AJW

POL 391

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December 3, 2016

The First Intifada

On December 8, 1987, an accident that killed four people ignited the dry kindling that flamed to life as the First Intifada, or Popular Uprising. On that day, an Israeli civilian truck driver lost control of his vehicle at a military checkpoint outside of Jabaliya, a Palestinian refugee camp, and hit an automobile, killing four Arabs (Said pg 5-22). Arabs immediately begin to riot in the vicinity wielding axes, knives, and Molotov cocktails towards Israeli soldiers and tanks. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) responded with force, wounding thirty Arabs and killing one (Uprising or Awakening). This paper seeks to analyze the impact of the mostly non-violent First Intifada by examining its activities and overall effectiveness. Although the goals of the First Intifada were never formally stated by an organization, this paper, deriving the goals from books on the movement, defines the goals of the movement as the repulsion of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Occupied Territories, the creation of their own sovereign state, and international recognition for such state (King).

To begin understanding the First Intifada, it is necessary to understand the geography and anthropology of the subject. For the purposes of this paper, Palestine will refer to either Palestinian Occupied Territories or the political state of Palestine as partially recognized by political actors, not the region of Palestine, which is the geographic region bordered by the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River. The state of Palestine did not exist until 1988, a year after the beginning of the First Intifada. Until such state was declared in November of 1988, the area of Palestine in this paper will refer to the Palestinian Occupied Territories, namely the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, displayed in the image to the right in red and dark green. After that point, Palestine will refer to the self-declared state of Palestine.

Palestinian Occupied Territories 1948



Anthropologically, the people to whom this paper refers as Palestinians before and until the declaration of statehood were stateless refugees. These people were represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which at the time was simultaneously recognized by several international actors such as the Arab Summit but was also considered a terrorist organization by the State of Israel and the United States of America. The terrorist designation was given for the PLO’s rejection of the State of Israel’s right to exist, avowed goal to destroy Zionism in the Middle East, and violence against Israelis (History and & Overview, Palestinian / Arab Terrorism).

While the initial car crash and resulting immediate reaction of violent protest precipitated the First Intifada, that day only began a mostly non-violent movement. In the months and years after that critical day, a non-violent campaign broke out and “Palestinians staged huge public demonstrations and sit-ins” despite Israeli military orders prohibiting such acts (Cobban). Intifada leaders issued leaflets with calendars that designated certain days in advance for different forms of protests. On these leaflets, “workers were called on to abstain from going to their jobs, business owners from opening their businesses; and students from going to school” (Cobban). The First Intifada organized strikes, boycotts of Israeli goods, business closures, and demonstrations in the streets (Al Jazeera). One of the most unique forms of protest the movement utilized was rejecting Israel’s daylight-saving time and adopting their own time, disrupting commerce and stability (Al Jazeera). At the time, Israel levied a system of taxes and expensive permits against the Palestinian Occupied Territories. To protest this economic injustice, the people of Beit Sahour, a town in occupied territory, engaged in a collective tax-strike (Cobban).

However, the First Intifada was not entirely peaceful and non-violent. During the first four years of the movement, Palestinians “carried out more than 3,600 Molotov cocktail attacks, 100 hand-grenade attacks, and 600 assaults with guns or explosives” Palestinian / Arab Terrorism). In June of 1988, resistance fighters set fire to more than 500 Israeli targets (Al Jazeera). Hamas, a terrorist organization whose charter called for the destruction of Israel, originated during the First Intifada and pledged violence against the Israel (Laub). Because many in the occupied territories lacked traditional modern weapons like guns, protesters, particularly youths and young adults, resorted to throwing stones and utilizing slingshots against the Israeli military (Al Jazeera). Due in part to the symbolism and photojournalism covering these stone throwers, the icon of the First Intifada became a young boy throwing stones at an Israeli tank whose turret is trained on him. However, according to Erica Chenoweth, author of “Why Civil Resistance Works”, the Israeli Defense Force reported that 97% of the First Intifada’s activities were non-violent. Analyzing the magnitude of violence in the movement, the fewer than 1000 shooting incidents pales in comparison to the almost 200,000 unarmed protest incidents over the period of 1988-1992 (Chenoweth pg 119-120). While violence was certainly committed by many movement supporters, data tells us that the nature of the First Intifada should be classified as mostly non-violent.

As a result of the momentum created by the First Intifada for repeal of the Israeli occupiers and independence, Yasser Arafat, then-chairman of the PLO, declared the State of Palestine (Palestine) on November 15, 1988. In his speech, Arafat condemned terrorism, accepted UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, and recognized Israel’s right to exist. Aside from the beginning of the First Intifada, this event was the most significant step in the process of repelling the Israeli occupation, realizing self-determination, and achieving recognition of statehood by the rest of the world. UN Security Council resolution 242 prescribes, “Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force” (S/RES/242). By accepting UN Security Council resolution 242, Arafat implied that he would cease aggressions towards Israel and respect their right to statehood, thus rejecting Hamas’ charter mission to destroy Israel. UN Security Council resolutions 338 stipulates, “immediately and concurrently with the cease-fire, negotiations shall start between the parties concerned under appropriate auspices aimed at establishing a just and durable peace in the Middle East” (S/RES/338). In accepting UN Resolution 338, Arafat agreed that Palestine would undertake a legitimate attempt at peace with Israel. The acceptance of these two resolutions was a precondition to peace with Israel, furthering both the Israeli withdrawal of forces from the Palestinian Occupied Territories and international recognition of Palestine.

After the 1991 Gulf War, President H. W. Bush of the United States and President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union began to collaborate on the subject of peace in the Middle East, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Bush and Gorbachev formulated the objectives of a meeting titled the Madrid Conference and invited Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians, albeit as part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, to Madrid. The invitation stated its goals as attempting in good faith to reach self-government and peaceful relations between Israel, the Arab states, and the Palestinians. The Conference was held on October 30, 1991 for three days between the aforementioned parties in an attempt to make peace between the State of Palestine and Israel, with follow up meetings around the world (Madrid Conference). These meetings and their progress subsequently led to the Oslo Accords.

The Oslo Accords are a series of two agreements, the Oslo I Accord and Oslo II Accord, known as such because they were created and signed in Oslo, Norway, that were an attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To accomplish this goal, the Oslo I Accord created a five-year interim agreement until a more permanent basis could be negotiated. The arrangement created a Palestinian self-government called the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). According to Oslo I, the PNA would administer the territory under its control and Israel would withdrawal its military from parts of the Palestinian Occupied Territories (Oslo I). The Oslo II Accord created three separate areas of control in the West Bank, called Area A, Area B, and Area C, as seen in the map at the top of the next page. Area A, seen in red, is under full civil and military control of the Palestinian Authority. Area B, seen in grey, is under full civil control of the Palestinian Authority, and joint military control of Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Area C, in green, is under full civil and military control of the State of Israel (Oslo II, Beitler).

Internationally, the State of Palestine enjoys limited recognition among international actors. As of 2012, the United Nations accorded the State of Palestine “non-member observer state” status (Sixty-seventh General Assembly). Roughly 73% of the world’s countries recognize Palestine. In contrast, notable exceptions that do not recognize Palestine include Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, South Korea, Spain, and Switzerland (Informed Comment). At the moment, 136 countries representing five and half billion people recognize Palestine’s statehood (Snyder). Although the European Parliament voted in 2014 to recognize Palestine as a state, few of its members individually recognize Palestine as a state (European Parliament Votes).



1995 West Bank ABC

Given hindsight on thirty years of progress since that car crash, the First Intifada has had significant, but not complete success in its goals of repelling the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Occupied Territories, creating a sovereign state (Palestine), and achieving international recognition for that state. Regarding the first goal, Palestinians can look to the Oslo Accords, particular Oslo II, for a measuring stick of its success. While the Gaza Strip is completely under Palestinian control, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is divided into three regions of control, with varying degrees of Palestinian authority and autonomy in each one. It should be noted, however, that most of the West Bank by territory is under complete Israeli control. Furthermore, Israeli settlements, despite their disputed legality, scattered throughout the West Bank host hundreds of thousands of Jewish Israelis (Tharoor). These settlements will further complicate Palestinian efforts for complete sovereignty in the West Bank in the future. The second goal, creating a sovereign state, has also been achieved with incomplete success. The definition of a sovereign state, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is “A state with a defined territory that administers its own government and is not subject to or dependent on another power” (Sovereign State). To this day, Palestine relies upon Israel economically and upon the rest of the international world for aid, of which the state receives more than $1 billion per year (How Much International Aid). Although Palestine has declared itself a state, Palestine cannot yet call itself a sovereign state; most of Palestine’s territory is under dispute or under control of another state (Israel), Palestine remains a patron state of the international community, and it involuntarily relies economically upon its neighbors, particularly Israel (Young). Despite achieving international recognition from 173 countries, Palestine has neither achieved full voter status in the United Nations nor achieved statehood recognition from Israel, the United States, or many western developed nations.

Despite the aforementioned limited success in achieving the goals of the First Intifada, the current state of the Palestinian people is much improved compared to December 7, 1987, the day before the car crash that started the First Intifada. Although impossible to determine the direct impact of individual acts of protest, the First Intifada and other events together transformed the Palestinians from a people considered stateless refugees wholly reliant upon Israel to a people who have their own partially recognized state with partial sovereignty. Their success should be celebrated as an achievement of the non-violent school of thought.

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