

# Whatever Happened to Palestine?



by April Summitt

It is a mid-March morning and I am watching CNN as I get ready to go to my office. I listen patiently to stories on the dropping stock market, preparations for war in Iraq, how Americans are so angry at the French that they are now calling French Fries "Freedom Fries" in many parts of the country. Amidst the latest scandal scoop involving Michael Jackson's problems with the IRS, I happen to notice the crawler at the bottom of the screen. Sport scores, celebrity news, Christopher Reeve breathed on his own for 15 minutes yesterday. Just as I am about to flip the channel, the crawler announces that up to 11 people were killed yesterday in the West Bank. What happened? I wait for more news, but the crawler then begins to talk about top-grossing movies last week and even the live announcer is talking about the contract negotiations of a lead actor in a popular TV show.

Later in the broadcast, the story finally showed up on screen. Apparently, Israelis were searching a West Bank refugee camp for terrorists when their forces came under fire. A few moments later, President Bush came on screen for a press conference. He stated that Palestinians were close to electing a new Prime Minister and as soon as they did, he would unveil a "road-map to a peace" plan for the region. Bush then called for an end to the build-

ing of new, Jewish settlements inside the West Bank. "It is about time," I think out-loud.

But that was over a month ago and since then, America has gone to war. First bombings, then troop maneuvers as slowly, U.S. and British forces moved up from the south toward Baghdad. Saddam Hussein's regime is no more after only a few weeks of military action and many people are cautiously celebrating what

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will likely be deemed an American victory. Even though rebuilding Iraq will continue to take time and effort, most are breathing sighs of relief that the regime fell so easily, with only the minimum of the expected "shock and awe" treatment.

Conditions are anything but stable, however, throughout the entire region. Not only will Iraq need rebuilding, but also attention is turning to Syria as accusations fly that members of Saddam's regime (and perhaps the notorious leader himself) found safe haven there. As CNN interviewed the Syrian Ambassador to the U.S.

on April 15, the ambassador began arguing that the United States was "picking on Syria" in order to divert attention from the looting in Iraq and from Israel's continuing aggression toward the Palestinians. "Talk about a nation with weapons of mass destruction," he stated angrily. "Is anyone considering sending in inspectors into Israel? Why do we accuse Syria and not Israel?"

If nothing else can be said, the war in Iraq has made most Americans quite forget about suicide bombers and plans for peace in Palestine. Even though CNN and other news networks have not been reporting on the process, Bush's "road-map" is under heavy debate in both Israeli and Palestinian circles. Generally, the plan calls for a staged process during which both sides demonstrate peaceful and cooperative intentions as conditions for the next step. Phase one calls for the Palestinian leadership to replace Yassir Arafat with new leadership that will renounce terrorism and make strong efforts to stop the violence. The Israelis must then withdraw from Palestinian cities and freeze the building of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. Phase two involves the establishing of a provisional Palestinian state by the end of this year. Phase three is a plan to debate and presumably solve the thorny issues of Jerusalem, borders, settlements and refugees by the end of 2005.

It sounds like a hopeful plan, but as a special-



ist in US-Middle East relations, I have watched other such plans come and go. Still, it is in the best interest of both Israel and the Palestinians to bring about an end to this recent uprising, or Intifadeh, that has taken approximately 1,990 Palestinian and 729 Israeli lives since September 2000. This uprising, consisting mostly of suicide bombings by Palestinians and Israeli military reprisals inside the West Bank, did attract a lot of attention during most of 2001 prior to September 11. After this tragedy, attention shifted to the hunt for Osama bin Laden, U.S. military actions in Afghanistan, and Bush's call for action against Iraq. Only the worst of the bombings, such as the Passover suicide bombing a year ago that killed 29 Israelis, distracted American news-watchers from discussions about the "War on Terror." Just recently, on April 14, Israel convicted four Palestinians to multiple life-sentences for their participation in the Passover bombing. This story was buried in newspapers and magazines far from the front pages and did not make it to TV news broadcasts at all.

What difference does it make if we turn away from this troubled region and focus on Iraq? After all, many American presidents have tried in vain to broker peace deals in Palestine. A brief scan of Arab public opinion illustrates the problem. Many Palestinians around the world and in the Middle East are now accusing the United States of ignoring Israel's own presumed stash of "weapons of mass destruction." If we choose to destroy Saddam Hussein's regime, why do we not pressure Israel to allow inspections as well? As we now direct our attentions to Syria and charge that it is harboring Iraqi leaders, many Palestinians feel that Bush's calls for peace are disingenuous. Americans are not chastising the Israelis for their continued occupation of Palestinian land or its bulldozing of their homes. Many Arabs sincerely believe that the major motive for the war in Iraq is simply to direct attention away from Israeli actions in the West Bank and to make it easier for Israel to subdue the Palestinians.

To a certain degree, the defeat of Saddam Hussein's regime does perhaps weaken Palestinian radicals inside the West Bank. Many

Palestinians view Iraq as a loyal friend in the face of Israeli aggression. During each of the major wars in Palestine (1948, 1967, and 1973), Iraq came to the aid of the Palestinians. Even Saddam Hussein himself donated more than \$2 million to families who lost homes during the 11-day standoff in the Jenin refugee camp last year. Many people in Jenin demonstrated their support for Saddam last month when the American military campaign began. One section of this refugee camp was recently renamed after an Iraqi suicide bomber who killed four U.S. marines at a checkpoint during the early weeks of the war. Now that Hussein is no longer in power, Americans view any Palestinians who sympathized openly with him as suspect. It will be difficult for

U.S. representatives to take such radicals seriously in ongoing peace negotiations.

Unfortunately, however, the costs of the war against Iraq seem to outweigh the benefits to Bush's "road-map for peace." As accusations against Syria build (another historic supporter of Palestinian radicals), more and more charges will fly that Bush seeks a Middle East in which



the United States and Israel reign supreme. In this environment, how will Bush persuade Palestinians to abandon terrorist tactics as their part of the peace bargain? It appears to many Arabs that the U.S. seeks only to ensure the stability of Israel and cares little for the needs and security of Palestinians.

What must Bush do, then? It is encouraging that even though the media has given it little attention, Bush is apparently thinking about Palestine. Nevertheless, he has some serious challenges ahead, not the least of which are the distractions of North Korea or even Afghanistan. Ariel Sharon argues that Israel will accept the peace plan ONLY if Palestinians first prove they can end the violence. Israel also continues to deny the "right of return" of Palestinians to land they owned inside Israel. Palestinians argue that without such a right, the peace-plan is a nonstarter. Israel and the United States are asking them to make all the conces-

sions and the first moves, they argue. Why should Palestinians be the ones to promise an end to violence if Bush does not force Israel to withdraw its tanks and soldiers from West Bank cities?

Somehow, Bush has to work with both sides and convince them that the U.S. is truly an impartial broker in the process. The only way he can succeed is to demand and somehow force Israel to give something in return for Palestinian efforts (currently underway) to replace Arafat's regime with a more moderate one. Sharon, however, is determined not to

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withdraw from West Bank cities or settlements until he is convinced violence will cease. Perhaps it is impossible for the United States, currently fighting one Arab regime and exchanging harsh words with another (Syria), to pose as an evenhanded broker.

As a student of Middle East history and the U.S. relationship with it, I am not so naïve to presume that I have a solution. Still, it seems obvious that Bush's approach to his various foreign policy goals often conflict and that the U.S. might need some help negotiating with Israel and Palestine. Who this fourth party should be is unclear. Let us ask the new Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, for suggestions. Sharon is always providing advice. Perhaps now we can talk to the Palestinians without appearing to support terrorists. In this post-Cold War era, it is often impossible to distinguish between villains and victims. Can the United Nations step forward with real solutions in this confusing landscape? This moment could be its final opportunity to demonstrate that the organization is capable of effective leadership in the 21st century.

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