

Possible Questions and Answers

29-13-01

1. Why did the Palestinians never present a comprehensive permanent settlement proposal of their own in response to Barak's proposals at Camp David?

Answer: On a number of occasions since Camp David – especially at the Taba talks – the Palestinian negotiating team presented its concept for the resolution of the key permanent status issues. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Israel and the Palestinians are differently situated. Israel seeks broad concessions from the Palestinians: it wants to annex Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem; obtain rights to Palestinian water resources in the West Bank; maintain military locations on Palestinian soil; and limit the implementation of Palestinian refugees' right of return. Israel has not offered a single concession involving its own territory and rights. The Palestinians, on the other hand, seek the right to establish a viable, sovereign State on their own territory, to provide for the withdrawal of Israeli military forces and settlements (which are universally recognized as illegal), and to secure the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the homes they fled in 1948. Although Palestinian negotiators have been willing to try to accommodate Israeli needs within that context, particularly with respect to security, it is up to Israel to explain what those needs are and to suggest the narrowest possible means of addressing them. That simply has not happened.

2. Why did the peace process fall apart just as it was making real progress toward a permanent agreement?

Answer: Palestinians entered the peace process on the understanding that (1) it would deliver concrete improvements to their lives during the interim period, (2) that the interim period would be relatively short in duration – i.e., five years, and (3) that a permanent agreement would be reached that was in accordance with 242 and 338. From the perspective of most Palestinians, the peace process delivered none of these things. They witnessed more burdensome restrictions on their movement and a decline in their economic situation. Israeli settlements expanded at an unprecedented pace. And deadlines were repeatedly missed in the implementation of agreements. Palestinians simply did not experience any “progress” in terms of their daily lives.

In addition, Israel's proposals in the initial stages of negotiations offered Palestinians very little hope that a just solution would be reached. Israel sought to annex large swathes of Palestinian territory, to assert sovereignty over Palestinian East Jerusalem, and to prevent any Palestinian refugees from returning to their homes. Although Palestinian negotiators continued to meet with Israelis until Prime Minister Barak suspended negotiations in October, they received few assurances that Israel was prepared to discuss these issues seriously. The parties did engage in serious, candid negotiations in Taba in January and finally made significant progress toward resolving their differences. One week later, however, Ariel Sharon was elected Prime Minister and the process came to an abrupt halt.

3. Isn't it true, as PA officials such as Communications Minister Imad al-Faluji have admitted, that the PA was planning the violence all along, and merely used Sharon's visit to the Haram al-Sharif as an excuse?

Answer: The Sharm El Sheikh Fact Finding Committee (Mitchell Committee) and its staff have spent months in Israel and occupied Palestinian territories investigating this question and we are confident that its final report will finally dispel the Israeli myth which presupposes that PA President Arafat can start and end violence at whim. If Israel was confident of its argument, it would have extended full cooperation to the Mitchell Committee but has instead attempted to limit its investigation and has already hinted that it will reject the Committee's report even before the Committee has begun drafting.

Minister al-Faluji, a former member of Hamas who joined Fateh in order to become a minister, is the only PA official to have made such comments and his remarks have been rejected by all other PA officials. His remarks, made at a refugee camp in Lebanon, can only be viewed as an attempt by the minister to garner support among the most disenfranchised members of Palestinian society by taking credit for popular resistance and suggesting that he has the power to plan an organized resistance to Israeli occupation.

4. If the violence was truly a spontaneous, civilian uprising, then why did it quickly develop into a shooting war involving Palestinians with guns and members of PA security forces?

Answer: On the issue of gun control, the PA has made considerable efforts – particularly since late 1998 – to control the proliferation of illegal weapons. It has confiscated hundreds of weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the areas under PA security jurisdiction – around 18% of the West Bank and 60% of the Gaza Strip – are surrounded entirely by areas under Israeli control. No weapon can enter Palestinian areas without passing first through Israeli areas. Moreover, almost all of the illegal weapons in the Occupied Palestinian Territories were supplied by the Israeli mafia, which has conducted a lucrative trade in arms sales since Oslo. Israel's unwillingness to police its own criminal organizations has made Palestinian efforts much more difficult.

As for the involvement of Palestinian security forces, the PA has taken disciplinary action against security and police officers involved in shooting at Israeli forces and has deployed patrols to prevent shooting by others. Palestinian police and security forces are well-trained. Had such forces been directly involved in shooting, the number of Israeli casualties would be higher.

5. How do you respond to allegations that the PA purposefully used children in the violence in an effort to "seize the moral high ground?"

Answer: This question contains the racist presupposition that Palestinians are unlike all other people and willingly sacrifice the lives of their children to win

"sympathy". The accusation is particularly offensive in light of the fact that the only death to be caught on film, that of 12 year-old Mohammad al-Durra, indicates not only that Mohammad was not throwing stones but that his father was actually trying to protect his son from the hail of bullets. To be a Palestinian child casualty, one need not throw rocks - children have been shot, maimed and killed while in their homes or in school courtyards as evidenced by even Israeli human rights organizations such as B'Tselem and numerous Israeli press reports.

On several occasions, attempts were made to prevent children (public calls, PA security forces dispatched to clash points) from confronting Israeli occupation forces but there is no way to restrict the freedom of movement of all Palestinian children, especially since more than 70% of the Palestinian population in Gaza is under the age of 18. The proximity of Israeli army installations to Palestinian schools and homes increases the probability of confrontations. In an effort to calm the situation and kept children at home, the PA closed some schools, only to be accused by Israel of purposely sending children in the street. PA security forces were later dispatched to schools in order to prevent children from confronting Israeli occupation forces. Nevertheless, an attempt by the PA to completely deny Palestinians the right to demonstrate against the Israeli occupation would in effect turn the PA into an agent of the Israeli occupation and undermine Palestinian confidence in the PA, ultimately leading to greater instability in the region.

6. What prevents President Arafat from publicly calling for an end to violence?

Answer: President Arafat is prepared to make such a call but to do so in isolation from Israeli actions to end the siege of Palestinian cities and its occupation would in effect be interpreted as telling the Palestinian people to stop resistance and live quietly under occupation. Such a message would undermine the PA's legitimacy and lead to regional instability.

7. How do you respond to allegations that PA elements (such as Force 17) are involved in planning terrorist activities?

Answer: The PA is not involved in planning terrorist activities and despite Israeli claims, no evidence has been provided to the contrary. If Israel is indeed in possession of such evidence as it claim, then the evidence should be made public, the accused taken into custody and a trial convened. Instead, Israel claims it has the right to conduct extra-judicial killings (assassinations) of Palestinians it claims are involved in resistance activities without providing any evidence of any criminal activity in violation of all norms of international law. Israeli human rights organizations such as B'Tselem and high-ranking officials (including Shlomo Ben-Ami) in Israel have all condemned Israel's policy.

8. How do you respond to allegations that the PA is smuggling weapons illegally from Egypt?

Answer: There is no evidence of any such smuggling. Israel has complete and unrestricted security control over all international borders, including the one between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, and controls the coastal waters off the Gaza Strip.

Consequently, Israel is the only power capable of monitoring any smuggling but has not provided any evidence that such smuggling has taken place.

9. What steps are being taken to suppress Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other radical forces? Why hasn't the PA re-arrested Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists it released from jail?

Answer: Political activity opposed to the course of the negotiations is not illegal. "Radical forces" can only be suppressed upon clear evidence of criminal activity. The only Palestinians released from jail since the uprising and who were not subsequently re-detained were those against whom there was no evidence of any criminal activity (but who had been arrested without charge upon Israel's request as part of "security cooperation"). Palestinians released from Gaza jails after the beginning of the uprising were released for their own protection after Israel notified the PA that it would be attacking official PA buildings. All criminal and security prisoners were subsequently re-detained and the Mitchell Committee was invited to verify this information.

10. What steps is the PA prepared to take unilaterally to help ease the fears of Israelis?

Answer: The PA understands the fears of the average Israeli and is willing to explore all opportunities to ease such fears. But such confidence-building measures must be done in cooperation with Israel and simultaneously with Israeli steps to ease Palestinian fears, recognize Palestine's right to exist and halting the construction of settlements in occupied Palestinian territory. Fears of Israelis are best addressed through the demonstrated success of security cooperation and the PA has repeatedly called on Israel to renew security cooperation at all levels (most recently re-iterated before the Mitchell Commission) that Israel, not the PA, suspended.

11. How do you respond to allegations that the PA violated the Oslo Accords, especially in the realm of security?

Answer: The Palestinian Authority has taken decisive steps to comply with all of its obligations under the Oslo Accords. At a press conference in June 1999, the current U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, commended the PA for its efforts, stating that the U.S. had "always said that the Palestinians have done a good job on some of the issues, particularly on the security cooperation issue and combating terrorism." Both sides have an urgent interest in restoring security cooperation. It's important, however, to keep two points in mind: First, the PA has security jurisdiction over only approximately 18% of the West Bank. These areas are surrounded entirely by areas under Israeli control, so not a single person or weapon can enter Palestinian-controlled areas without first passing through Israeli-controlled areas. It is unfair to place all of the blame for security incidents on the PA, when it lacks the capacity and responsibility for addressing them.

Second, Israel's actions since the start of the uprising have made it very difficult for the PA to promote peace and security. Movement between Palestinian cities, towns, and villages has been brought to an abrupt halt, crippling the PA's capacity to conduct preventive operations. Moreover, Israel's ongoing violence

against Palestinian civilians has severely compromised efforts to establish an atmosphere of peace and reconciliation.

12. Is the PA willing to negotiate an interim arrangement? If so, under what conditions and with what objectives?

Answer: Sharon's plan for a "long-term" interim agreement is meant to abrogate Israel's existing obligations under current interim agreements, in effect returning the parties to the conditions existing prior to the Madrid conference of 1991. Sharon is attempting to use an interim agreement as a means of legitimizing his abandonment of the Oslo peace process. The PLO is wary of interim agreements because prior interim agreements have been used by Israel to delay Palestinian freedom while giving Israel time to create more prejudicial "facts on the ground" by building more settlements (Israeli housing units in the occupied Palestinian territory increased by 52% since signing Oslo and the Israeli settler population has more than doubled) and encouraging more Israeli settlers to live in occupied territory. The PLO currently believes that existing interim agreements must be fully implemented (including the third Israeli troop redeployment now more than 2 years overdue) and final status negotiations should be immediately resumed.

13. Describe the PA's relationship with Iraq. Is there any truth to the rumors that Arafat is making contingency plans to move to Iraq?

Answer: The PA has diplomatic relations with all Arab governments and Iraq is no exception. There is no evidence of "contingency plans" to move to Iraq.

14. What is the PA doing to reduce incitement (school textbooks, anti-Semitic remarks in the media, etc.)?

Answer: The PA has done everything in its power to reduce incitement absent violating the freedom of speech of the Palestinian people. The Israeli government has not allowed Palestinians to produce their own textbooks since the occupation of Palestinian areas in 1967. Consequently, Palestinians have been forced to use textbooks from Jordan and Egypt - both countries with whom Israel has peace treaties. Only since the Oslo process have Palestinians been permitted to produce their own textbooks and the first of such textbooks (issued for only the first and sixth grades) were produced in September 2000 prior to the uprising. The textbooks, which were produced with the cooperation of the United Nations Social and Cultural Organization, were met with praise by some Israeli officials [TO BE CONFIRMED]. Israeli textbooks by contrast, continue to teach that there are no borders between Israel and the Palestinian and Syrian territories occupied in 1967. Nor do Israeli textbooks show Arab cities in maps of pre-Israel Palestine, leaving students to believe that there was no Arab presence.

The PA has not engaged in anti-Jewish remarks though it cannot prevent private individuals from expressing their beliefs, just as Israel does not silence extremist elements in its own government and society who make anti-Arab racist remarks or call for the death or expulsion of Christians and Muslims.

15. How do you respond to those who say that the violence which erupted following Barak's Camp David offers proves that Palestinians do not really want to live in peace with Israel?

Answer: Palestinians recognized Israel's right to exist in 1988 and subsequently re-iterated this recognition on several occasions. Palestine's recognition of Israel's right to exist was part of the Oslo accords though Israel has yet to explicitly and formally recognize Palestine's right to exist. The Palestinian people waited patiently since the Madrid Conference in 1991 for their freedom and independence despite Israel's incessant policy of creating facts on the ground by building settlements in occupied territory (Israeli housing units in occupied Palestinian territory increased by 52% since the signing of Oslo and the settler population has more than doubled). Palestinians do indeed wish to live at peace with Israel but peace with Israel must be a fair peace – not an unfair peace imposed by a stronger party over a weaker party. Peace must be a reconciliation between equal peoples.

16. How can Palestinians convince Israelis that Palestinian demands on the right of return are not intended to lead to Israel's demographic destruction?

Answer. The right of return is not a Palestinian DEMAND, it is a Palestinian RIGHT guaranteed under United Nations Resolution 194 (December 11, 1948 and reaffirmed every year since) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But recognition of the Palestinian right of return does not mean that all refugees will in fact return. Many may opt for (i) resettlement in third countries, (ii) resettlement in a newly independent Palestine (though they originate from that part of Palestine which became Israel) or (iii) normalization of their legal status in the host country where they currently reside. In addition, the right of return may be implemented in phases so as not to threaten Israel's demographics. At recent negotiations in Taba, Israel agreed to the concept of the right of return, the question remaining is only with respect to how many refugees may return and how quickly.

In any event, Israel can only maintain both its democratic and Jewish characters by maintaining a Jewish majority which, given current trends in the birthrate of Christians and Muslims in Israel, may not be the case in the not so distant future. An Israel at peace with its Palestinian neighbors is a much more enticing prospect for Jewish immigration than an Israel acting as an occupying power over indigenous populations.

17. How do you respond to allegations that Palestinian archaeologists, under the supervision of the waqf, are destroying evidence of a Jewish presence on the Haram al-Sharif?

Answer: Although not part of its mandate, the Mitchell Committee responded to Israeli complaints about this matter and investigated this issue while visiting the Haram al-Sharif during their fact-finding inquiry. They found that the waqf is, in fact, only installing a six-inch wide water pipe that is just below the surface and in no way affecting any archaeological sites: Jewish, Muslim, Christian, or otherwise. Israeli accusations to the contrary are irresponsible and can only be viewed as incitement.

18. How do you respond to widespread allegations of corruption within the PA?

Answer: The PA, like all governments, has been the subject of criticism, both valid and invalid. The PA has taken steps to address such criticisms but in any event, such criticism is an internal Palestinian matter and does not negate the rights of the Palestinian to live in freedom.

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In order to update the questions and answers document prepared prior to our trip to the DC, find below some of the questions that were asked to us. (Unfortunately, I didn't record all the questions. Maybe Omar and Amjad can add to the list of questions.)

Negotiations

- Do you think that the failure of the Camp David Summit was due to historical ripeness of the negotiations on permanent status issues or/ and tactical constraints on both sides?
- Can Yaser Arafat psychologically and politically sign an agreement that would end the conflict i.e. a permanent status agreement?
- What is the distribution by population of Palestinian refugees in different countries?
- How do you think the right of return can be implemented without destroying the State of Israel?
- How is the Clinton's proposal on refugees different from the palestinian requirements and understanding "the choice" as described by Omar Dajani?
- There is growing concern among Israelis that the Palestinians have now left the 2 states solution and are now resorting to the one state solution from "the sea to the river". What is your opinion about that?
- Did the Palestinian side accept the idea of land swap?
- Is there a way to guarantee West Bank- Gaza Strip contiguity without cutting Israel in half?

The Intifada

- Why aren't the Palestinians resorting to peaceful demonstrations and civil disobedience rather than violent demonstrations?
- Who is leading who at present? Does Yaser Arafat lead the people or do the people lead Yaser Arafat?
- If the Intifada was a demonstration of the people against continued occupation and loss of hope in reaching a final peace agreement, why did the Intifada not start late 1998 (the due date for a permanent status agreement according to the Oslo Accords)?

Settlements

- Sharon committed not to build new settlements. The Palestinians are concerned about settlements expansion. Isn't most, if not all, settlements' expansion taking place in areas which Israel would

maintain under its sovereignty in the Permanent Status Agreement?

- How much of the settlement expansion since 1993 took place outside the blocks Israel intends to annex?

End to Intifada

- It is very clear for many political and ideological reasons that Sharon will not accept to freeze settlement activities. Why are the Palestinians making the settlements freeze a crucial component in "the package" to end the violence and return to talks? Is that for strategic purposes or is it to effect Israeli internal politics?
- What exactly is the role of a third party in the Jordanian- Egyptian initiative (or any other initiative) to end the Intifada and resume negotiations?
- The United states' last government went out of its way to be the mediator in the conflict and to accommodate both sides concerns and yet that was not good enough for the Palestinians. Who is the third party that can play a strong and satisfactory role in the middle east peace process?

These are all the questions (not already covered in the questions answers paper) that i have recorded.
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