

The Palestinian Strategic Report 2006



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Chapter Six

The Palestinian Issue and the International Setting

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The Palestinian Issue and the International Setting

Introduction

The overall international response to the Palestinian issue during the year 2006 had been triggered by three developments. First, is the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian general elections and its formation of the Palestinian government. Second, is the impact of the Israeli-Lebanese war, particularly the ability of the Lebanese resistance to abort the Israeli invasion and to obstruct the American-Israeli strategic plan. Third, the impact of the structural change in the American authority on the Palestinian issue, which was caused by the USA failure in Iraq, and represented by the victory of the Democratic Party in the Congress elections.

The mainstream international reaction to the Palestinian issue has been focused on these three developments, be it on the level of individual powers or collectively in international conferences, or at the level of all kinds of international organizations. Naturally, the reactions of the powers to these developments were connected with their historical political orientation, where each and every one of them strove to adapt these developments to serve its own strategic interests on and around the Palestinian issue. Thus, we cannot isolate these developments from the historical political orientation of the powers under study.

Since, no doubt, America plays the most important role in shaping these reactions, we have to explain its position in details. Then we will look into the positions of other relevant powers as well as the international organizations, highlighting the focal issues that concern each and every one of those powers. By the end of the day, we will earmark the communalities between all these reactions, bearing in mind that the time span between all these developments was almost the same. For Hamas victory took place early in 2006, the Israeli aggression in July and the victory of the Democrats towards the end of the year.

First: The United States of America

1. Hamas' Victory and the Formation of the Palestinian Government

The USA had consistently claimed its utmost respect to the will of the peoples in selecting their governments worldwide and in the Middle East in particular. Besides, it kept urging the Palestinian people, to indulge themselves in the democratic process to such an extent that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared just before the last Palestinian elections, conducted on 25/1/2006, "It is a duty that everybody should be able to participate."¹ Nonetheless, the USA government took a completely different position towards these elections, and refused to deal with Hamas' newly-elected government, though all observers, including former President Jimmy Carter, had unanimously testified the fairness of the elections.²

The USA seemed to have encouraged Hamas to participate in these elections on the assumption that it will change its policy once it comes to power. Jimmy Carter supported this view in a lecture that he gave in Herzliya in which he said, "I hope that Hamas will transfer into a non-violent movement and change its attitude towards Israel, as happened with the PLO and Egypt after the conclusion of Oslo and Camp David Accords respectively."³ Moreover, as much as 69% of some surveyed prominent American thinkers and strategists were of the opinion that Hamas' assumption of power will tempt it to be less militarily inclined and more peace-oriented.⁴

Nonetheless, after these elections, the American administration set for itself a strategic objective based on the implementation of the Quartet conditions, and on the call upon Hamas to surrender its political program. In an address before the American Jewish Committee, dated 4/5/2006, President George Bush openly said that they will not support elected representatives who are not committed to peace, and that they will not deal with Hamas as long as it is in the "terrorist camp." He added that they will never work with Hamas unless it recognizes Israel.⁵ In its first comment on the Palestinian elections, the Quartet Committee (the USA, EU, Russia and the UN) confirmed this position, and emphasized that the flow of aid is conditioned on Hamas' commitment to all international agreements concluded by the PA.⁶

Thus, in dealing with political systems, America's priority is not whether or not a government is democratic in nature but rather how far its policies are in conformity with the American policy. This is, in fact, compatible with American political behavior worldwide.

The content of the American call for Hamas "to change its program" was expressed in a policy statement that says, "Declaration by Hamas that it accepts all treaties concluded by the PA and the PLO, including the Road Map, recognition of Israel, and the discard of violence." These conditions have been repeatedly repeated since January 2006 by American officials in particular, and in the declaration of the Quartet Committee and the G8 countries (major industrial countries: the USA, Russia, France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan) in general.⁷

To compel Hamas to accept the American demand of "changing its program," which is essentially to recognize Israel, the USA pursued a series of direct political and economic pressures as well as indirect military pressure through Israel, as follows:

a. Political Pressure: It took different forms amongst which were the following:

1. Continuous support to the policies of President Mahmud 'Abbas that are different from those of Hamas. *The New York Times* reported that "The [American] administration resolved, in turn, to support Mr. Abbas's political party with whatever diplomacy or resources it could."⁸ Conversely, some unofficial American quarters advocate encouraging what they consider a moderate sector in Hamas at the expense of a more radical one on the assumption that the former will ultimately recognize Israel.⁹
2. To put pressure on Arab and Islamic countries to shrink their political contacts with the Palestinian government, or to impose restrictions on its members' travel abroad. Besides, is the continuous call upon some countries, like Syria, to close down the offices of the Palestinian organizations in their territories.¹⁰
3. To put pressure on the international community to prohibit receiving representatives of the Palestinian government by both official organs and civil institutions.
4. To continuously emphasize that Hamas is a "terrorist" organization who has lost support because of its policies.¹¹ The pro-neo-conservatives American

media keeps claiming a close association between Hamas and the violent extremist forces in the region.¹²

5. Support to President 'Abbas's call for an early legislative and presidential elections in the hope that this will lead to the collapse of Hamas' government and the return of Fatah to power. The American government allocated the sum of \$42 million to support 'Abbas's bid for full power, a development that 'Abbas had personally admitted in December 2006, though he evasively claimed that the objective of the aid was to support "the objective to create democratic alternatives to authoritarian or radical Islamist political options."¹³ However, it is unlikely that a future elections will be transparent or free from rigging if its prior declared objective is the return of Fatah to power. In line with this position, the American administration obstructed the formation of a national government, and, instead, advocated a government of technocrats. Secretary Rice hoped that this alternative will quietly but effectively exclude Hamas from the Palestinian strategic decision making process.¹⁴
6. To intensify American-Israeli coordination. In this respect, Silvan Shalom recorded that 103 American Senators visited Israel in 2005, and the Congress passed 15 pro-Israel resolutions during the same year.
7. To continue diplomatic pressure on the Palestinian government in all international organizations. This took the following forms:
 - a. The hint that Washington will support the Israeli position to unilaterally demarcate the frontiers of the WB by the year 2010. Secretary Rice reiterated this position,¹⁵ which was further emphasized during a meeting between President Bush and Ehud Olmert, and by a statement that the latter gave in the Knesset after he won a vote of confidence on 4/5/2006.¹⁶
 - b. The role of the USA in obstructing a call by the Yemeni government to convene an Arab summit to discuss the Israeli aggression on GS and Lebanon.¹⁷
 - c. The American obstruction to international effort in the Security Council to stop the Israeli aggression on GS, which was clearly demonstrated in the opposition of the American administration to a draft resolution to this effect proposed by Qatar.¹⁸

- d. The employment of the veto twice, in July and November, 2006, against draft resolutions condemning Israeli attacks on GS.¹⁹

b. Economic Pressure: This took the following forms:

1. The stoppage of financial aid to the Palestinian government, even the withdrawal of some amounts approved prior to the elections. The campaign in this direction had, in fact, started before the elections when 73 Senators petitioned President Bush “to stop aid if Hamas won the elections.”²⁰ Subsequently, in May, the House of Representatives passed a resolution by a majority of 361 members to stop all aid to Hamas government.²¹ This campaign culminated in the “Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006,” and the denial of the Palestinian diplomats entrance to the USA.
2. To put pressure on Arab and other countries to refrain from extending financial aid to the Palestinian government. Secretary Rice raised this issue in her February tour to the Middle East during which she visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the UAE. It was then said that the discussions addressed several issues including “the guarantee that no aid should reach Hamas government.”²² In her response to a question on Arab aid to Hamas, Rice implicitly supported this position by saying, “It is imperative for any person who wishes that peace prevails in the Middle East to make sure that support should only be extended to a person who have the same objective in mind.”²³ ‘Amr Musa, the secretary-general of the Arab League, admitted the inability of his organization to transfer via banks funds to the PA because of American and international pressure.²⁴
3. To put pressure on Arab and non-Arab banks to refrain from transferring to the Palestinian government and Hamas contributions paid to them by individuals and non-government organizations. Efforts in this direction started before the elections, and with such banks as the British National Westminster Bank or NatWest and the French Credit Lyonnais Bank.²⁵ According to Treasury Department spokesperson Molly Millerwise, “If an organization or individual is facilitating direct fund-raising for Hamas, they open themselves up to action by the United States.”²⁶

A number of Arab banks, particularly the Arab Bank, were exposed to this pressure that required them to uphold the financial siege on the Palestinian government. They had to agree, particularly as some of them were fined in

the USA because of transactions related to “terrorist” and similar issues.²⁷ Reports in the American press enumerated these incidents in details.²⁸ This pressure was extended to American philanthropic organizations that extended aid to the Palestinians, such as the American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) and Kind Hearts Organization, who were prohibited from sending contributions to the Palestinian people.²⁹

4. Allowing the transfer of some funds to the Palestinian presidency, and not to the Palestinian government; in order to enlarge the influence of the president on the account of the government to negatively affect its popularity.
5. Encouraging the media coverage of demonstrations and general strikes that were conducted by different governmental sectors, to create a negative picture on the situation in the Palestinian community.

c. Military Pressure: It took the following forms:

1. To turn a blind eye to wide and limited range Israeli attacks on Palestinian targets. For example, the operation Summer Rains on GS in late June, attacks on Beit Hanun in November, and support of Israeli attack on Jericho Prison on 14 March in which the secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Ahmad Sa‘dat, was arrested. Commenting on the latter attack, the Israeli Premier Olmert boastfully said that it was fully supported by Washington and London.³⁰ These and other attacks got the American green light under the guise of self-defense against “terrorist” operations.
2. Another aspect of the military pressure was represented by the American initiative to strengthen President ‘Abbas’ security forces, and to increase their numbers from 3,500 to 6,000.³¹ Meanwhile, *Haaretz* newspaper says that the Bush administration dispatched General Keith Dayton, American Security Coordinator in the Palestinian territories, to London to report to the Road Map Quartet on the US plan to arm and train the forces of ‘Abbas “for a potential violent confrontation with Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip.”³² This position was further emphasized by a declaration by Secretary Rice on 17 December to the effect that she will “ask the Congress to allocate tens of millions of dollars to support President ‘Abbas’ security forces.”³³

The American and European stance towards the embargo glaringly reveal their double standard. While claiming keenness and determination to spread democracy and reform in the world, the USA and Europe showed no respect whatsoever to the outcome of the ballot box in the Palestinian case. Politically and theoretically, they have thus lost their credibility in this respect.

Conversely, however, some American quarters and personalities adopted a completely different position from that of their government. They cultivated contacts with Hamas and advocated respect to the will of the Palestinian people. Reverend Jesse Jackson, the prominent US civil rights activist, met Khalid Mish'al, the head of Hamas' Political Bureau, in Damascus on 28/8/2006.³⁴ The Catholic Church, whose relations with the USA were already strained because of its condemnation of the American Iraqi invasion, criticized the Israeli siege on the Palestinian people, though it simultaneously condemned the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers by Hamas and Hizbullah.³⁵

2. The Israeli-Lebanese War of July 2006

Without indulging in the local, regional and international dimensions of the Israeli-Lebanese war, we will concentrate in this part on the American position towards this war in as far as the Palestinian issue is concerned. The USA saw in the Islamic Lebanese resistance a formidable ally of its Palestinian counterpart. Hence, it strove to, at least, weaken it, and, if possible, completely eradicate it. The Lebanese resistance has, in fact, become a model to its sister movement in Palestine, particularly after the former's success to liberate Southern Lebanon in 2000, and force the Israeli occupation forces to withdraw from Lebanese territories unconditionally.

A number of American reports showed that the USA had actively cooperated with Israel against the Islamic resistance in Lebanon. It even participated in the preparation of offensive plans that ultimately aimed at the total destruction of this resistance,³⁶ which would hopefully achieve a number of what was viewed to be strategic advantages to both countries. The decision to launch a war against Lebanon had been taken some months before the arrest of the two soldiers, and Israel was just impatiently waiting for an opportune time.

But this 33 days war had been strategically counter productive for America in as far as the Palestinian issue is concerned. This is represented in the following:

- a. The consolidation of the notion of the peoples resistance and guerilla warfare among increasing sectors of the Palestinian people, as well as the Iraqi and Lebanese resistance and even some Arab countries, like Syria, who benefited from this successful experience. To the USA, this is a negative development because it popularized Hamas' unwanted strategy.
- b. The failure to disarm the Lebanese resistance, based on Resolution 1559, will correspondingly obstruct the American-Israeli plan to disarm the Palestinian forces in Lebanon. This concern was reiterated by Secretary Rice who said that there is no place in the political process for groups and individuals who refuse to recognize Israel and discard violence and "terrorism." She added that they must be disarmed.³⁷
- c. The failure of Israel in Lebanon obstructed the American drive towards "a new Middle East" that, according to Secretary Rice, would emerge from the Lebanese war. It should be noted here that the project of the new or greater Middle East is a central issue in American foreign policy, as reiterated by the US permanent representative to NATO, Nicholas Burns, who said in an address before the conference on "NATO and the Greater Middle East" in Prague, in October 2003, "We have to deploy our conceptual attention and our military forces east and south. NATO's future, we believe, is east, and is south. It's in the Greater Middle East."³⁸ NATO had, furthermore, convened a meeting in Rabat in April 2006, in which Israel, Egypt, Mauritania, Jordan, Tunis, Algeria and Morocco were represented. The declared objective of the meeting was "to confront common threats and challenges."³⁹ According to USA these challenges had resulted from the success of Hamas, the steadfastness of the Lebanese resistance and the acceleration of the Iraqi resistance. At NATO's November 2006 Riga Summit, NATO had thus emphasized the necessity of cooperation with the Arab countries to face these challenges.⁴⁰
- d. From the American point of view, the failure of the Israeli war on Lebanon will consolidate an alliance between Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and the Palestinian organizations, which, in the words of the US annual report on terrorism entitled Country Reports on Terrorism, is represented by the support of Syria and Iran to the "terrorist" Palestinian organizations.

- e. The linkage between the issues of the Israeli soldier kidnapped by Hamas in GS and those arrested by Hizbullah. This tallies with the positions of the G8 countries and the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI, which condemned in July 2006 the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers by Hizbullah and Hamas.⁴¹
- f. The USA was seriously concerned that its quandary in Iraq and the Israeli failure in Lebanon could shake up the balance of power in the region. Hence, it strove to build an Arab front from the so-called “moderate countries against terrorism.” The American diplomat Dennis Ross called for the formation of “Arab umbrella” for “bolstering the Lebanese government, its prime minister, Fuad Saniora, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.”⁴²

The USA obstructed the efforts to issue an international resolution that orders a ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel because it assumed that the Israeli forces would achieve formidable strategic successes against the Lebanese resistance. Thus, President Bush refused the call of the secretary-general of the UN, Kofi Annan, for a ceasefire, and Secretary Rice reiterated this position in Rome Conference that convened on 26 July to discuss the war on Lebanon. The USA had even aborted the attempts of the Security Council to issue a resolution that condemns the Israeli massacre of civilians in the Lebanese town Qana, and, towards the end of the war, Bush declared that his country “is still at war with the Fascist Muslims,”⁴³ a position that does not distinguish between Hamas and Hizbullah.

3. The Victory of the Democrats in the Congress Elections

Most of the experts and analyst of the Congress partial elections maintain that the failure of the American policy in Iraq was the underlying factor for the victory of the Democrats in these elections. Particularly so as the American administration failed to achieve in this country a reasonable measure of political stability, economic development and democracy, and violence had, in fact, consistently increased.

Meanwhile, Baker-Hamilton Commission Report was released, which called for dialogue with Syria and Iran, and their involvement in the resolution of the Iraqi crisis. Such a cooperation will, no doubt, have its impact on Lebanon and the Palestinian issue, specifically on Hizbullah and Hamas. For example, the members of Baker-Hamilton Commission Report argued, dialogue between the USA and these countries will limit the options of Hamas,⁴⁴ a development that would in totality be favorable to the Palestinian issue.⁴⁵ The estrangement between the USA on one side and some Middle Eastern countries and organizations, like Iran, Syria,

Hamas and Hizbullah, is, in the opinion of these experts, the prime mover of the tension in the region.⁴⁶

Studies show that the differences between the Republicans and the Democrats are focused on the Iraqi issue, while the two parties are closer to each other on the Palestinian issue. Opinion polls indicate that support for Israel among the Democratic nominees is 58%, and that of their Republican counterpart is 78%.⁴⁷

The American conquest of Iraq reflected on the Palestinian issue in various ways. In this respect, three major and inter-related developments emerged during the year 2006, which deserve to be reflected upon:

- a. Baker-Hamilton Commission Report: 10 prominent American politicians were asked to review American policy in Iraq, and suggest future options. Their report maintained a close linkage between the Iraqi crisis and the Palestinian issue by recording:

The United States cannot achieve its goals in the Middle East unless it deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict and regional instability. There must be a renewed and sustained commitment by the United States to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts: Lebanon, Syria, and President Bush's June 2002 commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine.⁴⁸

The report urged the American administration to negotiate with those who accept Israel's right to exist, which implicitly means no negotiations should be conducted with Hamas. It added, "There is no military solution to this conflict. The vast majority of the Israeli body politic is tired of being a nation perpetually at war." The resolution of the crisis, the report maintains, lies basically in the Security Council's resolutions 242 and 338, the principle of land in return for peace. The report confirmed that "No American administration—Democratic or Republican— will ever abandon Israel."⁴⁹

On the issue of Hamas, the report maintains that its suggested vision would strengthen the moderate forces in the region, including the Palestinian authority under the leadership of Mahmud 'Abbas. The report also asked Syria to use "its influence with Hamas and Hezbollah for the release of the captured Israeli Defense Force soldiers." It demanded "a verifiable cessation of arms shipments from or transiting, through Syria for Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups;" and "a Syrian commitment to help obtain from Hamas an acknowledgment of Israel's right to exist."⁵⁰

Though exhibiting interest in the report, President Bush dealt with it selectively, and there is no guarantee that he will implement its recommendations. Most likely, he will give priority to the Iraqi crisis and the Iranian nuclear issue.

- b. The study of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt:⁵¹ The significance of this study, prepared by two prominent American academicians, is that it criticizes the Israeli lobby, and argues that Israel is gradually becoming a strategic liability on the USA. It also emphasizes the importance of a revision of the American-Israeli relations, and a more balanced policy towards the Palestinians. The study, which provoked great interest among American academicians, also maintains:

Backing Israel was not cheap, however, and it complicated America's relations with the Arab world... Israel's armed forces were not in a position to protect US interests in the region... The US could not, for example, rely on Israel when the Iranian Revolution in 1979 raised concerns about the security of oil supplies, and had to create its own Rapid Deployment Force instead... The first Gulf War revealed the extent to which Israel was becoming a strategic burden... Denying the Palestinians their legitimate political rights certainly... has empowered extremist groups like Hamas, and reduced the number of Palestinian leaders who would be willing to accept a fair settlement.⁵²

- c. The book of the former President Jimmy Carter,⁵³ entitled: *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*. Carter criticized Israel for building what he described as an imprisonment wall in the WB. He described the hardship suffered by the Palestinians under Israeli occupation, and refused the claim that Israel gave tempting concessions to the Palestinians during 'Arafat-Ehud Barak Summit in Camp David. Naturally, this book was brutally criticized by pro-Israeli forces, and by the Jewish lobby in the USA.

What is interesting about these three developments is that they were all rejected by Israel. It rejected Baker-Hamilton Report, and criticized the special study on the role of the Jewish lobby in the USA as well as Carter's book. Notwithstanding their limitedness, these developments should be closely monitored to see whether they would lead in the long run to significant changes in the American policy, and whether Mearsheimer-Walt Study indicates an increase in the opposition to the accelerating influence of the Jewish lobby on the USA strategic decisions.

From the above, it is clear that the American government and the neo-conservatives faced four major setbacks during the year 2006: the victory of Hamas, the

steadfastness of the Lebanese resistance, failure in Iraq and the victory of the Democrats in the Congress elections, which prepared the way for a confrontation between the presidency and the Congress during the coming two years. Admittedly, the American administration achieved a notable success in cornering Hamas politically and economically, but it was unable to overthrow its government or achieve the objectives behind this tight siege, which is, anyhow, progressively weakening. By the end of 2006, the balance of power in the region and the world at large was not much in favor of the USA and Israel. To check this imbalance from developing into situations that favor the forces of resistance and rejection in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and the region at large, the year 2007 may witness intensification of the conflict along all the fronts.

Second: The European Union

1. Hamas' Victory

The European position towards Hamas' victory is, on the whole, different in form from that of the Americans, but not in content. All the declarations issued by the EU, collectively or individually by member states, are in line with the general orientation of the American position that asks Hamas to accept all treaties concluded by the PA and the PLO, and hence give up its program.

However, contacts between Hamas and the European powers continued before the elections. The reports of the International Crisis Group (ICG) give details of such contacts with European officials from Germany, Britain and other powers.⁵⁴

A few days after her election victory, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, urged, after a meeting that she had with the Israeli acting Premier Ehud Olmert, the president of the PA, Mahmud 'Abbas, to call upon Hamas to accept the treaties in order to guarantee the continuation of the aid.⁵⁵

To support this position, the EU declared the release of 120 million euros (about \$142.8 million)⁵⁶ to cover the cost of the Palestinian fuels exported from Israel, and announced its support to the UNRWA on condition that these funds never reach the hands of Hamas government.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, this position relaxed the intensity of the siege, which was planned to be comprehensive, and thus corner Hamas or lead to the downfall of its government.

The position of the EU was glaringly exhibited in a decision issued by its General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC), dated 10/4/2006, that ordered the stoppage of aid to the Palestinian government. This was in line with the Quartet declaration of 29 March, which required Hamas to commit itself to all peace principles.

The EU stopped its political contacts and temporarily shelved direct aid to the new Palestinian government under the guise of protecting the financial interests of the Union. However, the Union declared that, meanwhile, it will support the humanitarian and emergency needs of the Palestinian people, and resume its contact and aid to a Palestinian government that accepts the principles laid down by the Quartet.⁵⁸

This European orientation was further emphasized by a proposal that the French President Jacques Chirac made after meeting President ‘Abbas in New York, and which he submitted to a meeting of the Quartet Committee held in the UN headquarter on 9/5/2006. In an attempt to meet the day to day needs of the Palestinian people and, at the same time, force Hamas to accept international treaties, particularly recognition of Israel, Chirac suggested “to channel aid to Palestinians via an international mechanism such as the World Bank.”⁵⁹

Chirac’s proposal was endorsed by the EU, and translated itself in June 2006 in what was called Temporary International Mechanism (TIM), which stipulated the transfer of funds to the Palestinians through banks but without passing via the Palestinian government,⁶⁰ that had, anyhow, coolly received this arrangement. However, the declaration of the Quartet that it will review the situation in three months time,⁶¹ indicates a European attempt to distinguish its position towards the issue of the siege of Hamas government from that of the American-Israeli one.

A report by the International Crisis Group saw in this European mechanism an acceptable alternative solution, but suggested that it should be accompanied by a high level diplomatic channel in which a representative of the UN would act as an intermediary to explore Hamas’ willingness to compromise, and convey to it the extent of the concessions that the Quartet would offer in return.⁶²

The European humanitarian and emergency aid, that was in line with the orientation of the Quartet, totaled in 2006 the sum of 329.16 million euros (about \$411.45 million), in addition to 184 million euros (about \$230 million) extended to the UNRWA.⁶³

The European siege imposed on Hamas government took a diplomatic dimension when several important European countries, like France, rejected visa applications submitted by some Hamas leaders. France had even criticized the Swedish government for its refusal to observe this diplomatic boycott.⁶⁴

The French position during 2006 was, in particular, comparatively negative when compared with the traditional attitude of the “de Gaullist” towards Middle Eastern issues. Beside supporting the blockade, and participating in the American effort against Syria and Hizbullah, France had become more willing to excuse the Israeli military attacks. The Qatari draft resolution to condemn the Israeli July attack on GS was opposed by both the USA and France,⁶⁵ and the French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy, had gone to the extent of saying that he understands the security reasons that impelled Israel to build the Separation Wall in the WB.⁶⁶ However, President Chirac tried to dilute the implications of this statement by saying that Israel’s right to build the Wall that guarantees its security should not be denied, but this Wall should not separate the Palestinian territories.⁶⁷

The European position culminated in a peace initiative declared by France, Italy and Spain in November 2006. It called for an immediate and mutual Palestinian-Israeli ceasefire, exchange of prisoners, the dispatch of an international mission to GS and the formation of a Palestinian government recognized by the international community.⁶⁸ Once more, this initiative, which was rejected by Israel, indicates a measure of difference with the American-Israeli position, though both positions are essentially in conformity content wise.

Meanwhile, European powers were hesitant to accept the Israeli plan to unilaterally and permanently draw the frontiers between the Palestinians and Israel. In this respect, the EU ambassador in Israel, Ramiro Cibrian-Uzal, said, “Since the Union is not aware of the details of this plan, it is difficult to express agreement to it.”⁶⁹

Nonetheless, despite the official diplomatic boycott of major European powers to the Palestinian government, some European political forces did not abide by it. However, the attitude of the European public opinion on the issue, as reflected in the reports of the European press, indicates considerable disparity between European political trends.⁷⁰

Other reports show that this extreme position is not unanimously endorsed by all powers. Some European countries, like Sweden and Finland, as well as

experts in the European Commission (EC) and the Council of the European Union, expressed the need for flexibility in dealing with the Palestinian government, and the Belgian Senator, Pierre Galand, recorded his conviction that the siege does not “reflect the sentiments of the Europeans.”⁷¹

However, political contacts were secretly conducted between Hamas government and some European powers,⁷² and public meetings were convened between the organization and some European parties. For example, Gerry Adams, the president of Sinn Fein (the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA)) met a number of representatives from Hamas and Fatah. While declaring that aid to the Palestinian people should not stop, Adams indicated that “it was vital to offer an alternative to “armed action.” This is what happened in the Irish peace process and it transformed “a militarised society” into one where ex-thugs have been transformed into workers for NGOs.”⁷³

The leftist organization, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS), convened a conference in Berlin, in November 2006, in which representatives of some leftist organizations participated. In its final communiqué, the conference emphasized the necessity of the negotiations with the Palestinian government.⁷⁴ Likewise, many European humanitarian organizations continued their aid to the Palestinians, but this move had extremely limited impact in reducing the tight grip of the financial and diplomatic siege on the Palestinian government.

2. The Israeli-Lebanese War

Some European powers played an indirect role in this war through the following activities:

- a. During the war, British civilian ports were accessible to American planes loaded with intelligent bombs and armaments to Israel.⁷⁵
- b. The EU participated in the UNIFIL forces by around seven thousand soldiers recruited from a number of European countries, notably Italy and France.⁷⁶ Subsequently, others joined from Belgium and Spain,⁷⁷ an operation described by the German Chancellor as a task which would help in defending Israel.⁷⁸
- c. The existence in Lebanese territorial waters of European military warships (from France, Italy, Greece and later Germany) that supervised the Lebanese shores,⁷⁹ in order to prevent supply of armament from abroad to the Lebanese resistance.

- d. Participation in the reconstruction of some sectors of the infrastructure that were extensively destroyed by the Israeli bombardment. Tony Blair, the British premier, referred to this effort during a visit to Beirut after the war in which he offered his country's help to reconstruct some of the bridges destroyed during the war.⁸⁰
- e. The support given by European countries to the G8 declaration of 17 July that called for the stoppage of Hizbullah's missiles against Israel, and the release of the two Israeli soldiers kidnapped by the party.⁸¹ It is important to mention here that various sources had then indicated that Hizbullah might conclude a deal to release these two soldiers in return for freedom to Palestinian, Arab and Lebanese detainees and prisoners in Israeli jails.

Europe had also connected the outcome of the Israeli-Lebanese war with the Palestinian issue, in the sense that it maintained that disarmament in Lebanon should be extended to include all the Palestinian organizations there. By this, Europe emphasized that its position is in harmony with that of the UN, as explained by Terje Roed-Larsen who said that the disarmament of the Palestinian organizations is an integral part of Resolution 1559.⁸²

However, what distinguishes the European position in this respect from its American counterpart is that the former is more inclined to the notion that the Palestinian issue is the major source of instability in the region, an idea that was ascertained after the Israeli-Lebanese war. Tony Blair emphasized that priority should be given to the Middle East "not to Syria or Iran, we have to start with Israel and Palestine, this is the crux of the problem."⁸³ Similarly, the president of the French Socialist Party, Francois Hollande, said, "As long as the Palestinians are deprived from having a state and their rights, there will be no stability in the region."⁸⁴

The above discourse shows that Europe participated during the year 2006 in the financial and diplomatic siege imposed on the Palestinian government, though with a degree of difference from the American position on the issue, while the European civil forces were less extremist in this respect. However, Europe was politically more inclined to give the Palestinian issue priority over other Middle Eastern issues, and had occasionally criticized Israeli policies and actions, as demonstrated by the opposition of the European Parliament to the Israeli operation in Jericho Prison and its attacks on GS.

Third: Russia

The Russian and Arab positions towards the Palestinian issue were generally less apart than those of other forces. The invitation that the Russian President Vladimir Putin extended to Hamas leadership immediately after their organization's victory in the elections was an important breakthrough in the positions of the big powers. The delegation reached Russia at the beginning of March 2006, and met several officials and notables, including the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, the chairman of the Russian Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (the Upper House); in addition to the Russian Patriarch and the head of the Russian Council of *Muftis* (plural of *Mufti*, an official interpreter of Islamic Law) for Russia,⁸⁵ a development that was criticized by many of the big powers, particularly the USA.

However, with the exception of this different diplomatic position towards the new Palestinian government, the Russian attitude and political orientation was, on the whole, not basically dissimilar from its American-European counterpart. This could be detected in the activities of the Palestinian delegation in Russia as follows:

1. President Putin did not meet the Palestinian delegation
2. The Russian foreign minister emphasized to the delegation the necessity of "respect to all decisions of the Quartet, rejection of violence and the recognition of the right of Israel to exist," ideas that had been previously reiterated by Russian officials and praised by the Americans.⁸⁶

Though generally in agreement with the American demands from the Palestinian government, Russia doubted American sincerity to resolve the crisis in the Middle East, as Lavrov had said that some developing countries do not exhibit seriousness in resolving the Middle Eastern crisis, as is their case with the Korean and Iranian nuclear issues.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, Russia was keen to be in uniformity with other members of the Quartet, as can be seen in its support to all the declarations of the Quartet and the G8, which insisted on the commitment of the Palestinian government to the resolutions of the Quartet.⁸⁸ Thus, the Russian position is complex and complicated, and should not be read in a simple and simplistic manner.

Thus, all around Russia had taken a middle of the road position. While declining to boycott the Palestinian government diplomatically and had offered it an aid of \$10 million,⁸⁹ Russia had, on the other side, committed itself to the conditions of the Quartet. Moreover, the Russian list of terrorist organizations, as prepared by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), does not include Hamas and Hizbullah, as the Russian law confines definition of such organizations to those who undertake terrorist operations inside Russia. Through its spokesman Lavrov, the minister of foreign affairs, Russia had even called in September 2006 for the involvement of the two organizations in the peace process.⁹⁰ But, on the other side, the Russian envoy to the Middle East, Alexander Kalugin, emphasized in February 2006, the importance of Hamas' commitment to the resolutions of the Quartet by recognizing Israel, rejection of "terrorism" and accepting all treaties.⁹¹

The Russian middle position is due to many considerations of which some are listed below:

1. Motives for the dialogue with Hamas: Russia seems to have wanted to use this dialogue for internal purposes related to the problem of the Chechnya. For dialogue with a distinguished Islamic organization like Hamas would strengthen the Russian claim that their country does not fight the Chechens because of antagonism to Islam. Nonetheless, the Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Ivanov, linked "the violence on the West Bank and Gaza to the Taliban's increased activities in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and to extremist activity in Chechnya."⁹² Subsequently, however, this orientation was bound to change, as Russia have become in July 2005 a supervisory member of the OIC, coupled with its known disfavor to the notion of clash of civilizations that may have repercussions within its own territories.⁹³ Moreover, through its dialogue with Hamas, Russia wanted to ascertain its political presence in the region. Particularly so as some sectors within the Russian administration, the so-called "Arabized" in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Security Organs, the Rosoboronexport (the Russian agency for the export and import of military products) and among the communists and nationalists, were in favor of this dialogue.

The Russian public opinion may also have its impact on the government in this respect, as the opinion polls indicated a decrease, in the usually high support of the Russians to Israel, which reached its lowest ebb, 9%, after the Israeli-Lebanese war.⁹⁴

2. Motives for adherence to the conditions of the Quartet: Russia was keen to adhere to these conditions in order to maintain its mutual interest with America, and to guarantee its interests in Israel, its second largest trading partner in the Middle East after Turkey. The volume of trade between the two countries rose during the year 2006 by about 7.6%.⁹⁵ Israel, on the other hand, was keen to secure into its territories the free and safe influx of Russian Jewish emigrants, to obstruct the flow of Russian arms to the Arab region and nuclear equipments to Iran, and to use Russia's good offices with Syria as a channel of communication with that country.

All in all, Russia tried to distinguish itself from other European powers and America on the issue of the new Palestinian government, but, at the same time, it aspired to be in conformity with the orientation of other international forces towards this government.

Fourth: China

To properly understand the attitude of China towards the victory of Hamas and the new Palestinian government, we should comprehend the four-points program of modernization that the country had actively adopted since 1978. For this program have significantly transformed the country's political and economic infrastructure, and, at the same time, shaped its foreign policy in a largely pragmatic form.

The four basic considerations that formulate China's contemporary policy towards the Middle East are:⁹⁶

1. China increasing need for oil, where Arab oil covers 44% of its needs.⁹⁷
2. China's needs a working relationship with Israel, which it had already recognized in 1992, to serve as a vehicle to acquire western technology through joint Israeli-Chinese projects, and Jewish capital for investment in China, in addition to the support of the Jewish lobby in the American Congress, particularly to voice the Chinese position on controversial issues with the American administration. However, this relationship suffered some setbacks as was in the case of the abrogation of some commercial deals and military projects between the two countries, and on the occasion of the visit of the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama to Israel in February 2006.⁹⁸

3. China's extreme concern with the rising Islamist wave in the Arab region, and its repercussions on the heavily Muslim populated and tense western Chinese provinces.
4. China's reluctance to engage itself in a strategic competition with other powers, at least in the foreseeable future, and, instead, to concentrate on promoting its trade with the Arab region, which totaled \$71 billion in 2006, to \$100 billion in 2010.⁹⁹

Having these considerations in mind, China adopted a balanced policy towards the victory of Hamas. It welcomed the outcome of the Palestinian elections, and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs called in February the international community "not to take any measures that might worsen the living situation of Palestinian people at this current stage."¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the Chinese government declared in March that it will continue to offer unconditional aid to the Palestinians, and that it is not in favor of political isolation or economic siege.¹⁰¹ Simultaneously, however, it tried, through diplomatic means, to exhibit that the Chinese position is in essence coherent with that of the major powers. This is seen in the following indicators:

1. The declaration of the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in Cairo in June that his country supports the Road Map.
2. The conclusion in June 2006 of a ministerial Chinese-Arab agreement "to step up anti-terror cooperation in bilateral, regional and multi-lateral fields." Interestingly, this agreement was signed during the Second Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum, which was established in Beijing in 2004.
3. China's expressed hope that the participation of the Palestinian Foreign Minister Mahmud al-Zahhar in the Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum of June would not affect Chinese-Israeli relations.
4. China's emphasis on the "humanitarian" nature of its aid to the Palestinians, a position that was reiterated by the Chinese envoy in the Stockholm International Donor Conference on the Humanitarian Situation in the Palestinian Territories held in early September to extend aid to the Palestinian people.¹⁰²

These indicators should be read within the context of the Chinese position that wanted to have a margin of distinction in its relations with the Palestinians, and, at

the same time, avoid at the present stage conflicts with America, though it predicts that the USA might direct its enmity to it in the future.

Notably, Chinese diplomacy had maintained continuous dialogue with different Palestinian factions and organizations. For example, several Fatah leaders had a meeting in July 2006 with representatives of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Furthermore, Bassam al-Salihi, the head of the Palestinian People's Party (PPP) (*Hizb al-Sha'b al-Filastini*), met in Beijing on 23 March Ismail Amat, vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress (NPC).¹⁰³

As for Hamas, the Chinese government never extended a public and direct invitation to the Palestinian government nor to any of its members. Contact with the Palestinian government was kept at a low and minimum level, and through broad contacts as was the case during the above mentioned ministerial meeting.

The visit of the Palestinian minister of foreign affairs to Beijing had been accompanied by a measure of confusion. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs had at first, on 6 April, denied that an invitation had been extended to the minister, but on 18 May, maintained that he is coming within an invitation to attend the above mentioned China-Arab Cooperation Forum. This reserved and shy position was further ascertained through some official declarations:

- A declaration by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintained, "We don't necessarily agree with Hamas's policies, but as it is chosen by the Palestinian people, we should respect their choice."¹⁰⁴
- Another communiqué by the same ministry recorded, that "economic assistance" was not discussed with al-Zahhar, although "humanitarian aid" was.¹⁰⁵ This indicates that China wanted to avoid confrontation with the American-Israeli policy, though it was not a member of the Quartet Committee.

Thus, China had, on the one hand, continued its pragmatic policy in an attempt to maintain its "specialty," but, on the other hand, strove to swim with the international tide with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is largely determined by the USA. However, due attention should be given to this Chinese distinct position, but without magnifying it or betting on it.

Fifth: Japan

The Japanese policy in the Middle East is on the whole characterized by four characteristics:

1. Not to be directly involved in the strategic competition in the region.
2. To give priority to the mercantile dimension in its international relations, and to pursue the diplomacy of “multiple directions” that it had adopted since 1973, which means to deal with all countries and political trends irrespective of the differences between, or within, them.
3. To emphasize the political settlement for the conflicts in the region.
4. Not to provoke or offend the USA.

Japan addressed the Palestinian issue within these guidelines. Its first official contact with the PLO was in December 1988, less than eight hours after America expressed its readiness for dialogue with the PLO, when the Japanese Foreign Minister Sosuke Uno, met a representative of the PLO.¹⁰⁶

In conformity with these principal guidelines of the Japanese foreign policy, we may enumerate the country’s moves in the Middle East during the year 2006 in the following:

1. No direct involvement in the strategic competition in the region. This is glaringly reflected in the limited coverage of the Japanese media to the Israeli-Lebanese war,¹⁰⁷ and in the fact that none of the Japanese premiers had visited the region for over 15 years, during the period 1991-January 2006, though 90% of the country’s petrol comes from it. Japan did not go beyond the limits of “mercantile diplomacy” except in some aspects like the Fourth Seminar on Dialogue Among Civilizations between Japan and the Islamic World that was held in Tunis in January 2006.¹⁰⁸

2. The active pursuit of the “mercantile diplomacy” and the multiple diplomacy. A review of the Japanese declarations on the problems of the region shows that they continuously emphasize and remind of the Japanese aid to the region, including that extended to the Palestinian people, and to Japan’s projects and investment there. This diplomacy culminated in 1999 in Japan’s patronage, in cooperation with the UN Secretariat, of the policy of “Human Security” that catered for the provision of the essential needs to the Palestinian people.

On reviewing the Japanese activities in the region, particularly towards the Palestinians, we note that the Japanese presence in economic projects is clear and vivid, while the country's position on political projects is usually concealed behind that of the American.

Within these general aspects of the Japanese policy, we may track the Japanese attitude towards the elected Palestinian government. It is worth noting that a Japanese group, under the presidency of the deputy minister for foreign affairs, Shintaro Ito, had participated in the supervision of the Palestinian elections, and that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official declaration on 26/1/2006 that welcomed these elections, but expected that the PA "will make efforts for peace in accordance with the Roadmap, such as to control the extremists." However, the general orientation of the Japanese policy has become clear on 3 February, that the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for the Middle East, Tatsuo Arima, will not meet Hamas officials, in his forthcoming visit to the region.¹⁰⁹

In coherence with the American position towards the Palestinian government, the Japanese Premier Junichiro Koizumi, declared during a visit to the PA on 13 July that he will extend support to it and promote the efficiency of the president's office by increasing the Japanese aid to \$3.1 million,¹¹⁰ but without any reference to the Palestinian government.

During the deliberations of the World Economic Forum on the Middle East, held on 21/5/2006, the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for the Middle East, Tatsuo Arima, highlighted his government's position in the following points:

- a. Hamas should continue the quest for peace and 'Abbas and Olmert convene a meeting.
- b. Israel should take no measures that affect the status of the final negotiations.
- c. Israel should release the returns from the Palestinian taxes.
- d. To support the dialogue between Palestinian-Israeli elitist groups, in continuation of the elitist meetings held in Japan in 2003, and which culminated in what was known as Geneva Initiative.¹¹¹
- e. Japan comes second, after the USA, in offering aid to the Palestinian people. Its aid during the period 1993-2005 totaled \$840 million, i.e., 9.9% of the total international aid to the Palestinians.¹¹²

In its website, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan mentioned that it extended \$3.72 million aid to the UNRWA in 2006, and that it offered about \$11.42 million to the WB and GS.¹¹³ Junichiro Koizumi, the prime minister of Japan, in his visit to the Middle East in July 2006, proposed the concept called the “Corridor for Peace and Prosperity” which is based on regional cooperation, supported by Japan, in the Jordanian valley. During this visit, it was agreed that a “consultative unit,” composed of representatives from Jordan, PA Israel and Japan be established, and Japan will contribute \$2 million for the feasibility study to be conducted by the World Bank, on the construction of a Red Sea-Dead Sea water conveyance; as Japan forecasted it as important in developing the Jordan River rift valley and securing water resources.¹¹⁴

3. Emphasis on the peaceful settlement of conflicts in the region. This policy was clarified in a series of declarations by which Japan kept an equal distance between itself and both of the Palestinian and Israeli sides, i.e., what may be called the equal distance declarations.

This orientation is clear in the declarations that the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for the Middle East, Tatsuo Arima, issued after a visit that he paid during the period 5-11 November to Israel, Palestine and Syria. It is also noted in the declarations which addressed the Israeli attack on Beit Hanun in November 2006 where Japan expressed its “deep concern” towards the Israeli operations in this town, particularly the bombardment of houses of the civilians, and called upon Israel to conduct an investigation on the matter. Conversely, the declaration called upon the Palestinians to control their attacks from Gaza on Israel. It also welcomed the ceasefire between the two sides, and called for a meeting between the Israeli premier and the president of the PA.¹¹⁵ This policy “of equal distance” was reiterated in a declaration by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 30 June on the issue of kidnapping by Hamas of an Israeli soldier on 25 June. The declaration pointed to the necessity of the release of the Israeli soldier and exhibited its concern on the Israeli arrest of members of the Palestinian government.¹¹⁶

Some Japanese analyst maintain that the attitude of their government towards Hamas takes into consideration the impact of the rising role of the Islamic forces worldwide, but particularly on its neighboring countries that has a Muslim population like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines.¹¹⁷

During the year 2006, Japan was thus committed to the political orientation of the other major powers, though it tried to dilute the impact of this policy on the Arab street through its “cheque book diplomacy,” and by constantly reminding of its sizeable aid to the Palestinians in particular. Nonetheless, it is indeed worthwhile to track this increasing Japanese interest in the region, never belittle the importance of establishing communication channels with Japan directly and indirectly, and to encourage this country to pursue comparatively independent policies from those of the American administration.

Sixth: International Scenario

1. The International Organizations

a. The United Nations

The will of the UN should supposedly be determined by its member states. But, in reality, the Secretariat had chosen to be under the control of the central powers of the Security Council, particularly America and major European countries. Hence, the position of the international organization on the central issue in the year 2006, namely the financial and diplomatic blockade, was in conformity with that of these powers.

The first declaration of the Security Council on the Palestinian elections called for respect to the concluded agreements, and the Road Map. It also recorded the concern of the council on the extension of the settlements and on the route of the Separation Wall.¹¹⁸

In coherence with the international policy of the blockade, the UN imposed restrictions on contacts with the Palestinian government. The UN dictated that political contact with the Palestinian government will be undertaken on a case to case basis,¹¹⁹ and the secretary-general reiterated in different occasions that the Palestinian government should abide by the international agreements concluded between the PA and Israel.

The UN advised its aid agencies to “avoid meeting with Hamas political leaders and to limit contacts to technocrats in the new Palestinian Government.” The UN also advised its aid agencies “to avoid political contact” with Hamas leaders. UN

spokesman, Stephane Dujarric, said the following in this respect, “working contacts for aid agencies and other UN officials with the new Palestinian Government are permitted to ensure continuation of humanitarian programs... The issue of political contacts will be dealt with as it arises.”¹²⁰

In private briefings:

Bush administration officials have told UN agencies and non-government organisations to ensure that they do not provide any American funding to the Palestinian Authority, its ministries or local municipalities. The United States has also asked the agencies and groups to abide by its strict no-contact policy when working on projects funded by US taxpayer dollars.¹²¹

Meanwhile, the UN General Assembly continued to issue resolutions condemning Israel, such as the one passed on 17/11/2006, which condemned the Israeli attack on Beit Hanun. But the Security Council failed twice to condemn Israel because of the American veto.

The assistant secretary-general for political affairs, Tuliameni Kalomoh, warned against the unilateral solutions that Israel intends to pursue as this will weaken the two-state solution.¹²²

During the Iraqi crisis, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) drew attention in March to the dangers that face the Palestinians in Iraq, including the assassination operations against some of them.¹²³ This impelled the Shi'i leader Ayatollah al-Sistani to issue a religious edict (*fatwa*) demanding protection to the Palestinians and their property in Iraq, which was welcomed by the UN.¹²⁴

It should be mentioned that the accusations of corruption against Kofi Annan had weakened his position vis a vis the American administration to such an extent that he did not dare to disagree with it except during the last two months of his secretaryship when he criticized the American war in Iraq, and considered it to be illegal.

b. The Other International Organizations

In coherence with the American-European stand, the NATO secretary-general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, excluded, even before the formation of the Palestinian government, the possibility of conducting any contacts with Hamas. Moreover, he reiterated the conditions drawn by the member states of the NATO, namely discard of violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of the treaties that Israel concluded with the PA.¹²⁵

On 10/2/2006, he openly said, “It looks impossible to me that NATO as an Alliance would enter into any form of contacts with Hamas unless Hamas... and you know the conditions. But it’s an absolute impossibility NATO have any dealing with Hamas by NATO.”¹²⁶

Conversely, in the Ministerial Meeting of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement in Malaysia in late May, the ministers of foreign affairs condemned the continuation of the Israeli occupation of Arab lands.¹²⁷ Moreover, the Non-Aligned Movement, composed of 118 members, asked, in its summit meeting in Havana in September 2006, for the stoppage of the Israeli aggression on the Palestinian people, criticized the suspension of financial aid to the Palestinian government and called for immediate economic and financial aid to the Palestinian people.¹²⁸

A press release issued by the African Union condemned the Israeli attack on Beit Hanun, called upon the Security Council to take the necessary measures to stop the Israeli violations, and on the Quartet Committee to urge the conflicting parties in the Middle East to resume negotiations.¹²⁹ Incidentally, four African non-Arab countries, Chad, Guinea, Mali and the Niger, do not—to this day—have diplomatic representation with Israel.

Conversely, the Organization of American States (OAS) has been comparatively more concerned with the region after the Arab-Latin American Summit that was held in Brazil in May 2005, notwithstanding the poor Arab participation in it. The position of the OAS towards the Palestinian issue had been traditionally fixed by its acceptance of the Quartet’s conditions. But significant changes have swept the OAS, which were triggered by rising anti-Americanism, increasing understanding of Arab-Islamic issues and strong opposition to globalization and its devastating impact on the peoples of Latin America. This transformation was reflected in the condemnation of the OAS secretary-general, Jose Miguel Insulza, to the Israeli attack on the Lebanese city Qana on 31 July, and the killing shortly afterwards of several of the UN observers in Southern Lebanon.

However, in an address on 7/5/2006, Insulza maintained that he kept cordial relations with the Jewish lobby since his days as the foreign minister of Chile, and that he opposes “terrorism” and condemns all manifestations of anti-Semitism.¹³⁰

On the Asian level, the 14th Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum (APPF), composed of 23 member states of which one is an observer, and the Asian Development Bank

convened a meeting on 20/1/2006, which issued a declaration that welcome “the holding of legislative elections in Palestine this month and hoped it could advance the implementation of the Roadmap for Peace.”¹³¹

In Europe, an international conference, attended by 35 states and 20 international organizations, was held in Stockholm in early September 2006 to extend support to the Palestinian people.¹³²

As for non-government organizations, like Amnesty International, they had warned against the blockade and its humanitarian repercussions in the Palestinian regions. They called the “governments of states who are High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention,... to take action to prevent a further dramatic worsening of the human rights situation of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.”¹³³

But, as mentioned by James Wolfensohn, Quartet Special Envoy for Disengagement, who resigned on 30 April in protest of the restrictions imposed on his role, the American-Israeli pressure on these organizations made it impossible for them to replace the international aid that had been suspended from the Palestinians.

2. Other International Forces

The international position was on the whole in conformity with that of the major powers and the Quartet Committee of which the UN was a partner. This was clearly reflected in the Quartet’s declaration, issued one day after Hamas’ victory in the elections, which pointed to “a fundamental contradiction between armed group and militia activities and the building of a democratic state,” and demanded that all members of the forthcoming Palestinian government should be committed to the discard of violence.¹³⁴

The total annual international financial help to the Palestinians was estimated as \$1.6 billion.¹³⁵

Canada was among the first countries that stopped aid to the Palestinian government after the victory of Hamas.¹³⁶ However, its foreign minister, Peter Mackay, emphasized that his country will continue humanitarian aid to the Palestinians through President ‘Abbas’ office, non-Hamas members of the Legislative Council and mid rank officials of the PA who do not support Hamas. He added that Hamas’ commitment to the principles of the international community is a primary condition for the resumption of the aid.¹³⁷

The representative of Ghana in the Security Council criticized the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers by Hamas and Hizbullah, but, at the same time, criticized the Israeli operations against the civilians.¹³⁸

Switzerland associated its cooperation with the Palestinians to the availability of a Palestinian leadership that bases its activities on dialogue and peaceful means.¹³⁹ However, on the other side, some countries had openly and clearly supported the Arab-Palestinian stand. Venezuela went to the extent of withdrawing its ambassador in Israel in protest against the Israeli aggression on Lebanon, and its president, Hugo Chavez, labeled the Israeli attack on Lebanon as a “typical Hitlerian” operation.¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

In some of its aspects, the year 2006 may be described as the year of the blockade, and the USA and the EU as its chief proponents. The central objective of this siege was to impose political concessions, of which the most important is the recognition of Israel, and the acceptance of all the treaties that Israel had concluded with the PLO and the PA. Meanwhile, the American-Israeli axis had faced during the year 2006 many difficulties that tarnished its image and weakened its authority, particularly the failure of the aggression on Lebanon, the failure to topple Hamas’ government and the American quandary in Iraq.

The blockade failed to extract the required political concessions, but it led to an acute economic crisis that the Palestinian government was unable to get away with except on a very limited scale, as emphasized by all the reports of international economic organizations. The siege also generated internal political tension between Hamas and Fatah on one side and between the Palestinian presidency and government on the other. Most of the international community supports the former at the expense of the latter.

Meanwhile, it was increasingly felt, particularly in Europe, that the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the key to resolving the region’s problems, as Tony Blair had repeatedly maintained.¹⁴¹ This position gained momentum with the increasing violence in Iraq and the outbreak of the Lebanese-Israeli war.

But the American side is still less inclined towards this orientation. Instead, it opts to make the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict the final rather than the first stage, as James Wolfensohn, Quartet Special Envoy for Disengagement, mentioned in his last report of May 2006 (after which he resigned), in which he called not to postpone the effort to end this conflict.¹⁴² The USA hopes that the political, military and economic structural changes that it triggered in the region would lead to the liquidation of the Palestinian issue. In fact, this tendency had started with Oslo Accords, then the Israeli patronizing of the abolition of the right of return, and, finally, the unilateral resolution of the conflict initiated by Sharon and pursued by Olmert, which guarantees the drawing of the Israeli frontiers by gnawing the larger part of the WB, including Jerusalem, a plan that is expected to be completed in 2010.

Many reports and political analyses indicate that in the year 2006 most of the powers were, in one way or another, inclined toward this orientation.

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