

## Holding Israel Responsible

By Ghassan Khatib

In recent years, Israeli positions and practices vis-à-vis Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict at large have been responsible for the process of regional political and ideological radicalization.

Over the last few decades, Palestinians and Arabs have come a long way toward reaching a historic compromise. They have accepted the outline of an end to the conflict — recognition of Israel within the pre-1967 borders — despite the fact that this solution compromises the basic historical, political and national rights of Palestinians. In return for an end to the illegal Israeli military occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, Arab countries unanimously endorsed such a compromise at a 2002 summit.

These changing attitudes enabled Palestinians and Israelis, with the help of the international community, to begin the Madrid peace process in 1991. This culminated in the signing of the Oslo agreement two years later, which instituted interim arrangements lasting five years, to be followed by an end to the conflict on the basis of the land-for-peace formula.

Toward the end of the 1990s, particularly after the 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, significant changes occurred in the Israeli political landscape. Israeli public opinion manifested itself in positions and practices that left Palestinians and the Arabs with the sense that Israel had not yet reached the maturity required to end its illegal occupation, which has been the conflict's main provocation and the source of 39 years of humiliation and suffering for the Palestinian people.

The single most decisive aspect of ongoing Israeli policies that contribute to this shared Palestinian and Arab conclusion has been nonstop Israeli expansion of illegal Jewish settlements inside the occupied territories, alongside construction of the Israeli separation wall, which all too often has been routed through Palestinian land rather than on the 1967 borders.

Settlement expansion policies are incompatible with the peace process, because they consolidate rather than end the occupation. Nor are they easily reversed. Settlements create facts on the ground that prejudice the

borders of a two-state solution, the main vision of peace shared by those interested in ending this conflict.

The failure of the peace process culminated after the death of former Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and the election of President Mahmoud Abbas. Abu Mazen, as he is generally known, was elected by a clear majority in order to achieve through peaceful means the legitimate Palestinian aspirations of ending the occupation and attaining independence. But during the year of Abu Mazen's presidency, between Arafat's absence and the election of Hamas, he and the peace camp that he represents were completely abandoned by Israel and the United States. This further contributed to the radicalization of public opinion in Palestine and the region.

Israeli collective punishment, specifically "closure" policies and movement restrictions on people and goods between various Palestinian areas, have been recognized by the World Bank and other international agencies as being the primary cause of ongoing economic deterioration and unprecedented poverty. Many independent studies have tied political radicalization to increases in poverty.

But this Palestinian account is far less liable to reach the eyes and ears of those interested in achieving a balanced understanding of the conflict. As such, *bitterlemons.org* has created a unique opportunity for both concerned individuals and groups outside the region to gain greater understanding. Its contributors write and are interviewed separately by each side's editor, allowing them to present their views as complete viewpoints, rather than as reactions to the ideas of others. As such, perspectives are presented without compromise or the approval of the "other side." This is the truly unprecedented aspect of *bitterlemons*, one made possible by the landless arena of cyberspace and the commitment of its readers and creators.

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