

THE GULF CRISIS AND THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN EQUATION

BY JIM LEDERMAN

THE NEAR-UNANIMOUS SUPPORT by Palestinians for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait is yet another example of what happens when a popular national myth confronts and then takes control over national political policies. The Iraqi invasion brought the Palestinian masses out into the streets of Jordan and the West Bank in an extraordinary show of support for Saddam Hussein.

Palestinian newspapers of all political hues in East Jerusalem were unanimous in their praise of the Iraqi leader. Even among Palestinians who are Israeli citizens, the degree of applause was remarkable. A telephone poll released on 9 August, showed that 62 percent supported the invasion and 69 percent believed that Saddam Hussein was a national hero. Only 15 percent thought he was mad or irrational.

The practical consequences of this support were felt almost immediately. Egypt ordered its frontier posts to restrict the entry of Palestinians. Thousands of Palestinians who had been working in the Gulf states were expelled. The \$250 million they sent annually in remittances to their families in the Israeli-occupied territories slowed to a trickle. And once again, the PLO was condemned and became politically isolated in most of the Western world. To understand why the Palestinians acted as they did, and why they acted as uniformly as they did, one has to examine the context of events that were occurring in the Middle East at the time immediately prior to the invasion.

THE KUWAITIS WERE AMONG THE MOST WIDELY unpopular people in the Arab world. Whether they appeared in Cairo, Tunis, or Beirut, they were viewed as arrogant spendthrifts who used their money to throw their weight around and to ride roughshod over local sensitivities. The Sabahs, the ruling family, in particular, were viewed by most Palestinians as avaricious and unwilling to contribute more to the Palestinian cause than was absolutely necessary to contain Palestinian unrest at home.

Moreover, the Palestinian's political position prior to the invasion of Iraq looked particularly bleak. The Americans had suspended their low-level contacts in June in the wake of a terrorist attack on Israeli beaches. Israel's government had become dominated by ideological and security hawks. There was a crisis in Palestinian-Egyptian relations. The Soviet Union had withdrawn as an active patron. And the Palestinian uprising in the Israeli-occupied territories had stagnated and turned on itself. In July, more Palestinians had been killed by other Palestinians than by Israeli soldiers.

ANOTHER MAJOR REASON FOR PALESTINIAN dependency, which has gone virtually unnoticed in the Western press, is the massive Soviet immigration to Israel. Some 90,000 Soviet Jews had arrived in Israel in 1990 by the time the invasion occurred, and Israeli officials were predicting that immigration might reach two million by the end of the decade. This challenged one of the central Palestinian theses – that even if the Arabs could not defeat the Israelis on the battlefield, the far higher Palestinian birthrate would soon change the demography of the area and cause a political crisis.

To expatriate Palestinians, the arrival of the Soviet Jews meant more Jewish soldiers and, eventually a stronger Israeli economy. To Palestinians in the occupied territories the new arrivals represented an immediate threat to their jobs in Israel, and more importantly, a huge new source of Jewish settlers for the occupied territories. To Israeli Arabs, they represented a twofold threat. The first was that settling the immigrants was putting such a strain on the Israeli economy that Arab efforts to achieve parity with Jews in government grants for municipal services would be halted. The second was that Israeli Arabs, because of their high birthrate, were on their way to becoming a significant fulcrum of power in the Knesset. With the arrival of the Soviet Jews, this potential source of power would be lost.

ONE OF THE CENTRAL NATIONAL MYTHS THAT Palestinians turn to in times of crisis is that Zionist Jews are modern Crusaders – a foreign Western body implanted within the Arab midst, which can and will be cauterized by the sword. The model for almost all Palestinians is Salladin, the Kurdish general who drove the Crusaders from Jerusalem in 1187, and reestablished Moslem hegemony in the holy city.

Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had cultivated an image of himself as the modern Salladin. His willingness to confront the American superpower, his ability to sow fear in the Gulf sheikhdoms where the Palestinian workers had few civil rights, and his calls for holy war against the infidels the Saudis had invited onto

their territory, elicited an immediate emotional response among Palestinians. In many ways, Saddam Hussein was viewed as a secular messiah.

The effects on the Israeli-Palestinian equation have been substantial. The right in Israel launched a campaign of “we told you so” – Palestinians had entered into a perfidious alliance with Israel's most dangerous enemy and so they could not be trusted. Israeli doves, including many who had worked hard for an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, were

left in disarray. The doves' elder statesman, former foreign minister Abba Eban, stated, “My colleagues and I cannot possibly have a fruitful discussion with Palestinians who applaud the brutality of Saddam.” Knesset member Yossi Sarid, a leading peace activist added, “You need to put on a gas mask to protect yourself against the poisonous smell of the pro-Saddam stand of the Palestine Liberation Organization.”

THE ISRAELI LEFT'S PRIMARY INTERLOCUTORS in the occupied territories, like Feisal al Hussein, arguably the most influential political figure in the West Bank, tried to soften the effect the Palestinian stand was having in Israel. He stated that Palestinian support for Saddam was “a sign of frustration.” Furthermore, Palestinians were not for the Iraqi invasion, but against the “American double standard” of supporting Israel despite its conquest of the West Bank and Gaza, while opposing Iraq's similar conquest of Kuwait. The latter argument made little impression on the Israelis, who recalled that they did not launch the war that led to the capture of the West Bank, while Iraq's action was one of naked aggression.

For the majority of the Israeli centre and right wing the emphasis has shifted to another concern, the fear that any resolution of the Gulf crisis, including an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, will somehow be linked to Western efforts to pressure Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories. Both the right and the left are, however, united by a concern over the as yet unimaginable short and long-term consequences of a possible Iraqi decision to launch a major international terrorist campaign led by Palestinian terrorist mercenaries like Abu Abbas and Abu Nidal. □

This is the second in a series of articles Peace&Security will present on issues that comprise the Middle Eastern and Arab-Israeli conflicts. Jim Lederman, a Canadian, is the longest-serving foreign correspondent in Israel. He is currently finishing a book on US media coverage of the Intifadah.