

An Alternative Path for a Free Palestine



By Khaled Barakat

O

ctober 2021 will mark 30 years since the infamous Madrid Conference, an occasion that officially launched the so-called peace process, with all its serious repercussions for Palestinians in

the years and decades that followed. Lauded by many at the time as a “step towards resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict,” the Madrid Conference instead, under pragmatic slogans of realistic outcomes for Palestine, launched the path that led to Oslo and the signing of the Declaration of Principles on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993.

After 30 years of that process, it is clear to all that the Palestinian people are facing a dire situation on the political, social, and national levels. The Palestinian national liberation movement has never been as severely fragmented as today amid an ongoing *Nakba*.

While the Madrid-Oslo process was once hailed as a “state-building” process that would lead to Palestinian independence, it instead led to the creation of a “self-rule government,” the Palestinian Authority. Its most important role is to serve as a tool for Israeli, US, and European interests and to suppress the reemergence of Palestinian resistance through “security coordination” with the Israeli occupation.

If the failure of Madrid-Oslo is clear to Palestinians, then there is a question that must be asked and answered: If this is a failed path, what is the alternative? An entire new Palestinian generation has been born since the Madrid-Oslo era, born into siege, repression, and the confiscation of their futures while at the same time having no space for political and social participation in the Palestinian movement on an official level, despite organizing pockets of resistance, strategic protest, and incisive inquiry.

Palestinian refugees, over half of the Palestinian population, have consistently refused to accede to the confiscation or marginalization of their right to return, even as their suffering inside the refugee camps has increased. The marginalization of Palestinian refugees in the camps and their exclusion from Palestinian political institutions has been a major political priority for Israel and its Western backers, especially the United States.

In the past ten years in particular, Palestinian refugees in the Arab region have faced tremendous suffering, deprivation, and, once again, forced displacement due to war, sanctions, siege, and the broader devastation imposed upon the Arab people by imperialism, US weaponry and military invasions, and occupations. The hope for meaningful change – and a break with the era of Camp David and Wadi Araba that accompanied the Madrid-Oslo path on the Arab level – was crushed through imperialist intervention and the persistence of reactionary regimes and systems that were actually strengthened despite early appearances of change.

Many Palestinians, including those from the refugee camps of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Gaza Strip, displaced in 1948 from their original homes and lands inside occupied Palestine, faced another form of displacement and forced flight. For many, there was no other path to be found but to Europe. The presence of tens of thousands of Palestinians who have arrived in Europe in the past decade has changed the circumstances and the face of the Palestinian community because that stop in Europe is, in the end, a station on the road to Palestine.

The biggest crime committed against the people of Palestine, after the crime of their displacement at the hands of Zionism and imperialism, is the crime of separating Palestinians from their cause.

Ghassan Kanafani*

The Palestinian communities in diaspora and exile in North America, Latin America, and Europe have a strategic role to play in this necessary redirection of the Palestinian cause and the construction of an alternative path to Madrid and Oslo while rebuilding the Palestinian movement in the *shatat* (diaspora).

When examining the condition of Palestinians today, wherever they are, the term that overwhelmingly comes to mind is that of “siege.” Palestinians face different forms of siege, from Israel’s bloody siege of the Gaza Strip – maintained with the complicity of Egypt, not to mention the United States, the European Union, and Western powers – to the various forms of siege, repression, and encirclement that isolate and aim to cut off the road to that Palestinian future.

The Masar Badil, or Alternative Palestinian Path, initiative is preparing to organize a conference to be convened once again in Madrid, on the 30th anniversary of the initial Madrid Conference, in order to reject everything that the prior gathering embodied and has meant for the Palestinian people. Of course, a conference alone will not be sufficient to set right the Palestinian political compass and restructure the necessary frameworks to allow Palestinians to reclaim their rightful voice, action, and leadership of their liberation movement.

When we look at the Madrid Conference of 30 years ago, however, we also see that this was not, in reality, simply a conference but a manifestation of political power. Likewise, this initiative also goes beyond a conference – or, in reality, multiple popular gatherings and conferences – to declare, in Madrid, an alternative path for the Palestinian people and their movement that is specifically an alternative to the path of the Madrid Conference of 1991, the Oslo Accords of 1993, and all that has followed.

In response to this era of siege, the Masar Badil, with the strong leadership of Palestinian women and youth, aims to present not only a political alternative to the Madrid-Oslo era but also a cultural, social, and economic alternative through which Palestinians may regain their strength, resistance, and revolutionary unity, finding freedom for the prisoners and justice for the martyrs of Palestine.

Some may ask why we seek an alternative when a Palestinian political system and organizations

already exist, although they remain mired in many ways in the Madrid-Oslo track. The Masar Badil aims to present a clear, revolutionary, leftist vision for the future of Palestine, that aligns itself with the popular classes and the struggling peoples of the region and of the world.

This alternative path is not an alternative to the Palestinian national liberation movement or to the Palestinian National Charter of 1968 or of 1964; instead, this is an alternative that bases itself upon the revival and reinstatement of that legitimate charter for the future and vision of the Palestinian people toward liberation and return. This project must embrace all forms of resistance that are part of the Palestinian national consensus, to move decisively to advance the liberation of Palestine.

The full shape that this alternative path will take must be determined by the conference itself, but from the discussions taking place within and outside the preparatory committee, which have included dozens of virtual meetings with Palestinian communities around the world, we expect this conference to launch a new Palestinian popular movement. This movement will focus on building bridges between various Palestinian communities in exile and Palestinians inside Palestine, especially in occupied 1948 Palestine.

This alternative path finds common cause with the Black liberation movement, with the left and progressive forces of Latin America, and with the political prisoners who seek justice and liberation, from Turkey to the Philippines to Colombia.



This formation will also focus on launching a boycott movement in which Palestinians in exile and diaspora take a leadership role, directly linked to Palestinian rights, especially the right to return. Third, it will intensify our campaigns targeting all complicit governments, corporations, and entities that support the crimes of the occupation, mobilizing broad, popular Palestinian participation.

The Palestinian Authority's embassies are failing in their responsibilities to support the rights of the Palestinian people, especially

the liberation of Palestinian prisoners. Building an alternative means supporting groups that are leading these campaigns, such as the Samidoun Network and other organizations around the world.

This also requires building a network of Palestinian community-based organizations, providing the basis for unifying and reasserting the Palestinian popular unions, in the student movement, among Palestinian engineers, teachers, doctors, artists, writers, and workers, in order to release the vast collective Palestinian capabilities

for change and organizing that are, today, being squandered rather than utilized in the struggle. Palestinian women's organizations, such as Alkarama (Dignity) and others, require support to reassert the power and mobilization of Palestinian women.

Today, our Palestinian communities do not communicate solely in Arabic. The website of the Masar Badil is itself available in ten languages, and this language diversity can be a tremendous benefit rather than a barrier to the reassertion of Palestinian unity.

The role of Palestinian communities in exile is a Palestinian role, but it is also an international role. These communities have a critical role to play in strengthening campaigns for justice in Palestine in universities, churches, and labor unions and in building deeper links with our Jewish brothers and sisters based on a common commitment to anti-colonialism and social justice, the rejection of Zionism, and support for Palestinian resistance.

Further, there is a deep history of alliances between the Palestinian liberation movement and other global national liberation movements, and this alternative path will take on the project of reaffirming and reestablishing these critical ties, not only on a theoretical level of common understanding but on the terrain of joint struggle and collective action.

Today, media campaigns and social-media organizing play an important role in connecting Palestinians across borders and

walls. We must take advantage of these opportunities while remaining connected to community organizing on the ground. This alternative path, in order to fulfill its goals, must establish community centers and organizations in cities, refugee camps, and areas around the world, providing social services and political mobilization for the Palestinian people everywhere.

What is needed today is a new generation, a new vision, a new hope for Palestinian struggle and organizing that can place Palestine once again at the center of the Arab and international scene, this time without the illusions of pragmatism that marked the devastating road to Madrid and Oslo. Palestinians face new and complex challenges, most notably the overt involvement of Arab reactionary regimes in proclaiming their alliance and normalization with the Israeli occupation. To achieve the change necessary to assert this path for a liberated Palestinian future, we can expect to struggle for years and decades to come, creating the conditions for victory.

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**Political Writings of Ghassan Kanafani, p. 482 (published in Arabic by Al-Rimal Books).*