention of the Oslo accords, "the occupation authorities decided to move Aida into Zone C [the camp was initially in Zone A], bringing it under their exclusive control, then declared it a 'closed military zone'," said Salah Ajarma, the centre's director. The Palestinian police are no longer allowed to enter the camp or patrol the surrounding area. Even if they were, they would immediately face opposition from the refugees. Relations have deteriorated as a result of the arrest of opposition politicians over the last few years — "sometimes under the direct orders of the Israelis," said Ajarma, who was only 14 when he was first imprisoned. "How can we trust them when they depend on the occupiers' goodwill, and are actually a threat to us?" In early 2013, residents destroyed a police station in the camp and drove out the officers. "In the end, the only difference between them and Israeli soldiers is the [Palestinian] flag they serve under."

You hear the same criticisms among large sections of Palestinian society and the major political parties, including Fatah. Many have denounced the one-way nature of security cooperation between the Palestinian police and the Israeli army, and want it to end; and it triggers frequent protests in the West Bank. However, as far the Palestinian Authority is concerned, suspending cooperation is not on the agenda, as PA president Abbas told a gathering of Israeli peace activists, journalists and businessmen in Ramallah on 28 May — to the embarrassment of some Fatah cadres. Abbas said: "Security coordination is sacred and will continue whether we agree or disagree [with the Israelis] on

policy”.

This bilateral cooperation written into Oslo I was implemented after the follow-up Cairo agreement of 1994, which stated that the Palestinian police must “take all measures necessary in order to prevent acts of terrorism, crime and hostilities” against Israel and Israeli settlements, cooperating with the Israeli army, especially through the exchange of information and joint operations. This policy, which was suspended during the second intifada, then reactivated by Abbas when he became PA president in January 2005, gained fresh momentum from the security services reforms begun by former prime minister Salem Fayyad (2007-13).

The bloated security apparatus includes around 30,000 police and gendarmerie officers — roughly one for every 80 residents, among the highest ratios in the world. It was extensively reorganised under the supervision of the US, which formed special units and equipped them with modern vehicles, cutting-edge equipment and sophisticated weaponry. The security services, partly financed by the US and the EU, absorb over 30% of the PA’s annual budget (\$4.1bn in 2014) — more than it spends on education, healthcare and agriculture combined. “They are the linchpin of the Palestinian Authority,” said Palestinian sociologist Sbeih Sbeih. “The Oslo accords turned the PA into a subcontractor for the Israeli occupation.” But wasn’t that one of the aims of the accords in the first place? In 1993, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin explained that the transfer of responsibility for some security work to the Palestinians would — most importantly — “dispense the Israeli army from having to do the work itself”.

‘Security is a pillar of the state’

Said Abu Ali, Palestinian interior minister and in charge of security cooperation from 2009 until June this year, has a completely different vision. He received us, surrounded by advisors, in his spacious office at the ministry in Ramallah, whose quiet pomp is a million miles away from the refugee camps. “The coordination policy has benefited both sides,” he said. “The efforts we have made to restore order over the past few years have enabled us to maintain a degree of stability in the West Bank, and stem terrorism and extremism. Some condemn the fact that our security services cooperate with Israel or accuse us of collaboration, but it’s something quite different. Our goal is to build a state, and security is a pillar of that state.”

But this “stability” and “security” is relative: in 2013 more than 4,600 Palestinian civilians were arrested in the West Bank and 30 or more killed by the Israeli army, in the course of 4,000 operations. At the same time, acts of violence by settlers rose by 8% (from 368 incidents in 2012 to 399) and left a hundred Palestinians wounded, mainly smallholder farmers. The Palestinian police in the West Bank are regularly accused of abusing their powers and are holding hundreds of opposition politicians in arbitrary detention. And Israel conducts

hundreds of operations every year in coordination with the Palestinian security forces. “The real purpose of this security policy, which our leaders justify in the name of the state to be built, is to satisfy the ‘international community’, on which the Authority is financially dependent, and to avoid the risk of a flare-up of violence in the territories,” said Abaher al-Sakka, professor of sociology at Birzeit University in Ramallah. “But its effect has been to breed resentment among a growing number of Palestinians, who no longer hesitate to question the legitimacy of the regime.”

The population of the West Bank is also angered by social conditions. There were widespread demonstrations in 2011 and 2012, particularly against the government’s economic policy. The neoliberal reforms introduced by Fayyad from 2007 — backed by the IMF, the World Bank, the donor countries and Israel — placed entire sections of the West Bank economy under private sector control. To promote growth and attract investors, the former prime minister launched a “shock therapy” programme, cutting 40,000 civil service jobs (there are now an estimated 150,000), reducing social spending, compressing salaries, restructuring social welfare, reforming the banking sector and privatising education and public utilities. These measures worsened inequalities and led to widespread job losses and a huge rise in the cost of living.

The rapid economic growth of the late 2000s (7% in 2008 compared with 1.5% in 2013) — linked solely to foreign aid, which funds half the PA’s budget — was just an illusion. The “Palestinian Tiger’s” economic boom, hailed by western experts, led in 2010 to an unprecedented financial crisis as soon as the aid money stopped coming in. Unemployment is among the world’s highest (20-30% in the West Bank and over 40% in Gaza), and poverty affects nearly a quarter of the population (20% of West Bank Palestinians live on less than \$2 a day), though the richest saw their incomes rise by 10% between 2007 and 2010. “The bulk of the economy is in the hands of powerful families and nouveau riches, most of whom have links with the government and are able to take advantage of its networks,” said Al-Sakka. “They lead enterprises that control the telephony, building, energy and food sectors, among others. Some invest on the Israeli stockmarket and in the industrial settlements. In exchange, they are given privileges, such as priority at checkpoints, in the same way as Authority officials.” In Ramallah in particular, these “VIPs” live in the smart areas of town where you see them driving their big shiny cars, far removed from the world of the refugees.

But above all, the economic development of the West Bank is hampered by the occupation, the Separation Wall and the network of checkpoints across the territory. Under the Paris protocol (1994), the economic and financial element of the Oslo accords, the Israelis control the business activities of Palestinians — who get 70% of their imports from and send 85% of their exports to Israel. The Israeli authorities also collect the customs duties payable to the PA. They can confiscate these, as they see fit, by way of blackmail or reprisals. “We are

subjected to a double occupation: military and economic,” said Sbeih Sbeih. “The security policy and economic oppression are two aspects of the same system, which has been in operation since Oslo.”

‘The elite don’t represent us’

Naba Alassi, 30, lives in Deheisha refugee camp in Bethlehem. A friend, shot by Israeli soldiers during a demonstration, died in his arms. He says he is angry at “the Authority and its protégés. The elite and the capitalists in Ramallah, in their big Mercedes and their 4×4s, don’t represent us. They call us ‘terrorists’ and ‘extremists’ when all we are doing is resisting the occupation. We should dismantle the Authority, which is only good for conducting pointless negotiations, which in the end are the only reason for its existence — its business.”

Over the last 20 years, summits, conferences, round tables and diplomatic tours have produced a series of declarations of principles, international resolutions and solemn promises, but none of these have borne fruit. “What’s the point of pursuing a dialogue with your enemies and being photographed shaking their hands for the benefit of the ‘international community’, when they maintain their grip on our territory? Who do these unsuccessful negotiations benefit, if it’s not the Israelis?” asked Ajarma. “All they ever do is throw us a few crumbs, and they expect us to be satisfied and say thank you. The issue of an independent state wasn’t even on the agenda for the latest talks — as if the occupation was something quite natural,” said Abdelfattah Abusrour, director of the Al-Rowwad cultural centre in Aida.

The latest talks between Israel and the PA (July 2013-April 2014), mediated by US secretary of state John Kerry, were no exception to the rule. Weren’t they destined to fail from the start, since Israel had refused to freeze settlement in the occupied territories and Washington had given up trying to put pressure on Tel Aviv? “The US has not managed to get any agreement since Oslo was implemented, and as for the Israelis, we can’t hope for anything from a government that is entirely on the side of the settlers,” said Nabil Shaath, a senior Fatah official and former chief negotiator who was one of the architects of the Oslo accords. “Even before the talks restarted, I expressed my scepticism to Mahmoud Abbas and asked him why he had agreed to return to the negotiating table under such conditions. He told me: ‘I have no choice’.” Hassan Youssef, a top Hamas leader in the West Bank, whom we met in Ramallah a few days before his arrest by the Israelis on 16 June, said: “For our part, we were totally against restarting the talks. Israel is using them to manipulate us and create fait accomplis on the ground.”

Continued settlement and military occupation, the failure of the negotiations and the discrediting of the PA are all feeding speculation that there will be a third intifada. Yet Al-Sakka thinks this is “unlikely in the short term,” for three

reasons: the Palestinian security forces, while allowing a few limited demonstrations, do everything to prevent a general uprising; internal divisions persist despite the formation in June of a government of national unity following the “reconciliation” between Fatah and Hamas; and there is no political vision or strategy capable of mobilising Palestinian society. “Our only hope, for the moment,” said Al-Sakka, “lies in the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign against Israel, and the possibility of appealing to international courts to have its military and political leaders brought to trial. But all that’s needed is a spark, a catalysing event, and there will be a new intifada.”

In the longer term, “we’re destined for another intifada,” said Ayman Abu Zulof, a former PFLP militant who was imprisoned six times between 1989 and 1993 and now works as a guide and interpreter. His house in Beit Sahour, a small Christian town near Bethlehem, faces the Israeli settlement of Har Homa. This concrete fortress, built on Beit Sahour land, stands on a hill that was covered by woods where Abu Zulof used to play as a boy. The Israelis cut them down in 1997, after annexing the site. Bethlehem is surrounded by some 20 settlements, which are growing rapidly. “They are building, but so are we, and we will continue to build,” said Abu Zulof, looking across a valley dotted with olive trees. “We will stay here, on this land where we were born, and where our ancestors were born. We will cling to it, no matter what. It’s our way of fighting on a day-to-day basis.”