

Reassessing the Intifada

by Farida Al Asmar

For well over a year now, the Palestinian intifada has been facing serious problems, which were subsequently aggravated by the Gulf war and its aftermath. Many of the difficulties stem from weak points in Palestinian policy, but objective obstacles related to the Israeli occupation also play a major role. It is not the people's will to fight for their freedom and independence that is in question; in fact, acts of militancy are on the rise. Yet, a more consistent political line and practice, as well as more support to the intifada, are needed from the PLO and its component organizations, to empower the people in the occupied territories. The broad mass participation and organization of 1988-89 must be restored, perhaps in a new way, if the intifada is to meet the current challenges.

Israeli - created obstacles

The Israeli government's categorical dismissal of the Palestinian peace initiative of November 1988 delineates the overall condition in which the activities of the intifada began to decline in 1990. Already at this point the problem intersects with Palestinian policy. The false expectations promoted

by sectors of the PLO leadership — that a Palestinian state could be established soon — left the intifada ill-prepared to face the ensuing stalemate. While the PLO relied on the intifada to score gains for the Palestinian cause, excessive attention and resources were devoted to the diplomatic struggle, at the expense of substantive support to the intifada itself. Programs adopted to escalate the intifada were not thoroughly implemented. The PLO as a whole did not use its military capacity to support the intifada by confronting the Israeli occupation forces with firepower. Nor were Palestinian communities in exile systematically mobilized in support of the struggle in the occupied territories.

As a result, the population of the occupied territories was not provided with sufficient material support to counter successive waves of Zionist attacks. There was seeming disregard for «the integral relation between the requirements of militant action and the economic needs of the masses» — a relation highlighted by the UNL in call no. 70, May 1st. Funds were channeled in a short-sighted and sometimes wrong way, instead of being invested in developing social and productive institutions to sustain the people's steadfastness and build the infrastructure

of the declared State of Palestine.

Moreover, by spreading unrealistic expectations and offering concessions, without the prospects of attaining anything in return, PLO policy confused people and encouraged a return to the traditional attitude of waiting for the leadership outside to take the initiative. The inconsistent PLO policy also affected the Arab masses whose mobilization in support of the intifada began to dwindle after the first year (the situation in Jordan being one of few exceptions).

Meanwhile, the Israeli government's rejection of peace was predictably coupled with escalating repression. In addition to the murder of activists, the occupation authorities' arrest campaigns carved into the intifada's leadership and structure on the local level. In some places, less experienced cadres were left to guide the struggle. The gaps created by Zionist repression are part of the explanation for the emergence of incorrect practices and factional behavior in the ranks of the intifada itself.

Settlements mushroom

All the while an even more far-reaching attack on the intifada has been underway in the form of massive Soviet Jewish immigration to occupied Palestine, supplemented by the airlift of 14,000 Ethiopian Jews as the Mengistu regime crumbled. This influx has allowed the Shamir government to reinvigorate its settlement-building program, despite a patent lack of finances, in a new thrust to preempt an independent Palestinian state through more land-grabbing and demographic transformation.

Among other things, the Gulf war curfew on Palestinians served as a subterfuge for Israeli land surveyors with an eye for confiscation. The NGO Coordinating Committee in Jerusalem reported that at least 3,030 hectares of West Bank land were taken over by Israel in March and April alone, while another 4,000 hectares were closed off by the IDF for possible confiscation.

The Israeli Housing Ministry has operational plans aimed at fulfilling Sharon's seemingly wild pledges to double the number of settlements in the Golan Heights, settle one million Jews in

