THE UPRISING: TWO VIEWS

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Two Egyptian Writers in the Service of Peace
- Reuven Snir

Book Review Essays: William M. Brinner • Joseph Kostiner

Book in Review: Gary G. Sick • Aron Rodrigue
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Table of Contents

• THE UPRISING’S IMPACT ON THE OPTIONS FOR PEACE .......... 3
  Michael Curtis
• THE PALESTINIAN UPRISING AND THE SHULTZ INITIATIVE .... 13
  Kenneth W. Stein

• THE EVOLUTION OF ISRAEL’S AFRICA POLICY .................. 21
  Mitchell G. Bard
• ISRAEL AND SOUTH AFRICA:
  RECONCILING PRAGMATISM AND PRINCIPLE ..................... 29
  J. Leo Cefkin

• TWO EGYPTIAN WRITERS IN THE SERVICE OF PEACE ............ 41
  Reuven Snir

• BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS
  Anti-Semitism: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* ........... 47
  William M. Brinner
  Mordechai Abir, *Saudi Arabia in the Oil Era*; Norman N. Lewis,
  *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan*; Robert D. Burrowes,
  Joseph Kostiner

• BOOKS IN REVIEW
  Frederick W. Axelgard, *A New Iraq? The Gulf War and Implications
  for U.S. Policy* ..................................................... 59
  Gary G. Sick
  Aron Rodrigue
The Palestinian Uprising and the Shultz Initiative

Kenneth W. Stein

In early 1988, for the second time within 8 years, the Reagan Administration reacted to events in the Middle East by proposing that the stalled Arab-Israeli negotiating process be reactivated. The Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which began in earnest in December 1987, prompted an otherwise reluctant Administration to try to revive active diplomacy as the road to peace. The Shultz initiative was exceptional because the Reagan Administration had previously operated from the premise that it would studiously avoid involvement in the negotiating process until it found the regional actors seriously ready to engage on issues of substance. Injected into an election year, the interest in diplomatic engagement could have predictably reflected a laissez faire attitude. We had grown accustomed, at least since the breakdown of the May 1983 Israeli-Lebanese accord, to seeing the Reagan Administration’s efforts in the Middle East centered on finding possible ways to win the release of American hostages held in Lebanon; on protecting the territorial integrity of Arab Gulf states under duress from Iranian threats; on strengthening the U.S.-Israeli relationship; and on applying any and all means to deflect public attention from the embarrassing revelations associated with the Iran-Contra scandal.

From a policy-making viewpoint, the Shultz initiative contained several redeeming features which could easily carry over to the next Administration. First, the central importance of the U.S. role in fostering Arab-Israeli negotiations, a process initiated by Henry Kissinger in the 1970s, allowed Washington’s view to predominate in determining the parameters of the procedure and the substance to be applied to the negotiating process. Second, the American initiative gave Washington an additional opportunity to prescribe and circumscribe Moscow’s inevitable future role in the negotiating process. Third, the initiative reduced the stress on the Israeli government, which had initially been confounded by the magnitude and depth of the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories. Fourth, it applied informal pressure on constituencies in the Palestinian and Israeli communities to consider diplomatic options which, it was reasonably assumed, neither would readily accept. Fifth, because the initiative was the result of prodding by Israel’s supporters in the United States, there was little likelihood of unwanted political fallout from the gentle and Jewish establishment supporting Israel during the presidential election year. And sixth, Washington was interested in using American diplomatic action as an indirect means for abating the deepening domestic concern in Egypt and Jordan about a growing tendency toward polarization of political views, radicalization, and the popular use of street violence against ruling regimes.

The initiative itself contained new concepts as well as reworked ideas presented previously in the Camp David Accords. It sought to telescope the negotiating process from a five-year to a three-year transitional
time period. It sought to interlock interim arrangements aimed at giving the Palestinians in the occupied territories steadily widening control over their political and economic affairs, while concurrently providing for adequate Israeli and Arab security. It also emphasized a joint Jordanian/Palestinian delegation as a mode of Palestinian representation at a conference, thereby departing substantially from the representation formulations of the Camp David Accords. The central concept in the Shultz initiative was implementation and adherence to U.N. Resolution 242, which implied that Israel would withdraw from occupied land in exchange for peace with her Arab neighbors. Procedurally, the diplomatic mechanism for driving the proposed bilateral negotiations would be the long-debated international Middle East peace conference, which was to be launched via invitations sent by the United Nations Secretary General.

The initiative foundered on several points. Israel’s hydra-headed government reached a consensus neither on substance nor on procedure. Israeli Prime Minister Shamir politely rejected the Secretary of State’s overtures. Jordan, Syria, Israel, and the PLO differed over the procedural and substantive roles to be played by the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain, France, and China at the proposed international conference. Some wanted the conference to be merely an umbrella for bilateral action; others preferred a conference that was “empowered,” “authoritative,” and capable of breaking a negotiating deadlock. Jordanian and Israeli views on procedure (if not on substance) tended toward reserving more powers for themselves, thus denying the other conference participants openings for imposing solutions or for reversing agreements reached in bilateral negotiations. By contrast, the positions of Syria and the PLO were not explicitly stated but had to be divined from cryptic and contradictory reports. As far as could be inferred, they seemed to favor a more formidable and prescriptive role for the convening countries. Not unexpectedly, members of the PLO rejected the Shultz initiative for several reasons, not the least of which was its exclusion of the PLO as an independent political participant in the proposed negotiating process. However, the extraordinary Arab summit which met in Algiers in June 1988 both excoriated the United States for its pro-Israeli views and held back from rejecting the Shultz initiative out of hand.

For his part, Secretary of State Shultz refrained from criticizing any Middle East leader for failing to endorse the initiative. Sensitive concepts and emotionally charged language such as "self-determination," "independent Palestinian state," "the PLO," and "mutual recognition" were omitted from the initiative. These thorny issues were left on the Arab-Israeli negotiating agenda, bequeathed to America’s 41st President to include or ignore after his inauguration in January 1989. Secretary of State Shultz did not importune Moscow with offers of compromise over procedure or substance designed to entice the new Soviet leadership into fully engaging in the Middle East negotiating process. No effort was made to elevate the Middle East initiative’s success over other regional items on the super power agenda. In fact, from an American view, the Soviet Union had not yet obtained conclusive consensus from several of its own decision-making bureaucracies on significant matters, such as a definitive position about the ongoing nature of the international conference. Soviet ambiguity on this and other issues gave American officials pause for deliberation in their diplomatic efforts. On all sides there were enough points of disagreement on matters of substance and procedure to justify a third visit by Shultz to the region in 1988. What the Shultz effort accomplished was to leave all the salient issues alive and encapsulated for the next American administration to tackle during its first 100 days in office. Shultz’s inability to persuade Shamir to engage in the initiative was one of several factors causing King Hussein to disengage from the West Bank in late July 1988. Without a negotiating process headed in a proper direction, Hussein did not want to be impugned further for his efforts to assist the Palestinians living under the Israeli occupation.
The Palestinian Uprising: Causation

The Shultz initiative distracted international attention from the event that had led to its inception: the uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Dubbed intifada, meaning shudder or tremor (from the Arabic verb meaning “to be shaken off”), the uprising was the first prolonged spontaneous Palestinian Arab rebellion since the 1936-39 Arab revolt in Palestine during the British Mandate. Though fully 50 years apart, both expressions of Palestinian Arab political violence took place in environments where the Palestinian Arab population felt its political aspirations were being frustrated by the protracted control of a foreign occupier. As a horse shakes off fleas, those participating in the intifada rebelled primarily against the unwanted controllers of their fate: Israelis and the Occupation. But West Bank and Gaza Strip (hereinafter WBG) Palestinians also reacted against various parties physically outside the WBG including Arab political leaders, who were long on rhetoric but short on physical or financial assistance for the Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

Like the political violence in Palestine 50 years before, the intifada did not occur in a placid and tame environment. Especially during the 18 months that preceded the intifada, the WBG areas were dotted by a steady crescendo of violence and counteraction between Israelis and Palestinians. During parts of 1986 and 1987, the WBG areas were increasingly disturbed by weekly acts of communal violence and nationalist incitement. Palestinians threw stones, bombs, hand grenades, and molotov cocktails at Israelis and at Israeli installations. They burned tires in the streets and developed a generally disruptive atmosphere in the WBG territories. Israeli settlers in the WBG and Israeli soldiers were periodically attacked; some were killed. In retaliation, Israelis closed Palestinian universities and schools; arrested, detained, or deported those accused of inciting the youthful rebels; imposed curfews on villages and refugee camps; banned or temporarily closed Palestinian Arab newspapers and news agencies; and down Palestinian Arab trade union and university organizations; demolished houses, confiscated land, and wounded and killed Palestinians. It was the continuous nature of the intifada after its outbreak on December 9, 1987, which differentiated it from the sporadic but increasingly violent communal confrontations which had characterized Israeli-WBG Palestinian Arab relations for the previous 18 months.

The immediate cause of the intifada was the wounding of 8 Palestinians and the killing of 4 in Gaza on December 8 when their truck was rammed by a vehicle driven by an Israeli. Some Palestinians believed the deaths were a deliberate reprisal for the killing of an Israeli salesman in Gaza 48 hours earlier. Ultimately, the Israeli responsible for the December 8 incident was charged with manslaughter.) WBG Palestinians had also been emboldened by a successful November 1987 Palestinian guerrilla attack from southern Lebanon which killed 6 Israeli soldiers. By early 1988 more than two dozen Palestinians had died in clashes with Israelis in the WBG. After 9 months of the uprising, casualties numbered more than 250 Palestinians killed, 2,500 wounded, and thousands arrested, including more than 1,900 under administrative detention. Israeli casualties numbered 2 killed and over 300 wounded.

While a number of different reasons impelled WBG Palestinian Arabs to participate in the uprising, all the dissidents shared an overriding cumulative despair about their dismal present and their discouraging prospects. WBG Palestinians believed they were destined to remain in an economic and political cul de sac after 2 decades of Israeli rule and 4 decades since the establishment of the state of Israel. They saw the Israeli presence as collectively oppressive and personally demeaning. Ibrahim al-Qaqa, a Gaza Palestinian leader whom Israel deported to Lebanon, attributed the uprising to 2 main factors: the maintenance of Palestinian refugee status for over 40 years, and individual suffering during the 20-year [Israeli] occupation.
A second catalyst for the spontaneous public outburst of Palestinian anger was the Israeli occupiers' inattention to, and calculated distancing from, the condition of WBG Palestinians. WBG Palestinians saw little in the way of economic assistance coming from outside sources. The PLO and Jordan split on the matter of Palestinian representation at an international Middle East peace conference on the eve of the April 1987 Palestine National Council meeting. The United States had brokered an understanding between Jordan and Israel about the size and nature of the proposed international conference, but Washington did not pursue the matter with either side after spring 1987. Both Amman and Washington had been discussing WBG economic development for several years, but neither side had made funds available to implement the 1986 Jordanian development plan or the European-supported "Marshall Plan" which Shimon Peres had proposed for the entire region, including the WBG Palestinian population. The sub rosa Jordanian-Israeli condominium for the administrative management of the WBG was totally inadequate for meeting the needs of the indigenous population. With reported billions of dollars of assets both invested and liquid, the PLO itself did very little to ameliorate the economic hardships of the WBG Palestinian Arab population. Despite the fact that it had the means to assist the WBG population during the first months of the uprising, the PLO gave insignificant amounts of financial aid to one of its most cherished constituencies. Over the previous several years, WBG Palestinian Arab hopes had been raised and dashed repeatedly; the only constants were political inertia, Arab parsimony, and treatment of the Palestinians as pariahs.

A third provocation for the uprising was the WBG Palestinians' conviction that their situation was being ignored by the Arab world and the international community. Both Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian al-Fajr editor Hanna Siniora agreed on the presumed causes of the intifadah's outbreak: the Amman summit of November 1987 had slighted the Palestinian issue by focusing its predetermined agenda exclusively on the Gulf War and on the threat posed by the Iranian regime to the stability of Arab states in the Gulf; later came the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Washington, in which the superpowers paid no public attention to the Palestinians' plight.

A fourth set of factors fostering the uprising's outbreak was economic, demographic, and religious in nature. The downturn in the production and the price of oil in the Gulf region caused increased unemployment and underemployment among many Palestinians who consequently repatriated less money to their families in the WBG. Moreover, a "youth bulge" existed in the WBG Palestinian community in which 40% of the population was between the ages of 10 and 30. Within this segment was a sophisticated cadre of eligible recruits who coupled high educational achievement with an ability to carry out unarmed political militancy and to gain media attention for their activities.

Finally, a reinvigorated network of mosques became a convenient avenue for political mobilization. Especially in the last 8 years, coteries of the institutionalization of Islam as a platform for political mobilization, as exemplified by Iran, a renaissance of Islamic sentiment emerged in the WBG. High percentages of WBG university student councils have become increasingly influenced by a variety of Islamic groupings. Likewise, the construction of new mosques and Islamic sponsorship of youth and sports organizations gave the younger population from villages, towns, and the refugee camps a common place for expressing their accumulated grievances.
Implications of the Uprising for Future Negotiations

After 9 months of unrest, general exhaustion among the WBG population reduced the frequency of clashes between Palestinians and Jews. Suspected leaders of the uprising were deported, killed, or placed under various forms of legal detention. The level of violence in personal confrontations between Israelis and Palestinians was reduced, but communal reactions became routinized. Disgruntled Palestinians attacked Jewish property, while the Palestinian Arab population suffered economically and financially from the continued unrest. The Hashemites remained deeply interested in the future of the territories even though King Hussein disengaged Jordan from administrative responsibility in late July 1988. Jews and Zionists remained divided as to how to deal with Palestinian aspirations. Both the intifadah and the future disposition of the territories became the central issue in the period prior to the Israeli parliamentary election of November 1988.

The intifadah had its roots in conditions similar to those of half a century ago during the Palestinian Arab rebellion. Then, as now, Jewish security was intertwined with the future of the Palestinian Arabs. Zionism had given an unprecedented twist to Jewish history: through Israel’s creation, Jews were in a position to shape the destiny of another people. In Palestine during the first half of this century, Jewish demographic and territorial growth inevitably changed the mores, habits, and lifestyles of Palestine’s majority Arab agricultural population. Israel’s establishment in 1948 created Palestinian Arab refugees; the June 1967 war resulted in Israel’s complete control over what was once Mandatory Palestine. The Shultz initiative in 1988, like the Peel Commission report recommending the partition of Palestine in 1937, was aimed at finding some equilibrium for the competing claims to the same land area.

The intifadah came after 2 decades of Israel’s occupation of the WBG and 10 years of intensive progress in developing resolutions, formats, declarations, and plans for reconciling Israeli security with Palestinian political aspirations. These include UN Resolutions 242 and 338, the Camp David accords, the Venice Declaration, the Fahd Plan, the Fez Plan, the Reagan Plan, the Brezhnev Plan, the Hussein-PLO accord, and the various Palestinian National Council and UN General Assembly resolutions on self-determination and the establishment of an independent Palestinian State. The intifadah was both preemptive in form and unorthodox in content. Neither Israel nor the PLO was prepared for it. It represented a historically unique event for Palestinians vis-à-vis Israel: it was direct political action against Israeli occupation, asserting WBG Palestinian relevance for whatever negotiating initiative that may unfold. Secretary of State Shultz tried to distance WBG Palestinians from their symbolic PLO ties, but his efforts proved unsuccessful.

For Jordan, the intifadah generated more than the usual caution associated with the Hashemite attitude toward the occupied territories, the Palestinian people, and the PLO. Jordan’s already marginal popularity in the WBG was further reduced as a result of the intifadah. Though held in low esteem by the WBG, King Hussein challenged WBG Palestinians who had sacrificed lives in the uprising to express their views about an eventual settlement and representation at an international conference.

Over the last several years Jordan has not concealed its disdain for the influence and leadership of the PLO. It would be satisfactory for Amman if the prime result of the intifadah were the ultimate emergence of a WBG voice that would either prod the PLO or work independently to advance the negotiation process by offering Israel a legitimate and willing negotiating partner. “Jordan,” said King Hussein in a recent interview, “cannot represent the Palestinians ... Jordan has no wish to spread its influence or exercise its control on the Palestinians or on any inch of Palestinian territory in any form whatsoever.” On 31 July 1988, King Hussein formally delivered his message: the PLO was now responsible for the West Bank and its inhabitants, and he would not stand in its way directly or indirectly. Confronting
the Jordanian monarch was a rising tide of Palestinian national awakening resulting from the intifada. Hussein preferred to have the waves of that tide break on the PLO rather than on the Hashemite-ruled East Bank with its large Palestinian population. In effect, Hussein threw a geographic fence around the East Bank because he feared that the rhetoric of Israel's Likud Party might become reality and indeed make the East Bank a demographic dumping ground for disgruntled Palestinians. For if there is to be a settlement of Palestinian national aspirations, Hussein strongly prefers that it occur west of the Jordan River. Hussein therefore challenged the PLO to take responsibility as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Immediately after Hussein's remarks, Yasser Arafat and the mainstream PLO elite surveyed attitudes in the Arab world and Europe for an appropriate response. Before members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg in September, the PLO chairman reiterated earlier formulations about the preconditions for PLO participation in a negotiating process, namely, acceptance of all UN Palestine resolutions including those calling for Palestinian repatriation to pre-1967 Israel, and the right of Palestinian self-determination.

Hussein's decision to reduce the salaries of some municipal workers, to abolish his Ministry of Occupied Territories, and to place Palestinian affairs under the Foreign Ministry was unequivocal.

But Hussein's backing out of the West Bank was not necessarily forever. Though he clearly wants to play a central role in whatever negotiations may ensue, it will not be as a claimant for the West Bank nor as representative of the Palestinians. He also wants to avoid being blamed if Jordan negotiate but cannot obtain all that the WBG Palestinians desire. For the time being, the Hashemites are willing to give the PLO an opportunity to further the cause of the WBG Palestinians. Amman is willing to accept Palestinian representation in the form of either an independent PLO delegation or a joint Jordanian/Palestinian delegation. But Jordan seems to be hoping that if and when the euphoria of the intifada wears off and if the PLO remains frozen in its ideological posture, Jordan will ultimately play a vital role because Israel—and perhaps the WBG Palestinians—will see that substantive movement can take place only with the mediation of the Hashemites in Amman.

Though the PLO as an organization has suffered a loss of some luster among some Palestinians because it did not initiate the intifada, it reaffirmed its claim to act as a symbol for Palestinian aspirations and took this position within the inter-Arab state system at the Arab summit meeting in June 1988. Since the outbreak of the disturbances was spontaneous, the PLO was at best a belated and reluctant participant as the uprising unfolded. The PLO had not won any territory, funding or political influence for the inhabitants of the WBG. Whatever negotiating process ultimately unfolds will force the PLO to abandon its long-cherished ambiguity in order to participate in finite choice-making. But a negotiating process such as that implied by the Shultz initiative, which prescribes an exchange of territory for peace in a precise fashion, is not in the interest of the PLO if it is to retain its ideological orthodoxy. An exchange of territory for peace, thereby resolving the territorial dispute generated by the 1967 war, would presumably terminate the PLO struggle to disestablish Israel. Any exchange of territory for peace would be contrary to the PLO's current philosophical consensus, which publicly denies Israel's right to exist. Moreover, the PLO fears that any Israeli return of territory will give control of that area to Jordan and not to the PLO. Though the intifada focused enormous media attention on the plight of the Palestinian people, the uprising and the Shultz initiative have currently placed the PLO in a position where it can only react to political events which it could only remotely influence rather than control.
For the Jewish state, the intifadah did not threaten Israeli security as had the June 1967 or October 1973 wars. Its continuation did not generate uncontrollable anarchy either among WBG Palestinians or among Israel’s Arab population. Nor did it result in a complete break between the WBG population and the Israeli civil administration in the territories. Nine months after the outbreak of the disturbances, the many WBG Palestinians who worked inside Israel before the intifadah continue to work there. No alternative system of authority (save for the local “committees”) has emerged in the WBG, though the stabilizing influence of traditional urban, village, and municipal leaders has been significantly reduced. As a result of the intifadah, a series of internal networks has developed in the territories. In villages, neighborhoods, refugee camps, and in Palestinian institutions (social, religious, and health care), local “committees” have been established to which some popular local confidence has been transferred from the traditional elites. These “committees” oversee such day-to-day needs as food supply, education, health care, and provision of other goods and services. Israeli authorities claim that their dialogue with various WBG leadership elements has continued throughout the uprising. It remains to be seen whether a distinct WBG leadership evolves further to occupy a permanent place among the Palestinian bodies which now include the PLO and widely dispersed elements of the Palestinian diaspora. In any case, as a result of the intifadah, WBG Palestinians have tried and partially succeeded in taking upon themselves the responsibilities of municipal autonomy without recognition of this status by the Israelis or other outside powers.

As a result of the intifadah, Israel has been shaken from its complacent inertia over the future of the territories and their Palestinian inhabitants. The intifadah has resurrected the Green Line—the international armistice boundary that had separated Israel from Jordan after the 1948 war—which had virtually been dissolved because new Israeli road networks have crisscrossed and connected pre- and post-1967 Israel. Israelis themselves, with their customary Saturday auto excursions, have made the territories an object of tourism. Some Israelis have even established permanent settlements in the territories. But with the area now in a state of unrest, Israelis are much more reluctant to travel to the occupied territories. With more profound implications for the progress of negotiations, the intifadah has put some constraints on the growth of Israeli WBG settlements, though right-wing Israeli politicians are unremittingly in their efforts to bring more settlers into the territories. Meanwhile, far from backing the expansion of existing settlements or calling for the creation of new ones, other Israelis who already live in the occupied areas are trying to sell their WBG apartments and property. Insecurity and fear are not, however, driving Jewish religious and ideological zealots from the territories. One might even argue that the settlements, a bone of contention in the Israeli-U.S. relationship for more than a decade, as well as Israel’s method of occupation, generated sufficient common dislike among Palestinian refugees and Palestinian non-refugees in the WBG to help motivate their vigorous participation in the uprising.

Since the intifadah erupted during the preliminaries of an Israeli national election campaign, the issues of the territories and their Palestinian residents have sharpened the debate among Israeli voters. Before the outbreak of the intifadah, the question of an international Middle East peace conference as a fiercely divisive issue in the Israeli election campaign, as was the question of Israel’s future relationship with the WBG. The intifadah sharpened the controversy in Israeli society on both issues. In the aftermath, and concurrent with the intifadah, the Shultz initiative intensified the political debate already surrounding the peace process. Early indications suggest that the intifadah has further polarized the Israeli electorate, and, according to public opinion polls, has pushed the entire electorate further to the right on the political spectrum. Certainly, King Hussein’s disengagement from the
West Bank and his transferral of the negotiating role to the PLO has severely hurt, if not totally crippled, the Labor Party's traditional policy of exercising a "Jordanian option." But Israelis of every political stripe know that although King Hussein may disengage from the territories verbally, he is unable to disengage from them demographically.

For the first time since the June 1967 war, Palestinian and Israeli youth born after that date are confronting one another. Unlike the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Palestinians initiated this confrontation with the Israelis. The confrontation is being waged on Palestinian land rather than on the soil of a sovereign Arab state. WBG Palestinians have acted in an autonomous political fashion by obtaining "badges of honor," gaining political authenticity, and exhibiting a high threshold of personal pain. Rather than having political autonomy given to them, they have earned it. They are now faced with the challenge of translating their street successes into long-term political gains.

Though the intifadah has brought world media attention to the plight of the WBG Palestinians, the uprising has not elicited from Arab capitals an outpouring of sympathy that has gone beyond the usual rhetorical endorsement. The Gulf War, Khomeyni's Islamic drive, and uncertainty about a post-Khomeyni Iran dominate the attention of Arab Gulf states. So far, the external PLO leadership continues steadfast in its refusal to recognize Israel, though some WBG Palestinians have done so in a de facto manner during the past 20 years.

The domestic political immobility that was suffered or enjoyed by the respective parties in the Arab-Israel conflict has been shattered by the intifadah. Though Secretary Shultz's negotiating initiative has sought to take advantage of the breach, Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans still have to sort out their own internal political configurations before they can make another concerted effort to resolve the Arab-Israel conflict.

Before the June 1967 war, Israel was preoccupied with surviving; now it is focusing on defining its identity. But that definition is tied to the fate of the Palestinian Arab population. The intifadah and the diplomatic aftermath are continued manifestations of the reality established since the signing of the Camp David Accords 10 years ago, namely, that the focus in the Arab-Israel conflict remains fixed on the WBG territories and the political future of their Palestinian population.

NOTES

1. For examples of the frequency and intensity of Israeli and Palestinian Arab inter-communal fighting in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem areas, see the Chronology section, "Arab-Israeli Conflict," Middle East Journal, vols. 41-42 (1987-1988).

2. Remarks by Ibrahim al-Qahhah on Qahhah radio, 15 April 1988, as quoted in Foreign Broadcast Information Service—Near East and South Asia (hereinafter FBIS-NESA), 19 April 1988, p. 5.


