

## The Palestinian Conflict and Future Trends

By **KAI Noritake**

### <The Post-Election Period>

The second intifada between September 2000 and 2004 killed 2,900 victims on the Palestine side and 900 on the Israeli side. As it was becoming a war of attrition, many wanted a quick conclusion to the fighting. The damage to the social and economic base was major, and the sacrifice made by both sides was considerable.

On 9<sup>th</sup> January Mr. Abbas was elected Prime Minister by the people in a democratic manner. He called for an end to violence and demanded that Israel refrain from using their military. In late January he held discussions with Hamas and the Islamic Jihad group, during which he made similar demands. Immediately after the election, amid conflict on the Palestinian and Israeli sides, both groups decided to refrain from contacts at every level for a period, but Hamas and Islamic Jihad aimed to take part in the upcoming Palestinian council election in July.

In December of 2004, Sharon included the Labor Party into the political regime securing a parliamentary majority and a stable political administration.

In the meantime, a Palestine-Israeli leadership conference, which included President Mubarak of Egypt and the King of Jordan, was held on 8<sup>th</sup> February at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Shiek. Here, the main focus was again halting the violence and ending military action, an issue on which both Sharon and Abbas appeared to reach mutual understanding. However, Hamas publicly declared that they would not necessarily be restricted by these talks. In fact, a suicide bombing occurred in Tel Aviv on 26<sup>th</sup> February, nearly twenty days after the summit, killing 4 and injuring 49. This was the most deadly attack in Israel since November of the previous year, and it also contravened the cease-fire reached on 4<sup>th</sup> February. Islamic Jihad denied any involvement, but elements under their control announced a statement of crime. Some suggest that Hezbollah was involved.

### <Issues for the Future>

Journalist Takuji Tahara expressed his views on issues concerning the Abbas regime in the Tokyo Shimbun, the Japanese newspaper, on 1<sup>st</sup> April as follows: with regard to internal matters in the Palestinian Liberation Organization, he suggests promoting military dismantlement and addressing corruption problems. On external affairs, he refers to the problems that Sharon pointed out in December of the previous year: securing the settlements on the West bank, the denial of refugees' rights to return to their homeland, and the division of Jerusalem. Although

not an easy task that can be resolved quickly, it is vital to instill ethics into the new civil service under Abbas. The dismantling of military groups is also a major issue, although it will depend on the results of the July election. Whether military groups can simply be transformed into a wide range of social services including social welfare and education services (in the style of the demilitarization occurring in Lebanon's Hezbollah) is a key question.

Sharon also decided to begin a withdrawal from Gaza, starting 20<sup>th</sup> July and taking around 2 months (within the ruling-party Likud cabinet ministers, 17 voted for the decision and 5 against). This cabinet meeting is said to have taken ten hours, showing the decision was certainly not a simple task. The decision concerned 1,300,000 Palestinians and 8,600 Jewish in 21 locations in Gaza as well at 4 locations on the West Bank. Each family would receive US\$200,000-300,000 in compensation.

Previously, Sharon had strongly promoted resettlement but a reason behind the change in policy was said to be the major financial burden involved in sustaining the program. That is to say, aid and basic maintenance for resettlement projects was around 58 billion yen (1% of the annual national budget). In order to protect 400 settlers in Gaza, 600 soldiers needed to be deployed in the region. Some maintained that by leaving Gaza, the government could refocus on the West Bank. However, there was a strong opposition to the cabinet decision from Israelite domestic settler organizations. On the Palestinian side, there are concerns that the policy may lead to the Israelis solidifying their possession of areas held on the West Bank instead of a complete withdrawal. In the Middle East road map for peace, Israel is required to halt all resettlement activity and completely withdraw all troops from occupied territories. The Palestinian Authority views the withdrawal from Gaza as the first step in this process.

In the seven years between the Oslo Accords of September of 1993 and 2000, there have been seven agreements but none have been long-lived. There has also been little progress in implementing the road map of 2003. Current situation is under the new political environment such as the recent death of Chairman Arafat, the emergence of his successor through democratic selection, and the agreement achieved at the summit on 8<sup>th</sup> February. Additionally, the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in July and the smooth withdrawal of Israel from Gaza will be key factors in changing the situation hereafter.

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