Introduction: The Second Intifada

NADA ELIA

On September 28, 2000, Ariel Sharon visited Al-Aqsa Mosque in the occupied part of Jerusalem, flanked by over 1000 heavily-armed Israeli soldiers and bodyguards, an obvious sign to all that his visit had the blessing of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Indeed, Barak’s approval rating, which had suffered many recent setbacks, rose from 20 to 50 percent after Sharon’s visit. As tensions rose over the openly provocative visit, Muslims were soon barred from entering the Mosque on their own day of prayer.

The visit of any official of an occupying power, flanked by soldiers of an occupying army, and resulting in a people not being allowed to practice their religion, would be sufficient provocation. But Sharon, a “hawk” whose ruthlessness has earned him the reprimand of his own Israeli cabinet, is not just any Israeli official, and has been described by Noam Chomsky as “the very symbol of Israeli state terror and aggression, with a rich record of atrocities going back to 1953.”

As early as 1971, Sharon had led a systematic campaign to quell opposition in Gaza through repression, expulsions, arrests and imprisonment. In 1982, in his capacity as Israeli Defense Minister, he had led the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. An Israeli cabinet found him indirectly responsible for the brutal massacre of thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. He was removed from office as defense minister, but remained in the cabinet as “minister without portfolio.” In 1990, he served as Housing Minister, promoting a massive expansion of Israeli settlements in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. His visit to Al-Aqsa was fully in keeping with his provocative stance, expressed daily in the fact that he has draped his own house in the Old City in Jerusalem in a large Israeli flag. In his essay included here, Adam Keller, spokes-person of the Israeli Peace Bloc, calls him an “arch provocateur.”

The resentment of the Palestinian people over their deteriorating circumstances since the much-taunted 1993 Oslo Accords erupted in widespread rebellion, and
children and youth resorted once again to throwing stones and rocks at Israeli soldiers, in a perfectly appropriate illustration of the power dynamics at play: an impoverished, dispossessed, stateless people, whose violated rights have no champion in the world, whose land is occupied, standing up to a nuclear power with the world’s fourth most powerful army. What would soon become known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, or the Second Intifada, had erupted.

In many ways, it was business as usual. The world watched as Palestinian civilians, mostly unarmed children and young men, were massacred by Israeli helicopters, tanks, missile and sniper fire, and the media spoke of “renewed Palestinian violence”—not Israeli. Of a “crisis in the Middle East”—not a war, despite Israel’s arsenal and trigger-happy military, (caught on film by a BBC reporter, whose photograph of an Israeli soldier with the words “Born To Kill” painted on his helmet raised few international eyebrows.) In fact, the media continued to spin their lies about the Palestinians being “born to kill the Jews,” breeding their children for that task. This accusation contains the racist belief that Arab parents do not care about their children dying, when in truth, as a whole community fights for its very existence and freedom, its unsheltered youth cannot help but take part. And history has otherwise glorified children (so long as they were not Arab) who have fought for their country’s liberation: Joan of Arc was 16 when she led the French Army into battle, and more recently, the Jewish boy who, in 1948, destroyed a Syrian tank, has become a national hero in Israel. And one must not fail to mention that greatest stone-thrower in world history, little David who slew Goliath....

The media portrayed Israel, not the Palestinians, as “coming under siege,” although the confrontations were taking place in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, illegally annexed by Israel despite United Nations Resolution 242 (November 22, 1967) which “emphasiz[es] the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war,” and calls for the “withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent [June 1967] conflict.”2 Adopted unanimously at the United Nations, Resolution 242 was never implemented. And, as always, it was the Palestinian party, in the person of Yasser Arafat, who was deemed responsible for the “setback in the peace process” which the Oslo Accords were supposed to have ushered in, despite the fact that Oslo could not bring about peace, for it was an essentially flawed agreement, as proven by the fact that not even the slightest progress towards peace had happened in the seven years since it was signed.3 Instead, expropriations, demolitions of Palestinian homes, and the construction of new settlements in the Occupied Territories continued unabated through the administrations of Yitzhak Rabin — the signatory, with Arafat, of the Oslo Accords — Shimon Perez, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Ehud Barak.

Arafat was blamed for the collapse of the “peace process,” for he was said to be unwilling to make sufficient concessions, while Barak “has turned every stone to achieve peace.” The reality, both on the ground and in negotiation sessions,
was completely different, but we were not told that. Indeed, Barak has accelerated the pace of setting up new settlements from his first days in office, in the guise of “enlarging” existing ones, and buffering these with “security zones” by confiscating Palestinian land and demolishing Palestinian homes. Whereas even Benjamin Netanyahu had returned the greater part of Hebron to the Palestinians, Barak had not returned one single inch of the Occupied Territories. Politically, Barak had announced five “red lines” which he would not cross under any circumstances at the Camp David summit that immediately preceded the Al-Aqsa Intifada, including no right of return for a single Palestinian refugee to Israel, no return to the pre-1967 border, and full Israeli sovereignty over the entire city of Jerusalem. Yet it was Arafat who was blamed for the collapse of the Camp David Summit.

Theodore Herzl, founder of the World Zionist Organization, wrote in his diary that the creation of the state of Israel would require of the Zionists that they “spirit the penniless population across the frontier by denying them employment. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly.” The expropriation and displacement of Palestinians has indeed been going on for decades, the difference being that Israel no longer seeks to act “discreetly and circumspectly.” In the year 2000, as the world watched, Israel launched its heavy artillery against unarmed, stone-throwing civilians besieged in the territories it now occupies, despite United Nations recognition of their being Palestinian land, and claims it — Israel — is victimized by “Palestinian violence.” In his essay, “The Last Taboo in American Discourse,” Edward Said looks at the Zionist bias in the U.S. media, arguing that a denunciation of Zionism is simply impermissible in the U.S., which allows for public discussion of once-censored topics such as abortion and homosexuality, and for the public burning of the American flag, but prohibits criticism of Israel. And Hanan Ashrawi’s essay, “A Tragic Reversal,” foregrounds one specific example of the media spin, as she responds to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s accusation that Palestinians are besieging Israel, making it appear as if Israel were the victim, rather than the brutal oppressor.

As many of the articles in this issue demonstrate, “Oslo” was doomed to failure because it had not resolved key issues such as the status of Jerusalem, the final borders between Israel and Palestine, the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories, and the right of return of Palestinian refugees. Written shortly after the Oslo Agreements were signed and heralded as the beginning of “peace” in Israel and Palestine, Lisa Majaj’s essay, “Peace in the Making?” expresses the skepticism of the majority of Palestinians, who could not reconcile themselves to their leader’s capitulation being presented as a Palestinian triumph. In “War by Other Means: The Oslo Peace Process and the Second Intifada,” Souad Dajani argues that the Al-Aqsa Intifada did not result from the failure of Oslo, but stems instead from the very flaws built into the Oslo accords, which fail to address the
legitimate needs of the Palestinians. A Palestinian-American, Dajani is not alone in doubting the possibility of such an agreement ever achieving peace, as we read in Michael Warschawski’s “Open Letter to a Friend in Peace Now,” where the author, a citizen of Israel, also explains that the Oslo accords carry the seeds of insurrection, as they legitimize occupation, segregation, and dispossession. Coming from a slightly different perspective, Reuven Kaminer, also an Israeli citizen, writes that “the Oslo accords are not the enemy and are not the cause for the absence of peace. [...] Israel is to blame, and not Oslo.” Kaminer very strongly denounces the Israeli response, both military and civilian, to the Palestinian uprising: “Israel shoots to kill civilians because there is a deep, endemic racism in its military and police. [...] The large gangs of Israeli hooligans who took to the streets to kill Arabs, to burn their stores and mosques last week sucked up their ‘street racism’ from the interstices of the Israeli security forces.”

In keeping with the racism of the leaders and the hooligans, the suffering of the Palestinians is not acknowledged. This issue of *Radical Philosophy Review* tries to remedy this, in the very limited space afforded us in these few pages, by providing space for the expression of the humanity of the Palestinians living, surviving, struggling, and dying, in the Occupied Territories. Included here are excerpts from the diary of Muna Hamzeh, a journalist living in Dheisheh refugee camp, three interviews with Palestinians living in the cut-off towns in the Occupied Territories, conducted by Ibtisam Barakat, herself a native of East Jerusalem, as well as an essay by Elias Rashmawi, born in Gaza, who was issued a permanent deportation order by the Israeli High Court because of his activism for Palestine while a student in the U.S. In November 2000, Rashmawi was granted a “special humanitarian” limited permit to re-enter Palestine, to attend his father’s funeral.

Excerpts from another diary follow Rashmawi’s essay. This time, the author, Adam Keller, is a member of the Israeli left, and his writing expresses his utter frustration with his country’s policies, as well as the sense of urgency and confusion permeating the Israeli left, which seems to fragment as some members vow loyalty and support to Barak, while others denounce his brutal measures disguised as “generous offers.”

Israel has indeed aggressively pursued an armed policy of dispossession since its creation in 1948, as expressed in the following choice statements made by various Israeli politicians over the last fifty-two years:

“We must do everything to ensure they [the Palestinians] never do return.”
David Ben-Gurion, 1948.

“We should prepare to go on the offensive. Our aim is to smash Lebanon, Trans-Jordan, and Syria. The weak point is Lebanon, for the Moslem regime is artificial and easy to undermine. We shall establish a Christian state there, and then we will smash the Arab legion, eliminate Trans-Jordan. Syria will fall to us. We then bomb and move on to take Port Said, Alexandria, and Sinai.”
David Ben-Gurion, addressing the General Staff in 1948.
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And another by Ben-Gurion: “If I was an Arab leader I would never make [peace] with Israel. That is natural: we have taken their country.”

“We must use terror, assassination, intimidation, land confiscation, and the cutting of all social services to rid the Galilee of its Arab population.” Israel Koenig, “The Koenig Memorandum.”

“It should be clear that there is no room for both peoples to live in this country . . . Not one village, not one tribe must remain. They must be moved to Iraq, Syria, or even Transjordan.” Joseph Weitz, Diaries and Letters to the Children.

“[The Palestinians] are beasts walking on two legs.” Menahim Begin, speech to the Knesset.

“We shall use the ultimate force until the Palestinians come crawling to us on all fours.” Rafael Eitan, Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces.

Booker T. Washington is denounced by one and all for his suggestion that African Americans should seek to acquire only technical and agricultural skills, shying away from intellectual pursuits. Washington was a pragmatist, and he did not doubt the intellectual capacities of blacks as much as he assessed correctly the racism of whites. Yet Israel Koenig’s report reveals a no-less insidious opinion of the Arab intellect, for Koenig suggests that, by setting the same standards for Arabs and Jews, the former will lag behind of their own “natural” inferiority, and end up with the menial jobs. In his report, Koenig writes:

(a) The reception criteria for Arab university students should be the same as for Jewish students and this must also apply for the granting of scholarship. A meticulous implementation of these rules will produce a natural selection and will considerably reduce the number of Arab students. Accordingly, the number of low-standard graduates will also decrease, a fact that will facilitate their absorption into work after studies.

(b) Encourage the channeling of [Arab] students into technical professions, the physical and natural sciences. These studies leave less time for dabbling in nationalism and the dropout rate is higher.

“If Palestinians were black,” reads a recent article in the mainstream British media, “Israel would now be a pariah state subject to economic sanctions led by the United States. Its development and settlement of the West Bank would be seen as a system of apartheid, in which the indigenous population was allowed to live in a tiny fraction of its own country, in self-administered ‘bantustans,’ with ‘whites’ monopolizing the supply of water and electricity. And just as the black population was allowed into South Africa’s white areas in disgracefully under-resourced townships, so Israel’s treatment of Israeli Arabs — flagrantly discriminating against them in housing and education spending — would be recognized as scandalous too.” (The Guardian, Oct. 15)

I am compelled to point out that the victimization of Blacks does not receive worldwide denunciation, and that Blacks are being killed in large numbers daily as a result of flawed systems that have not addressed the multiple consequences of slavery and colonialism, while the world community at best watches in silent
consent, at worst cheers on the executioners. Nevertheless, the analogy with South Africa is valuable because it expresses a mainstream European recognition that Israel, the self-claimed “only democracy in the Middle East,” officially practices apartheid. Moreover, it was Black activism throughout Africa and in the Diaspora that finally brought about the end of apartheid, not the much-touted economic sanctions.

But the Palestinians are not black, and they have no international network of support and activism to reckon with . . . According to Tanya Reinhart, a professor at Tel Aviv University and the University of Utrecht, Israel’s policy is to kill between five to ten Palestinians a day, so as to incapacitate the resistance without incurring world condemnation. An article in the October 30 Jerusalem Post explains: “The prime minister said that, were there not 140 Palestinian casualties at this point, but rather 400 or 1000, this . . . would perhaps damage Israel a great deal.” Barak’s wager is correct. It is also an illustration of how the world condones Israeli violence. For one can easily imagine the world outcry that would surround the killing of five to ten Jews a day. Indeed, one need not imagine: on three occasions, two Jews were killed during the Second Intifada. Their deaths made headline news that day, breaking with the monotony of the seemingly endless Florida recount. On November 20, to cite but one example, two Israelis were killed in a bus bombing. CBS, NBC, and ABC all covered the bombing, and CBS and ABC interviewed the parents of the injured Israeli children, and spoke to many of their family members. In themselves, these interviews would not be offensive, yet they certainly are so when one observes that CBS, NBC and ABC have not once interviewed a single Palestinian victim or their family members. Palestinian deaths are a daily occurrence since September 28, yet they are only occasionally mentioned, in a seemingly random manner. Israeli victims are mentioned by name and age, but that is not the case for the Palestinians. Indeed, Palestinian injuries seem to simply not count, as evidenced by the fact that, for example, CNN reported a “relative calm” in the territories on November 3 — the very same day that, according to the Red Crescent, up to 452 Palestinians were hurt. And when some of the injured die, they are not even listed among the casualties of the day.

History books are replete with myths, lies, and falsehoods that are now being successfully denounced. Female slaves did not “seduce” their defenseless masters, they were raped. Columbus did not “discover” America, he heralded its invasion and the genocide of the Native Americans, a full ninety percent of whom died in the first 150 years of the European colonization of the North American continent. Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands did not “civilize” the African continent, they underdeveloped it. Women do not naturally slip into a subordinate position, patriarchy forces them into it. Surely, it is high time the Zionist narrative were also denounced for what it is: a cruel, racist distortion of the reality. Palestine is not a land without people for a people without land, as
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Israel’s former Prime Minister, Golda Meir, would have the world believe. Palestine is the land of the Palestinians, whose revolt against the continuing occupation today proves they will not give it up.

I would like to think the world will finally wake up to the reality of the suffering of the Palestinians. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194, (December 11, 1948), “Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest predictable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the governments or authorities responsible.” Numbering over five million diasporans, Palestinians today are the world’s largest and longest-existing refugee population, and they are being told by Israel and the United States to forget about return and/or compensation. In his January 8, 2001, farewell speech to the Israel Policy Forum at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, Clinton explained that the peace proposal he offered Arafat in late December 2000 — a proposal denounced by the Palestinian negotiating team as exactly what Israel had demanded of them in earlier meetings — did not require of Israel to acknowledge the Palestinian refugees’ right of return, because “that would threaten the very foundation of the nation [Israel].” Clinton, the first US president to visit Gaza, noted he had learned “firsthand” the “suffering” and also the “resilience and courage” of the Palestinian people, adding that his visit had convinced him “the Palestinian people have been used as a political football long enough.” It is all the more disheartening, then, to see the cavalier way he dismissed their right of return, echoing, over sixty years later, the words of Joseph Weitz, the director of the Jewish National Land Fund, one of the Zionist founders of Israel, who wrote in 1940: [T]here is no way besides transferring the Arabs from here to the neighboring countries, to transfer them all; except maybe for Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Old Jerusalem, we must not leave a single village, not a single tribe .... For that purpose we’ll find money, and a lot of money. ... There is no other way out.”

I would like to think the world will realize the irony in the fact that, as Israel continues to claim, and obtain, restitution for losses incurred due to anti-semitism in Europe over fifty years ago, the Palestinians are told to forget about their losses of land, property, dignity, human rights, and the lives of loved ones.

The picture can be very grim: the war of attrition (among other wars) waged against the Palestinian people may lead to the ultimate end desired by the US and Israel — the capitulation of the weary Palestinian population. Even if that were to happen — and let us never forget this real possibility, lest we let our guards down, and allow it to happen — I want to raise a few rhetorical questions: If a woman finally collapses after unsuccessfully attempting to fight off a gang of rapists, is she consenting to her own rape? Will the world look away from her bloodied lifeless body, choosing instead to focus on the scratches and bruises she...
“inflicted” on the rapists, before her last moan? Will the rapists claim they were the victims, because she put up a reasonably good fight? As we prepare to go to press in February 2001, Sharon, the “arch-provocateur,” has secured a commanding victory in the Knesset elections, with a very comfortable lead over Barak. His slogan: “A strong Sharon for a strong Israel,” proclaims his belief that we have so far seen only the “compassionate” side of Israel. George W. Bush has taken up residence at the White House. But leadership changes in the US and Israel have not changed the tragic course of the Palestinian people in any significant way. And leadership changes in the Arab world, which would usher in genuine support for the Palestinian people, are long overdue but nowhere in sight. And yet, against all odds, I would like to be hopeful. Genocides and outrageous violations of basic human rights have happened before in history, with what may possibly be the largest ever happening right here, in this “land of the free,” built with hitherto-uncompensated slave labor, and which has since become a “nation of immigrants” — as Israel is today. Not all genocides have been successfully denounced, and some denunciations do come too late. I would like to believe the world will finally take a stand against Israeli apartheid, as it did against South African apartheid, tardily, but in time to end a murderous institution. I would like to believe it is not already too late, that we have indeed learned from history, and that we will not allow another genocide to happen, to go undenounced, or worse yet, to be supported politically, financially, and militarily, by the world’s only superpower, the self-appointed “world cop,” self-named “honest broker.”

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Bassam al-Balbeisi, the ambulance driver who was shot dead as he attempted to rescue Mohammad al-Durra, the boy the world watched being killed, and to all the “children of the stone,” that they should one day be recognized as their country’s liberators.

NOTES

2. For the full text of various UN resolutions relevant to the Palestinian issue, look up: www.badii.org/Intifada2000/Intifada2000.html.
8. Koenig, then Northern District (Galilee) commissioner, wrote his secret report for then Prime Minister Yitzah Rabin, with practical advise on “handling the Arabs in Israel.” The full text of the Koenig Report was subsequently leaked to Al-Hamishmar on September 7, 1976. Excerpts appear in Edward Said, The Question of Palestine, 107–111.


13. In 1969, Meir flatly claimed there were no Palestinians, as her information departments and expert “Arabists” explained the inhabitants of Palestine were “Southern Syrians.” Yitzhak Rabin himself, until Oslo in 1993, referred to Palestinians as “so-called Palestinians.”
