

A Report by the Palestine Strategy Study Group: Executive Summary

August 2008

*This document contains views shared in a number of workshops¹ and other informal meetings between a group of Palestinians from inside and outside the occupied territories. The document outlines a number of scenarios and Palestinian strategic options. The full text of the document can be found on the **Palestine-Israel Journal's** website: www.pij.org or on www.palestinestudygroup.ps.*

- The current negotiations in the “Annapolis peace initiative” have reached a critical point. On the 60th anniversary of the *Nakba*, after 20 years of fruitless negotiation for a Palestinian state on the basis of the historic recognition by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1988 of the existence of the State of Israel, it is time for Palestinians to reconsider this entire strategic path to their national objectives. Although already greatly inflated beyond the original 57% allotted in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 in 1947, Israel shows no sign of accepting even the 78% of historic Palestine that lies within the 1967 borders, but continues to encroach beyond them in order to create new “facts on the ground” that will progressively render an independent Palestinian state on the remaining 22% inoperable. A weak Israeli government is confronted by strong internal resistance to any compromises whatsoever, while a divided Israeli public is not ready to take the necessary risks. Indeed, Israel refuses formally and consistently even to accept the fact that it is an occupying power with concomitant duties in international law. Instead Israel calculates that a negotiated two-state outcome on the 1988 basis is permanently available, and supposes that it can perpetually hold out for better alternatives to a negotiated agreement. The Israeli position rests on the assumption that procrastination will continue to tilt the strategic balance increasingly in Israel’s favor. In short, Israel is not a serious negotiating partner.
- The central proposal in this report is that Israel’s strategic calculations are wrong. Israeli strategic planners overestimate their own strength and underestimate the strategic opportunities open to Palestinians. There are four main perceived alternatives to a negotiated agreement that are attractive to Israel and therefore prevent Israel from reaching a final settlement on the terms offered. It is a key

* *Fourth*, the shift from a two-state outcome to a (bi-national or unitary democratic) single-state outcome as Palestinians' preferred strategic goal. This reopens a challenge to the existence of the State of Israel in its present form, but in an entirely new and more effective way than was the case before 1988.

Is this what Israel wants? Israel cannot prevent Palestinians from a strategic reorientation along these lines. Does Israel really want to force Palestinians to take these steps?

- The result of a reorientation of Palestinian strategy will clearly be much worse for Israel than the negotiation of a genuine two-state outcome on the basis of the existing 1988 offer. Although many Palestinians may still prefer a genuine negotiated two-state solution, a failure of the present Annapolis initiative will greatly strengthen those who argue against this. Most Palestinians are then likely to be convinced that a negotiated agreement is no longer possible. What is undoubtedly the case is that a reversal of the 1988 offer and the adoption of an alternative strategy is much preferable for Palestinians to any of the four preferred Israeli alternatives to a negotiated agreement. So, if current negotiations fail, Palestinians will be driven to replace the 1988 offer by a new strategy, not just rhetorically but in reality. The negotiated two-state outcome will then be definitively cancelled. Palestinians will ensure that Israel is seen to be responsible for the closure of their 20-year offer. Israel will have lost an historic and non-recurrent opportunity to end the conflict and to secure its own future survival on the best terms available for Israel.
- *In short Palestinians are able to block all four of Israel's best alternatives to a genuine negotiated outcome via a fundamental reorientation of strategy. Israel is not able to block this reorientation. The result of such a reorientation would be far worse for Israel than that of a genuine negotiated outcome. The result of such a reorientation would be far better for Palestinians than any of Israel's best alternatives to a genuine negotiated outcome. Therefore, when Palestinians calculate that a genuine negotiated outcome is no longer available, they undoubtedly will reorientate their strategy, not only rhetorically but in reality, and will finally close down their 20-year 1988 offer.*
- Palestinians, therefore, have three main immediate parallel strategic tasks, which it is the central purpose of this report to outline.
- *The first strategic task* is the detailed working out of a fundamental reorientation of Palestinian strategy along the lines outlined above, including the new preferred strategic path and the full range of means of implementation. All of this is

strategic aim of Palestinians to make clear to Israel why these four alternatives are simply not available.

* *First*, the default option of prolonging negotiations indefinitely by pretending that “progress has been made” and that suspensions are temporary as during the past 20 years, with ongoing encroachments and military incursions, few burdens, and considerable financial and other benefits from continuing occupation.

* *Second*, a pseudo-provisional “two-state agreement” with a strengthened but severely constrained Palestinian Authority (PA) masquerading as a Palestinian government while Israel disaggregates and picks off the “historic issues” and retains permanent control.

* *Third*, a unilateral separation dictated by Israel.

* *Fourth*, control of the occupied territories by Egypt and Jordan.

- But these four alternatives are unacceptable to Palestinians. They do not take Palestinian national aspirations seriously. Indeed, they aim to undermine Palestinians’ national identity and rights altogether. So, if Israel refuses to negotiate seriously for a genuine two-state outcome, Palestinians can and will block all four of them by switching to an alternative strategy made up of a combination of four linked reorientations to be undertaken singly or together.

* *First*, the definitive closing down of the 1988 negotiation option so long abused by Israel. This blocks the first two preferred Israeli alternatives to a genuine negotiated agreement.

* *Second*, the reconstitution of the PA so that it will not serve future Israeli interests by legitimizing indefinite occupation and protecting Israel from bearing its full burden of the costs of occupation (it may become a Palestinian Resistance Authority). This also blocks the first two preferred Israeli alternatives, and also helps to block the third.

* *Third*, the elevation of “smart” resistance over negotiation as the main means of implementation for Palestinians, together with a reassertion of national unity through reform of the PLO, the empowerment of Palestinians and the orchestrated eliciting of regional and international third-party support. The central aim will be to maximize the cost of continuing occupation for Israel, and to make the whole prospect of unilateral separation unworkable.

commented upon in the main body of the report. This task must be undertaken in all seriousness and on the assumption that present negotiations will fail. Even if only used as a strategic threat in order to force Israel to negotiate seriously, the intention must still be to implement the new strategy should negotiations fail. An empty threat is strategically no threat. A mere bluff does not work. So it is now an urgent priority for Palestinians to agree and work out in detail their alternative to a negotiated agreement and to communicate this as soon as possible and as forcefully as possible to Israel. This must be the immediate focus of unified national strategic planning that includes all Palestinians, from different backgrounds, generations, genders and political affiliations, both those living in the occupied territories and those living elsewhere.

- *The second strategic task* is to make sure that Israel understands the terms on which the 1988 offer is still held open by Palestinians and is clear about what Palestinians can and will do should these terms not be met. Has a national movement ever made a concession on a similar scale to that made by Palestinians in 1988? In negotiations Israelis repeatedly say, “We do all the giving and the Palestinians do all the taking.” This is the opposite of the truth. Palestinians continue to demand no more than 22% of their historic land. It is Israel that has done all the taking through continuous government-backed settler encroachment on this remaining 22%. The second strategic task for Palestinians, therefore, is to spell out the minimum terms acceptable for negotiating a fully independent Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, and to explain clearly why this is by far the best offer that Israel will ever get, including guarantees for Israel’s future security from neighboring Arab states. Palestinians will set out a clear timetable for judging whether this has been attained or is attainable. It is Palestinians who will judge “success,” and it is Palestinians who will decide how long to persist in negotiations and when the moment has come to change strategy entirely.
- *The third strategic task* is to ensure that it is the Palestinian discourse that frames international discussion of the Palestinian future. This is elucidated in the report. The aim is to make clear to regional and international third parties that in all this it is not Palestinians who are lacking in commitment to a negotiated outcome, but Israel. Palestinians have persisted for 20 years with their historic offer of 1988. Israel has refused to honor it. That is why Israeli protestations are no longer credible to Palestinians. Israel has given Palestinians no option but to look elsewhere for fulfillment of their national aspirations. Israel bears full responsibility should negotiations fail.
- In conclusion, it needs to be understood clearly that we Palestinians will never

allow Israel to continue its encroachments and domination under the pretence of insincere negotiations, nor to go on imagining falsely that there are better alternatives available to Israel. Israel will have to decide whether to accept the time-limited negotiation offer that is evidently in its own best interest, or not. And we Palestinians will then act accordingly at a time and in a way of our own choosing.

It is now up to us as Palestinians to regain the strategic initiative and to take control of our own national destiny. Israel, regional partners, and international actors, must understand definitively that Palestinians will not be divided in their strategic objectives, and that the Palestinian people, steadfast and determined, will never give up their national struggle.

The opinions expressed in this report do not reflect the perspective of any single political faction. They only reflect the deep concern the participants have about Palestine and its just cause. All the participants took part in their individual capacity.