Palestinian leadership and the contemporary significance of the First Intifada

NADIA NASER-NAJJAB

Abstract: On the eve of the highly controversial 2020 plan for Israel to annex parts of the West Bank, the author examines the nature of the Palestinian condition and the many challenges Palestinians confront, including the absence of an effective leadership. In registering this, the article proposes a reassessment of the First Intifada that places it in a contemporary perspective and seeks to ‘excavate’ modes of resistance. It engages with the problematic of leadership and highlights how existing challenges might be addressed. Taking into account the Oslo Accords and subsequent attempts towards neoliberal state-building, it draws on theories of settler colonialism and stresses the neo-colonial continuum in Palestine. Finally, the author interviews key activists from the First Intifada to (respectively) provide insight into the nature of the contemporary situation and suggest an alternative model of leadership and struggle.

Keywords: First Intifada, Oslo Accords, Palestinian leadership, settler colonialism, Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU)

Nadia Naser-Najjab is a Research Fellow in the European Centre for Palestine Studies, which is based in the University of Exeter’s Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies. Her most recent book is Dialogue in Palestine: the People-to-People Diplomacy Programme and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (Bloomsbury, 2020).
Introduction

Amidst a global pandemic, West Bank Palestinians face an ongoing crisis of their own, in the form of threatened annexation. In this article I suggest that this is, in many respects, a crisis foretold, which is rooted in a prolonged crisis of Palestinian leadership. The lack of an analysis of the colonial situation, a strategy or a plan, have become painfully apparent over time, even if their effects are most clearly embodied in the immediacy of the current threat.

I propose that bringing the First Intifada into contemporary perspective can make an important and vital contribution. The First Intifada was a broad-based popular uprising, which included broad sections of Palestinian society from both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It was spontaneous, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership in Tunis was just as surprised as Israel’s politicians and military officials when it broke out. The uprising had different dimensions, which included popular protests, strikes against the civil administration and the establishment of parallel educational arrangements. It was predominantly non-violent and was led by the Unified Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU).

The uprising began in December 1987 after an Israeli vehicle was involved in a traffic accident in the northern Gaza Strip that killed four Palestinians. After a false rumour spread that this was not an accident, popular unrest rapidly spread across the West Bank and Gaza Strip and developed into a full-scale uprising that reconfigured Palestinian-Israeli relations, transformed internal Palestinian political arrangements and fundamentally altered the perceptions that international observers had of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

This First Intifada lasted until the PLO and Israel signed Oslo Accord I on 13 September 1993. This agreement established the principles (its formal title was Declaration of Principles for Palestinian Self Government) that would guide cooperation between Israel and the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA) during an interim period. After this (six-year) period had passed, the two parties would then engage in direct peace talks, known as Camp David, with the intention of resolving deeply contentious ‘final status’ issues such as borders, Jerusalem and settlements.

The uprising is fondly remembered by West Bankers and Gazans, who celebrate it as the point when Palestinians first collectively mobilised in opposition to the occupation. However, this open celebration is more than slightly mitigated by a deep regret that its audacity, spirit and spontaneity is so clearly and manifestly lacking in the present.

Before the Intifada broke out, the eighteenth meeting of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) in April 1987 committed Palestinian factions and the divided leadership to unite in response to ongoing political challenges. UNLU sought to incorporate this sense of unity into the popular struggle. When Israel tried to co-opt UNLU, it insisted that it was not an alternative to the PLO and emphasised that the PLO was the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.
The UNLU recognised the limitations of ‘compromise’ and ‘moderation’, and clearly understood that unwarranted ‘concessions’ would produce a fragmented land and population, isolated ‘Bantustans’ and categories or sub-divisions of Palestinians. It accordingly rejected ‘autonomy’ and insisted on independence, and this was why it abruptly dismissed the Shultz Plan ('Palestinian land will remain occupied, settlements will proliferate with generous government support [and] Israel’s army will continue to patrol the streets of Palestinian towns, villages and camps whenever they decide that it is in the interest of the security of Israel').

The UNLU’s position reflected a more general suspicion of the US and its regional initiatives. This clearly contrasted with the attitudes and predispositions of Palestinian negotiators in the ‘secret channel’ talks that produced the Oslo agreements and the subsequent 2000 Camp David peace negotiations. The leadership was, however, aware of the importance of international support and this is why it insisted so strongly on the principle of non-violence. It also remained open to participation in international forums and negotiations, and a number of its leaders claimed that the peace agreements would have been more successful if they had participated. It also insisted on Palestinian rights, which happily contrasted with the more ‘flexible’ approach adopted by Palestinian negotiators in the ‘secret channel’ talks that produced Oslo I. They therefore insisted that Palestinian rights should be foregrounded and also argued that so-called ‘final status’ issues (Jerusalem, refugees and settlements) should establish the basis of negotiations. This was the exact opposite of the Oslo I position, which, instead, held that agreement on these issues would be the product or outcome of negotiations.

The UNLU’s analysis was highly prescient, and anticipated a number of the challenges, issues and problems that would emerge in subsequent years. When the Intifada ended in 1993, international observers celebrated the establishment of arrangements that would supposedly provide a basis for Palestinian self-government. But the exact opposite instead applied: limited territorial concessions and the redeployment of military forces enabled Israel to enhance its control of the West Bank.

The Oslo II agreement (which was signed on 28 December 1995), established the basis for the implementation of Oslo I by dividing the West Bank and Gaza Strip into three areas (A, B and C). It enabled Israel to control and administer 60 per cent of West Bank land, while ceding Palestinian urban centres (with the partial exception of Hebron’s Old City) to the newly established PA. Palestinian movement and development were impeded as a direct result and so-called ‘final status’ issues (borders, Jerusalem, refugees and settlements) were postponed to a later stage.

However, both Oslo I and II were quite transparently not negotiated between equals, despite the convenient pretence that this was the case. The PA was, from its establishment, highly dependent on external funding, and the restrictions that
Israel imposed on the Occupied Territories (OPT) meant that it first required the colonial power’s acquiescence to function to the most basic extent. The PA was in this respect essentially an intermediary, positioned between external patronage networks and the local population. But it was more accountable to international donors and Israel than to West Bank Palestinians or Gazans.

The Second Intifada broke out in September 2000 after the Camp David negotiations collapsed. It was sparked by Ariel Sharon’s unannounced visit to the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem (this is why it is also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada), which resulted in large-scale protests that spilled over into violence that only ended five years later. In contrast to the First Intifada, which was predominantly peaceful, the Second Intifada was violent. The Israeli army reoccupied Palestinian cities and refugee camps and fought battles with Palestinian militants and security forms, while Palestinian militants carried out armed attacks and suicide bombings, on both sides of the ‘Green Line’. This use of violence restricted the range of Palestinian participation, which meant that the uprising lacked a popular base.

The project of neoliberal state-building that began in 2004 was also conceived and developed in isolation from local participation, and was therefore an elite-driven project that was highly dependent on external sources of funding and legitimacy. Dakkak is entirely correct to observe that development of this kind, which is conceived and implemented in isolation from the political context, ‘only leads to a dead end’, and this is confirmed by the fact that the PA’s co-option into this technocratic, apolitical endeavour further undermined its ability to confront colonial power. Its unquestioning adherence to ‘counter-terrorism’ further aligned it with international and Israeli agendas and undermined its legitimacy among Palestinians. During the period 2007–2010, the US allocated $392 million to the PA’s counter-terrorism work.

In retrospect, ‘peacebuilding’, state-building and ‘counter-terrorism’ appear as an expanding architecture of external control and supervision that was conceived and developed in isolation from, and sometimes in opposition to, Palestinian society. Indeed, it was not merely the case that this architecture operated in isolation from any independent influence but also that, in key and crucial respects, it frustrated and impeded it. Herein lies the significance of Jamil Hilal’s observation that the Oslo agreement ‘rendered Palestinian communities − inside historic Palestine and outside − very vulnerable, and made collective action against collective colonial repression (including a third Intifada) more difficult’.

These developments attest to a clear crisis of Palestinian leadership. International observers often identify the weaknesses or failures of the state-building process, but do not reflect on the extent to which this protracted ‘failure’ has enabled the emergence and development of a sophisticated apparatus of coercion and control. A similar observation can be made in relation to the peacebuilding of the 1990s − although it failed to achieve its ostensible (or openly stated) goals, it was remarkably effective at enabling Israel to accelerate its colonisation of the West Bank and pursue related political goals.
Meeting current threats

Trump’s so-called ‘Deal of the Century’, the details of which were first leaked in June 2019, therefore represented something of a departure from established practice because it openly stated the expectation that Palestinians should acquiesce to a colonial settlement. The Palestinian sense of betrayal was subsequently confirmed by the publication of Peace to Prosperity, the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem and the cutting of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) funding. Although no further illustration of the failure/s of Palestinian leadership was required, Mahmoud Abbas (PA President) duly provided it when he gave a speech to the United Nations General Assembly that only served to underline his utter powerlessness.

Given this present, it is scarcely surprising that Palestinians, and even those who are too young to remember the uprising, recall the First Intifada with nostalgia. However, I personally regard this development with some caution because I view nostalgia as a self-indulgent retreat into the past in the face of a present that is threatening and/or uncertain. And this is why I propose to approach the Intifada more ‘instrumentally’, with the aim of adjusting it to contemporary challenges.

Given the extent and scale of the current democratic deficit, I find the precedent of the First Intifada to be an inspiring affirmation of what can be achieved through collective energy and a shared purpose. This, of course, was what external observers sought to deny when they caricatured the uprising as a group of young children throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. The popular committees, which were formed in the beginning of the First Intifada to meet popular needs by providing services, also embodied this. As grassroots community organisations, they played an essential role during the uprising, and their contribution in the face of a present that is threatening and/or uncertain. And this is why I propose to approach the Intifada more ‘instrumentally’, with the aim of adjusting it to contemporary challenges.

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The UNLU was able to offer alternative solutions for people to face Israeli repression through the popular committees. These committees provided services where needed to help sustain resistance. Both the leadership and people were able to challenge colonial power and envisage a different reality by working together. The work of the popular committees also sought to subvert a structure of social and economic dependence based on ‘competition, accumulation, and exploitation’.

[T]he Intifada succeeded in mobilizing all sectors and classes of the Palestinian people. This aspect of the Intifada undermined the individualistic and patriarchal nature of society and strengthened its collective, cooperative and democratic values, particularly during the Intifada’s first year.
My aim here, then, is to examine the current dilemma in two ways. First, by contextualising Palestine theoretically in terms of settler colonialism and, second, by interviewing some of those who were most active in building popular resistance during the First Intifada, so as to gain insight into what is missing now from leadership perspectives and formation.

### Settler colonialism in Palestine

Theories of settler colonialism are, in my view, the most appropriate framework for the Palestinian context. The concept provides perspectives into the techniques that Israel uses to control the territories, the attitudes and predisposition of both Israeli and international elites and the co-option of the Palestinian population and territory into colonial strategies and designs.

Settler colonialism does not always have genocidal intent, which can be defined as the physical elimination of the native population, and can instead envisage the destruction of a culture, history or right to exist. It is essentially a struggle for land that is waged between colonisers and native populations. Israel’s land expropriation and settlement construction began almost immediately after it occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip in June 1967. It has been suggested, however, that Israel had drawn up plans for the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip four years before.

But colonial practices are also rooted in a wider ideological justification, and this is precisely the point that Masalha makes when he observes that ‘Palestinian demography and the land issue were at the heart of the Zionist transfer mind-set and secret transfer plans of the 1930s and 1940s’. Wolfe makes a very similar point when he observes that the colonial project is a ‘structure not an event’. Although the situations of OPT Palestinians and Palestinians in Israel have historically been different (the latter were subject to military rule until 1966), Israel also pursues a colonial project within its own ‘borders’, and this is confirmed by its expropriation of Palestinian land in the Galilee, the Negev and Jerusalem. Colonial practices may vary in accordance with territorial differentiation, but there is nonetheless a broad continuity.

Sayigh observes:

The remnants of Palestine’s Arabs who have continued to live in the Zionist settler-state since 1948 have their own ‘Bantustans’, their ‘native reserves’, their ‘Ghettoes’ – although the institution which they encounter in their daily lives is given by the Zionist authorities the euphemistic name, ‘security zones’.

Coercion is ever-present in colonial strategies but it has been, in more recent times, complemented, if not entirely replaced, by a qualified recognition and partial incorporation that is an extension of the principle of ‘divide and rule’. Geopolitical land expropriation that institutes and reproduces political division is an example of this. Division is one of the key techniques of settler colonialism,
which is applied with the intention of creating uncertainty and fear in the ‘native’ population. And ‘divide and rule’ is, of course, a technique that has been applied in innumerable colonial contexts.

The ‘peace process’ and the colonial continuum

The ‘peace process’ institutionalised a number of colonial practices and the fact that rights and entitlements were defined in accordance with geographical location is one example of this. ‘Peace’ does not therefore mark the termination of colonial relations but instead enables them to take a different form. Coulthard, in referring to the Canadian context, invokes ‘colonial relations of power [that] are no longer reproduced primarily through overtly coercive means, but rather through the asymmetrical exchange of mediated forms of state recognition and accommodation’.

It was therefore significant that Oslo I and II (signed in 1993 and 1995) excluded Palestinians in Israel and also categorised refugees as a separate group whose interests and priorities would be deferred to ‘final status’ negotiations. Although the designers of the Oslo Accords justified this innovation on the grounds that it would enable political momentum to be generated, there was a quite clear overlap with Israel’s preference to engage different constituencies on different terms. The claim that the Oslo agreements represented a qualitative change in Israel’s approach to the Palestinians was therefore fundamentally misconceived. In actual fact, it would be more appropriate to speak of a shift in colonial tactics. This clearly evokes Fanon’s observation that ‘[t]he enemy, in fact, changes his tactics. At opportune moments he combines his policy of brutal repression with spectacular gestures of friendship [and] manoeuvres calculated to sow division.’ US ‘peace’ agreements similarly enabled colonial objectives to be advanced. As Dunbar-Ortiz has observed in another context, ‘the United States made eighty-six treaties with twenty-six Indigenous nations between New York and the Mississippi, all of them forcing land sessions, including removals’.

Peace agreements therefore establish a basis for the realignment of colonial power. They do not, contrary to popular misconception, establish a basis for mutual respect and regard. The content (or lack thereof), working procedures and practice of the Oslo agreements quite clearly demonstrated this by entrenching economic dependence, which is an established colonial relation. Similarly, the project of neoliberal state-building, which was justified on the grounds that it would strengthen and enhance Palestinian ‘governance’, actually increased the power of external donors and created a ‘client class’ of compliant Palestinians whose commitment to the status quo is refracted through their personal interest. The members of this co-opted class are afflicted by what Gramsci once referred to as a ‘contradictory consciousness’. Memmi similarly spoke of the coloniser putting the colonised in a dilemma ‘[that] places him before an alternative having equally disastrous results; daily injustice accepted for his benefit on the one hand and necessary, but never consummated, self-sacrifice on the other’. 


This ‘dilemma’ takes the form of a crisis of Palestinian representation that is produced by internal political divides and ineffective political parties. The PLO marginalisation, as a number of my interviewees recognised, has further exacerbated this ‘democratic deficit’, as has dependence on external (overwhelmingly western) donor funding, which has weakened accountability to grassroots bases.

**Normalising occupation**

This ‘client class’ is deeply invested in the status quo, and it is predisposed, in its words and actions to ‘normalise’ occupation. This is shown, for example, when Palestinian elites speak of ‘development’ and ‘state-building’ as self-contained goals to be achieved, and therefore fail to acknowledge that it is counter-intuitive, if not entirely absurd, to speak of such projects in a wider context of occupation. But this should not just be interpreted as a shortcoming of the ‘client class’, as colonisation is, in the words of Trouillot, driven ‘to proclaim its own normalcy’. It is predisposed, to this extent, to resist the insight that the exertion of colonial power will always give rise to resistance. Moshe Dayan’s concept of ‘enlightened occupation’, which proposed that Palestinians would acquiesce if the tools of repression were delicately and sensitively applied, rendered precisely the same fiction as the contemporary project of (neoliberal) state-building.

So, there is a clear overlap between Palestine and other colonial settings, and we can gain considerable insight by identifying and tracing the shared tendencies. We can also gain considerable insight into possibilities of resistance, as the contemporary example of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement, which seeks to build on the precedent of the struggle against Apartheid South Africa, demonstrates.

But there is also a sense that the exertion of colonial power anticipates practices of resistance. Resistance therefore appears as the inversion of this power, and it is defined and asserted in opposition to it. It was this insight that led Fanon to conclude, for example, that the violence of colonialism could ultimately only be denied through violent resistance. But this does not imply that the harsh, blunt force of military occupation should elicit a military response. This is a mistake that Palestinians have previously made, and its error was profoundly and vividly illustrated during the Second Intifada. So, instead, I propose to draw on Foucault to assert ‘a multiplicity of points of resistance’ and ‘a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case’.

**Leadership lessons from the First Intifada**

The First Intifada is part of Palestinian consciousness, and even those who did not live through it feel a close attachment to it. It is often invoked to express dissatisfaction with the current situation and the PA, or to evoke the possibility of popular mobilisation. Ala Alazzeh observes that ‘[a]mong activists today, there is a strong anxiety about the lack of popular participation and an
attendant nostalgia for and desire to reproduce the ethos of the first Intifada’. He adds: ‘As the OPT continues to find itself embedded in new modalities of control and as forms of resistance respond to very different forms of occupation, nostalgia continues.’

However, given the current situation, ‘nostalgia’ seems to be inappropriate, not least because it involves removing oneself from the present and seeking refuge in the past. Insofar as it is an act of abstract reflection, it is also, from my perspective, without practical implication. My emphasis on an instrumental approach and my practical orientation leads me to conclude that I am not in any sense engaged in ‘nostalgia’.

Alazzeh then refers, too, to my earlier observation that the techniques of control anticipate the modalities of resistance when he observes that ‘understanding mass participation in the first Intifada and its absence in the years following is not possible without acknowledging the dynamics of control used by the Israeli occupation’. The UNLU leadership had an intimate knowledge of these ‘dynamics’, not least because a considerable number of them had spent time in Israel’s prisons. Their knowledge was therefore generated through and within their past and present experiences of life under occupation. This clearly contrasted with the members of the PLO leadership who returned to the OPT having previously lived among refugee communities in Jordan and Lebanon. After being expelled from Beirut in 1982, they had resided in the Tunisian capital of Tunis. The ‘client class’ was therefore, to a substantial extent, already an external imposition.

**Interviewing those with ‘lived experience’**

During the uprising, I was an active participant: I co-ordinated protests, actively contributed to popular committees and was also part of a wider popular mobilisation. This enabled me to build up an extensive range of personal contacts and networks who I could engage with in interviews about their perspectives on that First Intifada.

I initially proposed to interview a representative from each of the four political parties that were part of the PLO: the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DLFP); the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP); Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah); and the Palestinian People’s Party (PPP). But then Suha Barghouthi, one of the interviewees, told me that, for her, it was her sense of affiliation as an activist, rather than her membership of a particular party, that was important. This led me to reconsider and to conclude that the significance of a national uprising lies in the fact that it cuts across pre-existent ties and identity, including party affiliation. Indeed, during my interviews, I actually became aware of the extent to which party loyalty can impede genuine national struggle and resistance.

The six interviewees included here are: Suha Barghouthi, an activist and organiser in the Women’s Committee during the First Intifada who was the founder of the General Union of Palestinian Women in the late 1970s; Hisham
Sharabati, an activist and co-ordinator of the Hebron Defense Committee; Jamal Zakout co-founder of the Unified Leadership, who led the DFLP and was arrested and deported in 1988 after being accused of being a UNLU member. He returned after the signing of the Oslo agreements, and was a member of the PNC. Radi Jarai, a Fatah leader who was arrested several times after being accused of being a UNLU member, who was the assistant deputy minister for prisoner affairs; Ziad Hammourin, a leader and activist, who is the director of the Jerusalem Center for Social and Economic Rights; and Rana Nashashibi, an activist in the First Intifada, who is now the Director of Palestine Counselling Centre. (Each interviewee will be referred to by initials.)

I know all of the interviewees in a personal capacity; we previously worked together in the popular committees and jointly co-ordinated protests in the First Intifada. All of the interviewees gave their permission to be identified and quoted. An unstructured approach was adopted to make it easier for interviewees to freely express their views, and interviews were conducted in a relaxed and friendly environment, often taking on the appearance of a conversation between friends.

In this research, I did not seek to apply the concept of neutrality, and actually viewed it as an impediment to what I was trying to achieve. Abu Saad claims that when such neutrality is asserted as an unquestioned imperative, it actually reinforces unequal power relations. I do not view research as a purely scholastic concern and instead treat it as a practical concern.

I also draw on a book that the UNLU created during the uprising, *Towards a State of Independence: the Palestinian Uprising, December 1987–August 1988*, which was published in English by the Fact Information Committee of the Intifada.

In drawing on my own experiences, the perspectives and insights of activists, a key UNLU publication and theories of settler colonialism, I seek to demonstrate how a return to the events of the First Intifada can provide new theoretical, strategic and tactical insight.

The ‘lived experience’ of the UNLU leadership was, as Alazzeh notes, essential to the popular dimension of the uprising. A leadership that had personally experienced the humiliation and degradation of occupation was, to this extent, better placed to produce a mobilisation that was constructed on ‘a broad and popular organizational base’. RJ observes that this aspect is completely lacking in the current situation, not least because the PA security forces suppress Palestinian demonstrations. All six of the interviewees therefore highlight the popular dimension of the First Intifada and the extent of community co-operation and solidarity. The UNLU similarly spoke of being ‘together with the people of the uprising’ and had no fear of contradiction when it issued its communiques ‘in the name of the people’; it had a strong democratic legitimacy.

The popular dimension of the First Intifada

SB explains that ‘popular committees and the spirit of volunteerism enabled people to [be] steadfast and challenge Israel[’s] repressive measures’ and RJ observes that the uprising was grounded in solidarity and a sense of community. In my
conversation with him, we recalled the prolonged curfew the Israelis imposed on Jalzone Camp, near Ramallah, and remembered how members of the popular committees sneaked in at night and distributed food to people. HS recalls:

When the UNLU issued a leaflet calling for shops to open until 11.00 AM, I went with my friend and walked in the streets of Hebron to see if shops would close. At 11.00, it was like a magic, all shops closed. Israeli soldiers came, tied each door shop with the military jeep and drove to break the locks. In no time, Palestinian blacksmiths came and fixed all doors and locks. It was voluntary because of the strong social solidarity.

This highlights a frequently overlooked point – namely that popular mobilisation had an important tactical dimension and benefit. RJ recalls that it confused the occupation forces. He also cites General Amram Mitzna, Israeli Commander of the Central Command, as acknowledging the challenges associated with this form of popular resistance. Mitzna also said armed resistance would be easier to liquidate.

JZ too recognises the importance of a ‘popular’ leadership that did not merely seek to ‘represent’ the masses but also sought to channel popular energies. He speaks of a ‘harmony between the leadership and needs on the ground’, and reflects that ‘the UNLU had a clear vision based on people’s need to confront Israel’s oppression and punitive measures’. He also invoked ‘a wide network of community work and solidarity’.

‘Popular’ involvement also extended to the involvement of women. However, this innovation was far removed from the symbolic appointment of women to political positions or the ongoing fixation of international organisations on ‘empowering’ Palestinian women. This development was instead entirely organic, spontaneous and rooted in the lives of Palestinian women. SB confirms that ‘women played a significant role. Due to Israeli misconception about Palestinian women’s role and as they targeted men more, women were present in the public sphere leading, organising and mobilising protests and activities.’

COVID-19

I was surprised when interviewees engaged the health dimension by referring to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as I had not previously considered this angle. However, during our discussions, I realised that the coronavirus highlighted more general problems and issues and was therefore of interest. SB observes:

there are about 45,000 Palestinian workers in Israel who are returning due to Coronavirus. They will be without source of income. Had this happened in the First Intifada, a popular committee would have provided support to [them]. Some of these workers have no safety equipment and there are no protective measures in place; furthermore, when they test positive they are sent back.71
JZ is similarly critical:

At present with COVID-19, [there are] no popular efforts, [and] there [is] a total marginalisation [of] any participatory effort, only Fatah, no other political parties. As during the Intifada, we need a community network [and] solidarity to face the challenges of the virus.

Far from providing a unified response, the government has actually driven disunity and fragmentation. The Palestinian People’s Party has criticised the government’s bias towards Fatah and the security force, and has demanded that its response should include all political parties.72

HS explains that:

other political parties are active and provide services to people during this pandemic, but they are marginalised by Fatah groups and the PA. Only Fatah activities are covered by the formal Palestinian TV. The PA owns all bodies and institutions and controls them.

ZH also refers to a Preventive Forces internal memo that justified the provision of services on the grounds that this would improve perceptions of its own personnel and Fatah security forces. This recommendation was extensively criticised on Palestinian social media. RJ notes that the need to improve public perceptions derived from the fact that these security forces were primarily focused on repressing potential unrest.

It is therefore significant that in Jerusalem, where the PA does not operate, Palestinians have developed a social response. Israel has actually prevented the PA from testing in Silwan, east Jerusalem,73 and ZH reflects that local residents have therefore been forced to develop social solidarity initiatives, albeit on a smaller scale than during the First Intifada. RN refers to Jerusalem and observes that efforts should also be directed against the occupation and Israel should also be held to account for its violations. Services that change the situation should be provided. The pandemic has created an urgent need for services.

Leadership and neoliberalism

Although the PLO is currently an important part of Mahmoud Abbas’s power base (Abbas is the incumbent PA president, who is also the president of the PLO), a number of interviewees suggested that it should be reformed in a way that would enhance accountability and participation. However, they were not fully clear on how this could be achieved and this appeared to implicitly acknowledge the extent of its co-option.74 Concerns were also raised about the role of political parties in public life and the extent to which their activities are in the public interest.
The increased dependence of these parties on external funding also raises the prospect that they could, or may already have become, detached from their own party bases. RN, for example, claims that ‘political parties are ineffective because they became institutionalised, and their leaders are concerned with personal interests rather than the national aspiration’. She believes these parties are now ‘co-opted and part of the elite class, detached from the people’.

This is significant because it shifts the terms of the discussion: it is not merely that the PA is unable to provide effective leadership and/or mobilisation on the model of the UNLU, but, rather, that it is part of the problem, because its own interests have become intertwined with the preservation of the status quo. RJ claims that ‘the PA is an oligarch benefiting from the status quo’. Meanwhile, JZ and HS argue that the leadership has become preoccupied with protecting its own entitlements and privileges, and SB, in making the necessary comparison, observes that the UNLU was produced and formed from the people and was not imposed on them. During the First Intifada it was not concerned with prestige, taking photos or being featured in the media. Its leaders paid a price for leading the Intifada, and they were arrested, deported, injured or even killed.

Political failures

But this highlighted a certain contradiction in the response of interviewees. In the first instance, they viewed the PA as having been comprehensively co-opted and as functioning as a mechanism of the colonial structure. However, in the second they still looked to it to provide national leadership, and therefore criticised it for failing to end the division between Fatah and Hamas. JZ, for example, criticises the ‘politics of politics of waiting and anticipation’ and laments the fact that the PA is not ‘proactive’ and ‘only complains to international organisations’. But this is to accept the PA’s good intentions, which Tabar and Salamanca clearly do not do when they decry a ‘false decolonialization’ – for me, ‘false’ quite clearly levels the charge that the leadership are only pretending to end colonisation.

SB and JZ also stress the importance of a unified political programme that overcomes the Fatah-Hamas split, and RN claims this is the PA’s main failing. She adds: ‘The PA is weak and cannot provide solutions and leaves people to deal with occupation because it is unable to deliver. I expected the PA to end the division, for example, to find a solution.’ HS also explains that the UNLU more effectively managed tensions that arose when Hamas pursued unilateral courses of action. In referring to the example of the 1991 Madrid conference, he recalls:

Hamas issued a leaflet against negotiations and called for a strike. On the same day, the UNLU issued a leaflet that called for a strike and criticised the US and Israel for their uncompromising position on Palestinian demands. This was done to avoid deepening the division.
In stressing the importance of unity, all of the interviewees viewed it as a precondition for confronting ongoing challenges, and JZ explicitly added that there is no historical example of a successful divided liberation movement.

The internationalisation of the OPT was another factor that interviewees highlighted. Aid conditionality had resulted in the commitment of funds becoming contingent on security-focused and counter-terrorism work. This arrangement also consolidated the authority of the aforementioned ‘client class’.78

However, there was sometimes a tendency to discuss these different factors in isolation from each other, which meant that interviewees sometimes listed different failures, thus giving the impression they were somehow independent of each other. In reality, of course, the failure to develop (or perhaps to return to) a colonial analysis of the conflict is closely linked to, and perhaps even attributable to, clearly defined patronage networks. Badarin’s previous observation that ‘[t]he overall institution-building and capacity-building arrangements coexisted with the operative colonial structure instead of bringing it to a close’79 is not therefore preceded by a recognition of the fact that this shortcoming is not a contingent development but is instead rooted in the priorities and orientations of external actors. The establishment of a ‘client class’, the geopolitical fragmentation of the West Bank and the disconnection with Gaza80 appear, to the same extent, as the essential corollaries of a colonial system of rule. This situation exposed the leadership’s inertia and inability to challenge Israeli’s continual expropriation of Palestinian land.

In discussing political failures, we should not focus entirely on formal politics and should also recognise the importance of social actors. ZH claims that ‘had the Coronavirus outbreak happened in the First Intifada, it could have been creatively contained. The spirit of social solidarity would make each person believe they have a duty.’ The UNLU then called on ‘all those physicians, pharmacists, and nurses who have already given great support to our cause, to continue their tireless efforts at providing emergency relief and routine medical care to the people’.81 It also called for the work of the health committees to grow, for doctors to lower their fees and for the provision of first aid courses, preventive medicine and health education to expand.82

Conclusion

In reflecting on the analogy of the First Intifada, interviewees most frequently focused on Palestinian unity, popular participation and trust in the leadership. Each theme was then developed with reference to the UNLU and its rootedness within the community and experience of occupation. The UNLU was directly compared to the PA and the latter was often held to lack accountability and the ability to initiate popular mobilisation and strategic/tactical planning.

Anti-colonial struggle must address itself to the techniques of colonial power, the establishment of a genuinely popular national movement and the engagement of international constituencies. In each respect, interviewees compared the PA against the UNLU and found it to be lacking.
If colonisation persists, then there is always the possibility of ‘organized popular non-violent resistance’. However, this resistance may simply take the form of ‘reaction’, as the recent example of the ‘Knife Intifada’ demonstrated. This was a series of ‘lone wolf’ attacks by individual Palestinians on Israeli Jews that began in October 2015 and persisted for a few months. In a clear echo of the Second Intifada, these attacks began after Israeli politicians and leaders acted provocatively at Jerusalem’s Al-Aqsa mosque.

Genuine analysis requires an analysis of colonialism and its cultural, economic and political dimensions. The PLO once had such an analysis and this was shown by its role within the anti-colonial and non-aligned movements. However, this was lost as the organisation became bureaucratised and then beholden to the peacebuilding project. I found myself agreeing with interviewees who spoke of reforming the PLO, but only because I viewed this as a way to (re)introduce a ‘colonial’ analysis.

Most of the interviewees spoke about the PA. However, for me this highlighted a clear contradiction: the Authority cannot simultaneously be a mechanism of colonial rule and an instrument of effective leadership. By extended implication, it is equally contradictory to expect coherent leadership from the members of a co-opted ‘client class’ or to expect change to be provided by those whose interests are so clearly invested in the status quo.

In my analysis, the problem is two-fold. In the first instance, the leadership are failing to effectively counter colonial power or to provide basic assistance to Palestinians who live under occupation. We can define these failings in relation to the actions (or inactions) of political representatives and formal political institutions. This is both an intellectual and practical failing, and it is evidenced both in an absence of strategy and purposeful action.

However, this is to be clearly distinguished from the second criticism, which relates to the role of the PA in helping to originate or catalyse popular mobilisation. Here it is the ability of the actor to exert influence that is the key criterion against which it will be judged. It should first be recognised that it is not realistic to look to the PA to perform this function, as it was not established with this end or objective in mind. On the contrary, it was clearly understood (at least by Israel and the international community) that its main ‘contribution’ would be to repress dissent. Furthermore, its continued existence did not depend on its domestic legitimacy but rather on the fact that international donors and influential state actors continued to be satisfied with its performance of a limited number of functions.

In contrast, the UNLU was extremely effective in producing and helping to sustain popular mobilisation. But it is essential to recognise that Israel’s establishment of ‘facts on the ground’ has fundamentally altered the reality, to the point where popular mobilisation on the model of the First Intifada is no longer conceivable. So, the question shifts from how popular mobilisation can be achieved to the form that it can take, and this requires a more sustained analysis of changes in popular protest, including the role of electronic media. This raises
the possibility that resistance may be transferred from the local context and internationalised,\textsuperscript{84} perhaps on the model of BDS.

The main contribution of the First Intifada is to reiterate the importance of a leadership that is democratically accountable, rooted in the experience of colonial rule and which is able to unify the different elements of the national struggle. In these and many other respects, the national leadership continues to fall short of the most basic requirements.

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