

# The Intifada

## Meeting New Challenges

This article was written by the progressive US journalist Phyllis Bennis after her visit to occupied Palestine in February 1990.

Two years and three months ago, the intifada was all new. All at once, it was spontaneous and deeply-rooted; it was stone-throwing and tomato-growing; it was building a new Palestine for a new kind of Palestinian.

The intifada is older now, no longer spontaneous and its roots have penetrated deep into the layers of a multifaceted Palestinian society. The uprising looks different now, even to an outsider visiting Palestine - but the most significant differences, those that herald the structural and political shifts in the intifada, do not appear so clearly on the surface. Understanding those changes means delving into the intifada's roots, analyzing the nature of the stages in its development.

When I visited occupied Palestine for the first time, in the spring of 1988, the intifada was in its first months. No one was sure how long it would last, and what would be gained from it. No one knew how high a price remained to be paid.

The intifada's infancy was ending. That first stage in which the spontaneous reaction to the years of occupation exploded in mass resistance, was coming to a close. That stage was characterized by the creation of new kinds of popular institutions to organize and take responsibility for the waves of unplanned militancy challenging the domination of the occupation authorities at the street level. Had the mass demonstrations, rock-throwing and other early forms of protest remained impromptu, the brutality of Israel's immediate efforts to crush the intifada might have done just that.

By the spring of 1988, the intifada was far from spontaneous. It had grown, matured, transformed itself into a society-wide challenge to Israeli occupation. Its immediate demand was freedom from the occupation's brutality and humiliation; its ultimate goal was - and remains - an independent Palestinian state.

The next phase focused on consolidating the popular organizations and

transforming them into a network of institutions that collectively serve as the structures of the emerging Palestinian state. Most of the work was mobilized through various social sectors - virtually all of which were pulled into political motion by the power of the popular committees. Shopkeepers in the merchants' committee designed rules for the now-frequent commercial strikes; women's committees expanded their work to include economic self-sufficiency projects as well as political mobilization. Committees were created to carry out the tasks of education, agricultural production, medical care, guarding, food distribution and virtually every other aspect of collective social life.

The popular committees themselves, responsible for governing the new state-in-form, took shape at every level of society - from block to neighborhood to city-wide, district and regional formations, culminating at the top of the pyramid in the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNL). It was in the name of the UNL that the communiques, the numbered leaflets that form the «laws» of the nascent state, began to be issued.

The phase of institutionalizing the intifada seemed to culminate with the Declaration of Independence at the Algiers PNC in November 1988. The announcement of the State of Palestine gave new internal coherence, as well as international credibility to the national power structure being built. For Palestinians living under occupation, the issue of dual power with the Israeli occupation was taking on a newly concrete form, for every popular organization carried out two functions. Alongside the «official» task of providing medical services, coordinating agricultural cooperatives or guarding a village, for example, lay the second role of challenging the capacity of the occupation authority to govern.

When a six-week-long battle of wills broke out in early 1988 between Israeli

soldiers and Ramallah's shopkeepers over the shops closing in accordance with the UNL's strike call, the real issue had little to do with whether a grocery store opened from 9 to 12, or from 3 to 6. But it had everything to do with who decided those kind of questions. When the soldiers finally abandoned their failed efforts to prevent the strike's success by forcing open shops, breaking locks, etc., the potential for Ramallah's popular committees to govern additional aspects of life in the town took on a new resilience.

Since the PNC, the consolidation of the intifada's infrastructure has largely been a success. The 21-hour-day commercial strike is an unchallenged reality throughout occupied Palestine. The boycott of Israeli goods has become second nature, and factories are on double shifts to keep up with the demands for national products. Women's committees have created numerous small and large-scale cooperatives that play important roles in village and refugee camp economic life.

But with the «normalization» of certain aspects of the intifada, a new stage is coming to the fore. While direct, militant resistance to the occupation's military and settler presence in Palestine continues unabated, its forms have changed. Large-scale demonstrations are less frequent these days - too many martyrs and serious injuries have been the result of such face-offs. But resistance is very much the name of the game in 1990's intifada, and much of it takes the shape of economic struggles to fight and defeat the occupation's efforts to strangle Palestine's national economic life and make day-to-day existence on the individual level so untenable that some, perhaps many Palestinians would choose «voluntary» exile in the hopes of finding a better life for their children.

Beyond the struggle to survive and to resist Tel Aviv's economic onslaught, the new stage has also been shaped by the effort to realize the gains of the intifada in the diplomatic arena. The stage emerged in the context of the dramatic opening of a US-PLO «dialogue». While still not recognizing the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and still rejecting the creation of an independent Palestinian state, Washington's move gave tacit acceptance to PLO involvement in any peace