

# What Future for Palestinians?

Pamela Ferguson

Well, what does the future hold for the Palestinians? How can self-determination be achieved? This is a question that should disturb us, but too often this question, at the very core of the Middle East conflict, is swept away by the mechanics of war, of peace, of oil and of troop disengagement. Such irony is hard to stomach and is a bare reward for those many Palestinians of varying political beliefs who support the involvement of the Palestine Liberation Organization at the Geneva peace talks and speak encouragingly about a separate Palestine state.

The idea of such a state needs to be scrutinized against the backgrounds of both Israeli and Jordanian policies regarding the Palestinians, in order to understand fully why these policies are quite inadequate and why it is impossible to imagine a Palestinian state linked either to Israel or Jordan. The idea of an independent state pinned between Israel and Jordan is acceptable only with radical changes and concessions—from Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians alike—that will ensure peace and harmony from border to border.

Israel and Jordan ride a rough seesaw over the Palestinians, and the way this affects the daily lives of the Palestinians is insufficiently known. However, King Hussein has started to make major concessions. His May 1 speech in Amman publicly confirmed that he was prepared to abide by the "collective Arab will" that supported PLO responsibility for the recovery and rule of occupied land. In short, he washed his hands of political responsibility for the Palestinians—a major change from his determination at the outset of the Geneva peace talks that only his representatives would represent the Palestinians. Early in 1972 he spoke of a "federal Arab kingdom" link-

ing Jordan with the West Bank. In his May 1 speech he was prepared to "leave it to history to pass its final judgment."

Interestingly, a member of a leading Palestinian family in diplomatic service for the Jordanian government expressed to me privately in January, 1971, the same sentiment, though in a totally different context. At the time Jordan was suffering from a fresh round of fighting between troops and Palestinian commandos following the bloody events of the September, 1970, civil war. "Such irreparable harm," this diplomat commented sadly. "Only history can pass the final judgment on the Jordanians for what they have done to the Palestinians."

It may seem unfair to the Jordanians to turn the clock back to those days, but it is essential to show how these events sharpened the divisions between the proestablishment Palestinians and Jordanians and the antiestablishment Palestinians and Jordanians. With the years it has become possible to distinguish between those who were merely Palestinian by name and those who were strongly Palestinian by nature.

It is misleading to talk about a clear-cut division between Palestinian and Jordanian for this reason. There are several Palestinians in the army, police and government service in Jordan who have thrown in their lot with King Hussein and who are quick to tell foreign journalists "We don't want acts of violence here. . . . Munich . . . Khartoum . . . we don't want any of that here." It has been official Jordanian policy to insist that there were no divisions between Jordanian and Palestinian. It has been the policy of prominent Palestinian spokesmen to insist there were. (Even the Jordanian telex operator who was sending my news copy from Amman to London last year objected violently to typing the word "Palestinian" and to my proposals for a separate Palestinian state, and kept on breaking off in midmessage to argue the point!)

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Before 1967 Jordan was careful not to encourage anything that could disassociate the Palestinian entity from the Jordanian; indeed, senior officials recall a special meeting at prime-ministerial level in the early fifties to discuss the ways in which the Palestinian entity could be preserved. But the proposals were dropped and never referred to again. And restrictions increased against Palestinians who were brave enough to demonstrate against or object to the Hashemite rule. They were often subjected to the same sort of treatment as the Communists and the pro-Nasserites—incarceration in a detention camp, without trial.

Jordan has always had a strangely schizophrenic attitude to the Palestinians, and at no time was this more clearly visible than in the quick swap-around of governments during the September, 1970, crisis. Jordanians are quick to defend their actions against ardent Palestinians by pointing out the immense freedom and privileges that were handed out to the *fedayeen* from May, 1968, to the autumn of 1970, when, threatened by a fifth column and embarrassed by the hijacking of three aircraft to Jordan in August, 1970, the King and his army decided to show the *fedayeen* who was boss.

This was set about in various ways and resulted in over three thousand dead and hundreds wounded, the refugee camps inevitably taking the heaviest toll. Outwardly it would appear that the King was merely attempting to restore law and order. In fact September, 1970, symbolized the King's intention to clear Jordan of militants, revolutionary elements and their sympathizers. His army took nearly a year to do this. The press made much of various cease-fires that were signed between the army and the *fedayeen*, but the army had little intention of honoring the agreements.

For example—after only four months in office—the cabinet (under Abdel Moneim el Rifai) resigned on the same evening that it signed an agreement with the *fedayeen* for a cease-fire. The next morning a military cabinet was, very conveniently, ready to be sworn in. This meant that powers higher than Rifai had no intention of respecting the cease-fire agreement. When he realized this, Rifai was forced to resign, although official sources later claimed he had resigned for “health reasons” and that a military cabinet was needed to implement the cease-fire. The *fedayeen* were suspicious of this bewildering and sudden change of premiers, so they withdrew their signature from the agreement.

The new cabinet under the premiership of the Palestinian Brigadier Mohammed Douad, wanted to restore the cease-fire, until it became clear that not even he was in full control of the armed forces. Fighting resumed and very heavy casualties were inflicted. Douad resigned after only ten days in office. I met him a few months later in Cairo and found an ill and broken-hearted man living in self-imposed

exile in a quiet suburb with his wife, a New Zealander. He died within a year.

Another Palestinian, Ahmed Tukan, was sworn in after Douad resigned. Later, sources most critical of the King maintained that both Douad and Tukan were chosen as “front men,” puppets, selected to disprove popular theories in the West that the battle was severing Jordan between Palestinians and Jordanians. Both men suffered personal humiliation as a result. A Jordanian, Wasfi Tell, was appointed after Tukan. A previous premier, he had earned the reputation of being a hard-liner with the Palestinians, and events in Jordan certainly proved it. A group of Palestinians took their revenge on Tell; he was assassinated on the steps of Cairo's fashionable Sheraton Hotel on November 28, 1971.

It is not pretty to be reminded of 1970 and the years following, but it is necessary to show how the back of Palestinian resistance was broken in Jordan and why significant Palestinian forces today would never accept the idea of a federal state linked to Jordan. Today the mutual mistrust and suspicion between Palestinians of varying political affiliations in Jordan is impossible for any journalist to ignore. Outward signs of prosperity (in the form of new shoes or a new house) are regarded with the utmost suspicion and rouse comments like “Hmmm . . . he is spying for the government,” or “Hmmm, a CIA man” or, with a shrug, the rhetorical question “What's the difference anyway?” Certainly there is nothing secretive about the way the secret service “heavies” hang around the foyer of that famous marketplace for information, the Intercontinental Hotel in Amman, nor about the alleged links with the Israeli secret service, and the CIA involvement in both.

The suspicion and mistrust run just as deeply across the river, in the territories occupied by Israel since June, 1967. Israeli law clearly exploits this. The “Not Preventing an Offense” law under section 59 of the military law of the occupied areas enables the Israelis to arrest *anyone* who does not pass on information or tell the authorities about suspicious activities or about suspected persons. Those sentenced need not have gone as far as “aiding and abetting” or “conspiring.” Indeed, Felicia Langer, Israel's foremost civil rights lawyer, told me in London recently that she has defended mothers, sons and fathers sentenced for “offering a glass of water” to members of a family merely suspected of being *fedayeen*.

The Israelis argue against this criticism, saying that without a death sentence such measures are necessary in the interests of law and order. However, this law (described by Mrs. Langer as the authorities' way of transforming the “whole nation into Quislings and informers”) is merely one of various harsh measures imposed on the Palestinians under



Ferguson

occupation. For example, between 1967 and 1973 alone the Israelis expropriated 72,000 dunams of land (1 dunam =  $\frac{1}{4}$  acre), demolished 17,180 houses and (to 1972) deported 1,482 Palestinians. Each of these actions is in direct violation of various articles of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, drawn up at the end of World War II following the ghastly experiences of the victims of Nazi German.

The statistics I offer are from detailed records (names, dates, incidents) supplied to me by Dr. Aref el-Aref exactly two weeks before he died in July, 1973. I was possibly the last Western journalist to interview him, and later had the facts he gave me verified by Dr. Israel Shahak, head of the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights. Dr. el-Aref gathered his information each day from Hebrew, Arabic, English and German newspapers, TV and radio broadcasts, and was able to support each statistic with a press clipping, monitored report, photograph or an interview with the family concerned. These records, perhaps the most intricate and detailed to be kept by anyone during the occupation, are awaiting publication in Beirut.

I mention these statistics because they are far higher, of course, than Israeli official figures. For example, a booklet entitled *Arabs and Israelis, Life Together* by Gideon Weigert, given out by the Israeli government press office, lists the number of deportees to 1972 as only 70—against my detailed list of 1,482 for the identical period. The sum total of deportees, land expropriation, the establishment of settlements in the occupied areas (forty-five to date), the demolition of houses, imprisonment without trial and the destruction of villages, is intended to undermine the confidence, livelihoods and security of Pal-

estinians living under occupation. The Israelis would find it well-nigh impossible to justify all these actions on "military or security" grounds alone, and certainly the majority of those Palestinians who are made to suffer by these actions are *not* convicted saboteurs.

The law permitting the demolition of a suspect's home, or that of his family, dates back to the British Mandate, the only difference being that before 1948 the families involved could appeal to the High Court. But even this right is denied to Palestinians today. In fact, houses are sometimes demolished before the suspect is even put on trial.

Again, the Israelis will argue that such measures are necessary to keep acts of revolutionary violence at bay, or to discourage young Palestinians from joining the *fedayeen*, but in fact the Israeli measures are far more politically exacting. For example, under the country's administrative order of the Defense Regulations (1945) inherited from the British Mandate, *anybody* suspected of endangering the security of the state can be detained indefinitely—without trial. This is a far harsher law than the more familiar 90-day or 180-day law of Vorster's South Africa, as the detention time is unlimited. The law has been nicknamed "life sentence" by many Palestinians.

During mid-May this year some 150 Palestinians were arrested in the occupied areas. Not saboteurs or even suspected saboteurs but members and suspected sympathizers of the Communist and Palestine National Front parties. This is ironical for two reasons. The Communist Party in Israel proper is lawful and large, but the occupied areas share both Israeli military law and Jordanian

law, and communism is outlawed under the latter. The National Front comprises all the political groups in the occupied areas and, as far back as mid-December, 1973, pledged its support of the PLO involvement in the Geneva peace talks. More important, it accepts U.N. Resolution 242.

The arrests brought the total detained (to mid-May, before the terrible scene of Ma'alot) to some 400 since the October war, for a total of over 3,500 imprisoned for political reasons since the June, 1967, war. When Felicia Langer arrived in London in mid-May she was particularly concerned, because she had been unable to obtain *habeas corpus* for nine of those arrested as suspected Communists. She said that she and her fellow lawyers had often been denied access to clients for up to two months, in spite of persistent appeals to the High Courts. She also detailed several cases of torture and maltreatment of political prisoners before they were put on trial and added that Red Cross representatives were being denied the usual access. She is calling for a public inquiry into conditions in the prisons and evidence of torture. To date her complaints and those of other lawyers are met with the standard reply, "Your complaint is completely baseless." Says Mrs. Langer: "If my clients and I are not speaking the truth, why don't they establish an unbiased committee to come into the prisons? Why deny access to journalists, members of parliament and the U.N.?"

Mrs. Langer addressed a press conference in London on May 15—the morning of the Ma'alot attack. She was quick to condemn the attack and similar acts of violence that "torpedo the efforts being made by Jews and Arabs for peace." She added: "Such actions undermine the just struggle of the Palestinian people and strengthen the aggressive elements in Israel." Indeed, Israel's retaliatory measures on civilians in Lebanon soon afterward confirmed her words.

Unhappily, violence and the bloodshed of innocents turn the clock back and inspire a cyclical mood of blood vengeance. It also provides an excuse for mass arrests, arbitrary deportation and detention. The rounding up of Communists, suspected Communists and National Front sympathizers *prior* to the Ma'alot attack certainly contradicts the popular misconception that such measures are imposed solely on saboteurs or *fedayeen*.

It is important to remember that the Palestinians have no judicial means of opposing the occupation. Strikes are prohibited (in shops, schools, markets), the distribution of leaflets is forbidden, and the mere possession of the Palestinian flag is regarded as a crime by the authorities. Interestingly, a Jew has the right to close his shop—as a form of protest—say, for a day, but if an Arab in a place like East Jerusalem does this, his shop can be closed down.

A frightening prospect is the future application of Israel's March, 1972, Amendment to the Criminal Code (Offenses Abroad) law, an amendment under

which the Israelis can arrest whomever they like outside of Israel if they are considered by the authorities to be a potential threat to the security or economy of the state. The first sentence passed under this law was on a group of ten captured in Lebanon in March last year and whisked over the border to Israel to stand trial in a military court for being members of an illegal organization and for possessing offensive weapons, *in Lebanon*. During May of this year the court sentenced each to six years in prison.

The vigil of the Israeli secret service, the Shin Beth, is so exacting abroad that in another case an Israeli Arab, Shahar Abu-Het, was sentenced to five years in prison for holding a discussion in East Berlin last year with a member of his family who was "alleged to be a member of Al Fatah."

The deep penetration of both the Israeli and Jordanian systems into Palestinian life furthers the fragmentation of the people. Would a separate Palestinian state solve this? Certainly it would draw out the thorn in the flesh for both Israel and Jordan (and Lebanon), since in each country the Palestinians are regarded with a mixture of resentment, suspicion and mistrust.

For such a state to exist it would need to be totally free of either Israeli or Jordanian ties, and this means a complete turnabout in the economic life of the West Bank. At the moment the West Bank needs Israel as a source of investment and as an employer, and it needs Jordan as an outlet to markets in the Arab world. Similarly, Gaza has been turned into the equivalent of a development area, with several factories turning out goods under contract to Israeli companies. The underlying message is clear enough: If Palestinian businessmen and industrialists are prepared to cooperate with the occupier, their future is assured. Israel's eagerness to offer joint incentives, build roads, hospitals, lay water pipes and erect street lights and so on symbolizes the authorities' desire to win hearts by improving living standards. The political implication of this is quite obvious.

A Palestinian state would need to be independent of all this and would require the finest managerial and industrial capabilities of Palestinians from all over the world to bring it about. This is a staggering projection, but many Palestinians are coming to regard it as preferable to their present conditions. These Palestinians are, therefore, making concessions in this direction, and what was once a taboo subject—an independent state—is receiving an encouraging response. Without some form of territorial independence the Palestinians will continue to be regarded by their various host countries as revolutionary threats and a political nuisance. This isn't merely a gloomy thought for a splintered people. It recognizes their right to save themselves from a slow and subtle process of disintegration as a people.