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Sari Nusseibeh and
Mark A. Heller
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The *intifada*'s impact

ANDREW GOWERS



Palestinian youths on the attack, Beit Sahur, West Bank; from J. C. Tordai and Harvey Morris's *Into the Promised Land* (80pp. Manchester: Cornerhouse. Paperback, £9.95. 0948797 614)

At the end of last October, Presidents George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev presided at the ceremonial opening of an event that – it is almost certainly fair to say – none of the authors of these books thought at all likely when they were writing them: a Middle East peace conference in which Israel sat face to face with its Arab neighbours. Wearily and grudgingly, the Israelis and their Arab enemies of more than four decades' standing – including representatives of the Palestinians – began to talk to each other across a deep chasm of mutual distrust. And so began what some contend is a new era in the tortured politics of the Middle East.

How easy it is to be overtaken by events: President Gorbachev is, of course, already history, and the next session of the peace conference (which may have taken place by the time you read this) will probably have to rely in part on the good offices of Boris Yeltsin. Nevertheless, even after the now strangely distant drama of the Gulf war, the ancient conflict between Arab and Jew is not moving quite as fast as events in the eastern part of Europe have been. Enduring observations on the past five years and the prospects for the future may be possible. Several of these books have a stab at the task, and two at least emerge with distinction.

At one level in the Middle East, there is a century-old, even millennial, communal struggle between groups of people over an arid and hilly patch of land not much larger than Wales; at

another, an all-out military conflict between heavily armed states that has brought the region to the brink of nuclear catastrophe on at least one occasion in the past and could easily do so again. In these circumstances, it is not always easy to maintain a sense of perspective on what the conflict is mostly about: the constant, highly charged and deeply felt emotions arising from Israel's subjection of a large number of Palestinian Arabs who want to govern themselves in a state of their own. It is that central fact of Arab life that enabled Saddam Hussein to make his spurious claims of "linkage" between Iraq's annexation of Kuwait and Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip; it is that fact that encouraged the Palestinians to dance on their rooftops a year ago as Saddam's Scuds landed in Israel. It is also essentially the same fact that impelled James Baker, the US Secretary of State, to make eight separate, gruelling visits to the Middle East in 1991, and to cajole and bully Israel and its Arab neighbours to the conference table in Madrid.

At the centre of Baker's mediation efforts, and of several of these books, is the *intifada*, the four-year-old Palestinian uprising in the Israeli occupied territories. What had long been known as "the Israeli-Arab conflict", meaning in essence a conflict between states, had reverted to its original dimensions: a conflict between Jews and Arabs over control of the part of the former British Mandate west of the Jordan river. The Arab states of the hinterland continued to provide succour for the cause, but they were no longer claiming the lead role; for the first time since the great exodus of 1948, in effect, the Palestinians in *Palestine* were making a sustained attempt to take their future into their own hands; and even the exiled leaders of the PLO, though still hailed by the Palestinians under occupation as their sole legitimate representatives, were reduced to a supporting act.

The *intifada* was, at least in its early stages, something of a media event, and as media events often do, gave rise to much extravagant political speculation and a good deal of second-rate academic punditry. Into the latter category falls *The Palestinian Uprising: A war by other means*, as thinly researched and lamely written a piece of work about Middle Eastern issues as the normally reliable house of I. B. Tauris can have put out in many a year. F. Robert Hunter, a professor at Tulane University, relies heavily on interviews

with rent-a-quote Palestinians and easily accessible Israeli journalists and academics, taking on trust statements from some of his interlocutors that are at best naive, at worst simply wrong. He has neither the insight to bring the background to the uprising alive nor the courage to make sensible projections into a future that has in any case already overtaken him: in conclusion we are told limply that the *intifada* will either diminish, or stay about the same, or possibly grow in intensity, but that anyway Palestinians are "great survivors. They take a long-range view of things." No hostages to fortune here!

A more comprehensive and authoritative account of the uprising is provided by *The Intifada*. A compilation of proceedings from one of a series of seminars on Middle Eastern issues held over the years by Baltimore Hebrew University, the book contains much useful and illuminating material – principally but not exclusively for a specialist audience – on the nature and origins of the *intifada* itself, the wider strategic and geopolitical implications, and the likely political and economic consequences for Israel. The fact that the book predates the Gulf war and that its Soviet chapter now seems sadly obsolete should not detract from the original and meticulously researched work it does contain: in particular, Ken Stein's fascinating contrast between the *intifada* and the earlier Palestinian uprising of 1936–9; Helena Cobban's account of the way the 1987 uprising swiftly institutionalized itself and of the evolution of relations between the Palestinian leadership inside the occupied territories and the PLO in exile; and George Gruen's assessment of the impact of the *intifada*, and Israel's handling of it, on the hugely important Jewish constituency in the United States. The latter may turn out to have been among the *intifada*'s most important political consequences, for increased public criticism of Israel in America, and the difficulties the pro-Israeli lobby experienced in countering it, helped make it possible for the Bush administration to take a harder line with the Shamir government in Jerusalem.

One aspect of the *intifada* that has baffled many observers since its earliest days in December 1987 is exactly how what had until then seemed a very traditional, predominantly rural, people arrived at the point of civil insurrection. Joost Hiltermann's *Behind the Intifada* offers an intriguing account of the forces at work restructuring Palestinian society in the occupied territories

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movement allied itself with the small shopkeeper bourgeoisie, and to some extent with emergent women's and self-help organizations, to create the backbone of a mass nationalist movement which the occupying authorities found it impossible to suppress.

What the events of the past couple of years in the occupied territories have brought out most clearly, however, is something that none of the above books fully succeeds in capturing: namely the painfully intimate, personal nature of the conflict for all those unfortunate enough to be caught up in it. For behind the television pictures of stone-throwing Palestinian youths and of bristling Israeli armoured patrols lies a multiplicity of human stories that seem by turns childish, horrifying and almost unbearably fraught with conflicting feelings – of mutual fear, hatred and a claustrophobic mix of alienation and entanglement. This complex of emotions, which affects both sides of the ethnic divide in different ways, is movingly portrayed by the Palestinian writer and journalist Said Aburish in his *Cry Palestine*. Aburish, who was born on the West Bank, is an acute, though not, of course, dispassionate observer of the petty brutalities of occupation. In terse, down-to-earth prose often laced with a healthy sense of the absurd, he conveys the daily frictions between occupiers and subjects; the arbitrary acts of violence on both sides; the personal rancour stemming from Palestinians' and Israelis' sufferings, in which one people can apparently affirm its own existence only at the expense of the other. One incident sticks in the mind: a furious confrontation between an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian youth over the time shown on the Palestinian's watch, Israeli clocks having gone back an hour and the Palestinians having refused on principle to follow suit.

The Israeli-Palestinian struggle still seems intractable in early 1992, Madrid notwithstanding. Nevertheless, the fact that the two sides have started to talk – however falteringly – does offer a glimmer of hope that they will one day move towards some form of accommodation. When they do and they are wondering precisely what form it should take, they should turn to a remarkable little volume called *No Trumpets, No Drums*, which deals thoughtfully and in some considerable detail with many of the issues that an eventual substantive negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians will have to contemplate. The authors, Sari Nusseibeh and Mark Heller, are respectively a Palestinian professor of philosophy and an Israeli researcher in strategic studies, and although they start from vastly different points of view, they both settle quickly on the common ground that any settlement of the conflict will have to provide for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the Israeli one. What is striking is not so much the idea itself as the fact that it is propounded publicly and in a jointly agreed document by an Israeli and a Palestinian both of whom command respect in their own communities, and that they have worked it out in such concrete, and hard-headed, terms. For *No Trumpets, No Drums* looks more closely, honestly and authoritatively at the formidably difficult issues likely to be raised by any real attempt to engineer an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement – the questions of security guarantees and borders, refugees and compensation, economic relationships and water rights – than any other recent work. That it struggles to an essentially optimistic conclusion, and does so without lapsing into naive platitudes or ducking the genuine concerns of Israelis and Palestinians, is a credit to its authors – though it has to be said that one could just as well argue precisely the opposite case on exactly the same evidence. The tragedy is that the leaders of these two peoples have not been able to articulate the issues in this way – and that the current leaders of Israel have barely reached the point of acknowledging the need to negotiate with the Palestinians at all.

Andrew Gowers is Foreign Editor-designate of the Financial Times. He is co-author (with Tony Walker) of Behind the Myth: Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian revolution, 1990 (recently reissued in paperback).