The Palestinian Question: Interview with Chris Giannou

CHRIS GIANNOU

Dr. Chris Giannou was born in Canada in 1949, the son of Greek immigrants. He attended school in Toronto, and in 1968 went as a volunteer teacher to Mali where, as he explains in the interview, he made up his mind to undertake medical training in a third world country, in conditions which would prepare him to practise medicine in the third world. After training in Algeria and Cairo he offered his services to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and served as a surgeon and hospital administrator in Southern Lebanon, where he was imprisoned and taken to Israel by the Israeli army during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. He later served as director of medical training for Palestinians in Havana, Cuba; and
finally, in 1985, as the surgeon responsible for setting up a field hospital in the heart of the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila, in southern Beirut, after the first attempt by the Amal Shiite militia to destroy it. The subsequent siege of Shatila, vividly described in the interview, began with an intense bombardment and continued for over two years with periodic shelling, constant sniping and a blockade. Although they had overwhelming military superiority the Amal failed to break the camp's resistance and overrun it. The siege was finally lifted when the uprising in the occupied territories, started in December 1987. Chris Giannou then felt finally free to leave. He spoke with SPE in March, 1988. Subsequently, of course, Shatila did fall victim to Syrian-backed P.L.O. dissidents in the Summer of 1988.

SPE: How did you come to be involved with the Palestinians? CG: I wanted to become a doctor and I wanted to practice medicine in the Third World. I left Canada...

SPE: What led you to decide to do that? CG: Part of it was the influence of my family, especially my father, and part of it was my own feelings of alienation. I was the son of immigrants and never felt very at home in Canadian society. Most Mediterranean families talk about politics a great deal. It is the number one topic of conversation in the kitchen, whether you are Spanish, Italian, Greek, Israeli, Turkish or Arab. So there was constant political discussion at home, and interest in public affairs and current events. My first prise de conscience in international affairs was at the time of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, when my father said to me, “remember this name, because one day Africa is going to make an idol of him, he's going to be the great hero of Africa.” At that time there was the Cuban revolution, Algerian independence, etc., and I became more and more interested in the Third World and read a great deal about it. And while a secondary school student in Toronto, at a very 'establishment' school, I joined the public affairs club and the United Nations club and we participated in a model United Nations General Assembly. There I was listening to an international lawyer giving us a lecture about Palestinian refugees. We looked at UN resolutions dating from the early fifties, many of them co-sponsored by Canada and the United States, talking about the repatriation and compensation of Palestinian refugees and how
the refugee centres, the camps, were only supposed to be temporary. And I found that what I was reading was in great contradiction with what was being presented in the press and the media. I did more reading and found that the history of the Middle East was a little bit more complicated than the way the western media were presenting it. I was also very interested in Africa and Latin America. When I left Canada actually I went to West Africa and worked there for a year as a teacher in Mali. I meant to be a doctor in the Third World, so I trained in the conditions under which I would have to work, in Algeria and Egypt. When I finished my training the choices open to me were either Angola or Lebanon. Lebanon was closer, I had more friends there, so I went to Lebanon. I presented myself to the Palestine Red Crescent Society and was engaged by them, and since 1980 I have been working with them.

**SPE:** Does the Red Crescent Society operate like any other Red Crescent or Red Cross Society? In Palestine it is closely linked to the PLO, is it not?

**CG:** Yes. The PLO is an institutional framework for Palestinian nationalism and in effect is organized like a government in exile. There is a social welfare department, an education department, and so on. The Palestine Red Crescent Society is, in effect, the ministry of health. It has some 6,000 employees. It has hospitals in Egypt, North Yemen, the Sudan, Lebanon and Syria. It is not allowed to function in the occupied territories. It is an observing member of the World Health Organization, the International League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and a full member of the Arab league of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. So it has international standing and recognition. It is an observing member simply because there is no Palestinian state and therefore it cannot be a full member. Like any ministry of health it has its own bureaucracy (and of course its own internal administrative problems.) I worked with them in a number of hospitals, as chief medical officer in various areas, and finally in October 1985, I arrived in Shatila.

**SPE:** What was Shatila like?
CG: The Shatila refugee ‘camp’ was an area of Beirut of only about 200 metres by 200 metres. There had been a first round of what was called the ‘camp war’ in the summer of 1985. At that time the Sabra camp was overrun. Hundreds of men were taken prisoner by the Amal Shiite militia and have never been seen since, and the camp itself was razed, bulldozed. The Shatila camp did not fall, but it was reduced to this very limited geographical area. In that first round of fighting there were no medical services available in the camp — there were two doctors who had no surgical experience and no equipment, and the only medicines available were what they could gather from the various houses: a few capsules of ampicillin here and a few tablets of aspirin there. And there were horror stories: some of the people who were wounded during that first round of fighting had no medical aid or care available whatsoever, the sum total of relief for some of these patients in the summer heat was simply to fan them as they slowly died. Under such conditions it was obvious that the camp could not continue to resist. If it was subjected to further rounds of fighting and if that was the sort of death that people would have to face, few people would agree to continue. And so I arrived at Shatila with the aim of setting up a field hospital there.

I had quite a number of colleagues in the Palestine Red Crescent. We rented four adjacent dwellings in the centre of the camp and set up a functioning hospital. There was an emergency room, an X-ray room with portable X-ray apparatus, a pharmacy, in-patient service, and laboratory. In a small underground shelter there was an operating theatre and in the fourth building there were various services — laundry, kitchen, cafeteria, administration and so forth. The total service area was not very great, we are talking about an area of about 30 yards by 20 yards. We had a staff of over 90, from doctors to cleaners and workers. Over the next two and a half years there was a whole series of battles. In January 1986 a four day battle; in April a twenty day battle; in June and July a thirty-five day battle; and from the beginning of November until April 1987 a six month battle.

SPE: Why were the Amal so determined to eliminate this particular camp?
CG: Because Shatila was located in a very strategic position. It was at the junction between West Beirut and the southern suburbs. The southern suburbs are largely Shi'ite. Because of rural exodus over the years the southern suburbs have become a tremendously overpopulated slum, and it is the fief of Amal and the Hizbollah. The political capital of Lebanon is Beirut, and access to West Beirut is important for any political faction. Shatila was also the smallest of the camps (the average population over the last two and a half years was only 3,500) and was considered to be the weakest. It lies in a gully, surrounded by hills. From the city sports stadium, or the various taller buildings around the camp, it is very easy to shoot into it. It looked fairly easy to overrun. In fact, it was fought over for two and a half years, including the six month battle from November 1986 to April 1987. In that battle, during the first three weeks the camp received over 250,000 shells, mortar and heavy artillery tank fire. The result was the damage or destruction of 95% of the dwellings of the camp. Entire areas of the camp and the surrounding area were completely flattened.

SPE: Why did the Amal not move infantry in and overrun the camp?

CG: They tried. There were twenty-seven frontal attacks. In such attacks you shell massively. You aim to destroy the buildings and oblige the defenders to withdraw. It is at this point that you then attack on the ground in order to occupy the terrain. But the defenders dug tunnels under the debris of the destroyed buildings. The rubble of the buildings protected them from any further bombing and shelling, and they would come out in foxholes at the front lines amidst the debris to repulse any frontal assault. In some areas they dug entire rooms under the building and they put in beds and a television, and just lived there. One person would be on guard duty and if there was an attack people would go up and defend. To support the ceilings of the tunnels and the rooms, we took apart the entire camp. We didn't leave a door or a window behind. All these doors and windows were used to either support the tunnels or were burnt for fuel. We eventually had to burn the furniture in order to be able to do the laundry in the hospital, or the cooking. After the first six weeks we really
only had to contend with tank-fire and sniping-fire and in the last two months there really were just the snipers. Once many of the tall buildings immediately around the camp had been destroyed, the alleyways in the centre of the camp became exposed to sniper-fire. To go from one area to the other, very often you would not even walk through the alleys. You would go from one room to another, and one building to another, through doorways that had been knocked out in the walls, so you would not be exposed to sniper-fire.

SPE: But in spite of this you must have had heavy casualties?
CG: During the six month siege we had 110 dead and 750 wounded, out of a population of 3,500. We performed some 200 major operations in the operating theatre and over 400 minor operations under local anaesthesia in the emergency room. These operations included about 55 laperotomies, abdominal operations, 20 craniotomies, about 25 vascular cases and other soft tissue, thorocotomies, etc. During the total of two and a half years I was there, the average population was 3,500 and during that time we had a total of 500 dead and some 2,200 wounded. Many people were wounded more than once and some we operated upon, they recovered, and then they were killed later on. We performed a total of some 450 major operations in the 27 months I was there. This raised the morale of the fighters tremendously. Somebody would be on one of the fronts, he would be shot in the abdomen — he would have his intestines literally coming out — he would be carried to the hospital and a month and a half later he would be back at the front. Nonetheless, it was still a horrendously high casualty rate.

SPE: How do you feel about it now?
CG: In the first part of the siege, there was so much work to do, so many casualties, that we were operating 18 or 20 hours a day. At later stages it was more a question of administering the rations — food, water, soap, medicines — so we were still doing 20 hour days, in effect. I had been in war situations previously where we would go days without sleep, but it never lasted that long. Also, the administrative aspect had never been so important. Once the attempt to overrun the camp had failed, the Amal tried to starve us out. Or they relied on the
psychological effects of the blockade and the siege, hoping that people would finally be so frustrated that they would surrender. But for the people in the camp there was never any question of surrendering.

SPE: How did your preparations work out? What did you learn from that experience?

CG: No matter how well you plan or how much you stock up on medicines and so forth you are always going to forget something and run out of something. Therefore our entire planning was on the basis of alternative systems. Whether it was the water supply, the electrical supply or technical, medical things — you always have to have an alternative there and planned out. In our laboratory, for instance: in modern laboratories when you do blood analyses, you use what is called a Coulter counter, and this automatically gives you results of blood analyses and with some of them you can actually do ten or twenty different types of analyses from one sample of blood. You can even put in 20 or 30 samples and have simultaneous results from all these different samples, all kinds of different tests, and very quickly. But that is a very sophisticated and costly piece of equipment, and if it breaks down maintenance is very difficult in the Third World. So instead we use a centrifuge, and we do haematocrit counts. That's fine — it's simple but it gives results. But it needs electricity and this may be cut off. So, when you do have electric current, you recharge car batteries and use a converter to change the direct to alternating current so that you can run the centrifuge on a car battery. If the centrifuge breaks down, then you can estimate the haemoglobin level by the Sahle method. This is described in the history part of medical texts. You take your blood sample, put in some hydrochloric acid, and compare the intensity of the hue of the solution with a standard solution. It gives you the result with between 5 and 10% error. You don't need electricity or anything else. As long as your centrifuge is running, fine. But if not, you must have this alternative technology available.

Another example is anaesthesia. We ran out of oxygen and nitrous oxide. So we used an intravenous drip of a drug called ketamine (Ketalar). You give this with a little bit of valium, pethidine, a muscle relaxant, and you can perform all kinds
of surgery, it is very safe and works very well. Enough of this drug to perform 200 major operations will fit in a suitcase, and we had it available in sufficient quantities so that we were able to continue to operate.

The thing that we had not planned for, but that we had to improvise during this six-month major siege, was electricity. When the electricity supply to the camp had been cut off we had a diesel electric generator for the hospital and with this we could also run the water pump for the camp and the oven to bake bread. But it used a great deal of fuel, and after several months of siege we could only run it for one hour a day. That allowed us to pump enough water in the camp. But we needed more electricity for the hospital, so we brought in a very small gasoline generator for the hospital. It was only one-tenth as powerful, but it also used less than one-tenth of the fuel.

So then we had to make a study of all the appliances and equipment we had in the hospital — just how much electricity they actually consumed — and I sat down with a fellow who was an electrician and said, “All right, imagine we are going to receive a patient in the emergency room. There are two fluorescent lights — 60 watts each, that’s 120 watts — and maybe an electric suction to do an aspiration — that’s 200 watts.” We saw how much amperage it took, what the voltage was, and then we just calculated how many watts of energy we would consume. Then we move the patient from the emergency room to the X-ray: we turn off the lights. We take a blood sample and send it to the laboratory, they need two lights: that’s 120 watts; one centrifuge for the haematocrit needs 160 watts, the other for preparing the blood samples for cross-matching is 200 watts. We could run one centrifuge and then the other — not both at the same time. We finish the blood samples, etc., we turn off the lights. Then the same for the operating theatre lamps, the electric cautery, the suction apparatus. We did this calculation and we found out that, in effect, this small generator which was really only enough to run a house, not a hospital, provided some 3,500 watts, which was sufficient for us to perform an operation, and at the same time receive a second patient. We could continue to function as a hospital for 10 or 12 or 15 hours per day, and during that time recharge our car batteries so that when we turned
off the electric generator the lights continued to function and the nursing staff could take observations and give medication. This is the sort of thing we improvised during the fighting.

**SPE:** Why was the siege finally lifted?

**CG:** The six-month battle finally came to an end after the Syrian army had entered West Beirut. During the battle, fighting also broke out in West Beirut between the Amal militia, on one hand, and the Communist and Socialist parties on the other. For five days West Beirut was paralyzed by street fighting. The Syrians were called in by the Prime Minister, the President of the National Assembly, and a number of other political leaders, to put an end to it; and once they entered West Beirut we knew the camp war would be over. Eventually a ceasefire was arranged, and the Syrians were asked to play an intermediary role by both sides. In April of 1987, therefore, the food and medical blockade of the camps was lifted; we could evacuate the wounded who needed specialized treatment outside and bring in medicines and food. But the military blockade of the camp continued, which meant that nothing of military value could be brought in. Men were not allowed to enter or leave the camp. Radio batteries were not allowed because they can have military uses. All sorts of things like electrical wiring were prohibited; but Lebanon being what it is, you pay a little bit of baksheesh and you can smuggle in just about anything you want if you organize it.

It's a good thing that many of the more traditional women in the Middle East have very large bosoms, because they could hide all sorts of things under their bosoms. There was in effect a reversal of social rules. In traditional Middle Eastern society it is the men who have contact with the outside world: they do the chores, they are the ones who are mobile. The women basically stay at home. In Shatila it was the men who stayed at home and it was the women who had all the contact with the outside world. They not only brought in the food and medicines and newspapers, spare parts, electrical wiring, batteries, etc., they also brought in ammunition, and they also were the messengers carrying secret messages to the Palestinian leadership out in West Beirut. Their role was extremely important and essential.
SPE: What finally made it possible for you to leave this year?
CG: Over the last 8 or 9 months there were a number of skirmishes; a number of snipings, we still had casualties in the camp. All sorts of negotiations were going on to end the camp war; finally, the popular uprising in the West Bank and Gaza occurred. The political leadership of the Amal movement, in solidarity with this popular uprising, finally declared that it would unilaterally lift the siege and withdraw their men.

SPE: Wasn’t this contradictory on Amal’s part?
CG: The Amal militia is not a homogeneous movement. There are different factions, and a number of them were against the camp war as a matter of principle. After two and a half years of fighting they had tremendous losses and there were obviously no political gains. They have been totally isolated because of the camp war. The Shiite community in Lebanon, which forms the bulk of the population in the south, was politically divided: besides the Amal, the Shiites also supported the Hizbollah, who were against the camp war, and the Communist Party who were also against it. The Shiite community had spent three years, from 1982 to 1985, fighting the Israeli occupation forces who were finally obliged to withdraw from most of south Lebanon in order to cut their losses. The Israelis remained, along with local militia allies, in a border strip in the south, but even there the Shiite carry out daily acts of resistance — ambushes, laying of mines, etc. These people felt such a tremendous empathy with the popular resistance in the Gaza Strip and West Bank that there was tremendous grassroots pressure on the religious and political leadership of the Shiite community of Lebanon to lift the siege. Nabih Berri, the head of Amal, could not at the same time proclaim himself to be a nationalist Arab leader and be seen to be besieging Palestinian camps in Lebanon, while the Israeli army was besieging Palestinian refugee camps in the Gaza and the West Bank. For him that would be political suicide.

SPE: So the new situation created by the uprising was decisive for Shatila. What does it mean for the PLO?
CG: To answer that we must begin by understanding how the Palestinians have come to be the focus of progressive Arab aspirations everywhere — and for that we have to go back to
what occurred at Karamah in Jordan, in 1968. In the 1960s the Arab world was split. On the one hand were the so-called ‘progressive’ states, which were republics, and had a social philosophy of some form of socialism or social renovation. They were secular. They were involved in the non-aligned movement, and they supported the national liberation movements throughout Africa and Southeast Asia. Egypt was one of these states. On the other hand, there were conservative regimes that were for the most part traditional monarchies, where Islam played a very important role in legitimizing the political authority. These regimes were mostly seen as close allies or clients of the United States. Saudi Arabia was a leading example of this type of regime, and the conflict between these two kinds of Arab state actually erupted into open warfare between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in North Yemen just after the North Yemeni revolution.

The youth of the Arab world, even in these more traditional countries, looked towards Abdel Nasser as their hero and leader, because of his pan-Arabism, his opposition to the colonial division of the Arab world into artificial borders, and because of his assertion of a renaissance of Arab culture and dignity. This enthusiasm for Nasser came primarily after the 1956 war; although it was a military defeat for a very weak Egyptian army at the time, it was seen as a great victory. Nasser faced down the British, French and Israelis. He nationalized the Suez Canal and this was seen as a great blow against the former colonialist powers and imperialism.

In the early sixties, too, the Egyptian economy was developing very rapidly, on the basis of state-owned heavy industry, the democratization of the educational and health systems, and the levelling out of a very unequal society by the creation of a large middle class of civil servants and professionals.

Then, in the 1967 war, this regime, which had been the hope of so much of the Arab youth, was defeated in six days, as was another progressive regime, the Baathists in Syria. It was a great defeat for pan-Arabism, for social renovation, for secularism. Yet a conservative regime — that of King Hussein of Jordan — was also defeated; both the progressives and the reactionaries were defeated, and great despair was felt throughout the Arab world.
Now the main leadership of the Palestinian resistance (which had started in the late fifties and early sixties) — the Fateh, Yasser Arafat's group — had been working in Egypt and Kuwait, mostly clandestinely. Their political philosophy was also nationalist and pan-Arab — but with a difference. The basic concept of pan-Arabism had been that Arab unity would lead to the liberation of Palestine. The Arabs first of all had to unify themselves, get over all the artificial divisions left behind by colonialism, and once they were unified they would be powerful enough demographically, militarily and economically to face Israel. The 1967 defeat proved what the Arafat group had already been thinking, that the Arabs would not unify soon enough to liberate Palestine. On the contrary, you had to reverse the formula: the struggle for the liberation of Palestine must lead to Arab unity. The Fateh leaders realized that the Palestinians were not strong enough to liberate Palestine themselves and they could only do it in effect by mobilizing the different Arab countries, peoples and armies into the struggle.

After the 1967 defeat the Palestinian resistance started organizing openly, especially in Jordan. The Palestinian guerrillas had a military base there in a village called Karameh, and in March 1968 the Israeli army attacked this base.

Now, in the six-day war the Arab armies were routed completely. All the jokes that were made then about Egyptian tanks having five speeds — one forward and four in reverse — were directed against the Arab state system and what were basically seen as corrupt regimes, whether they were progressive or reactionary. But in the battle at Karameh, these irregular guerrilla fighters resisted, they did not run away, and the Israelis were unable to overrun their positions in spite of tremendously superior technology. They used supersonic aircraft, tanks and heavy artillery, but they were not able to overrun the base as Karameh.

Karameh became a symbol of resistance for Arab youth, from Morocco all the way to the Gulf. Suddenly you had Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians, Egyptians, Sudanese, Iraqis coming to join the Palestinian resistance, because it had saved Arab dignity and honour, resisted the enemy, and not collapsed or run away. Because the Fateh was the most important group in Karameh, most of these people came and joined the Fateh,
as did large numbers of Palestinian youth as well. The Fateh became by far the largest of all the different Palestinian groups. It was still basically Nasserist, radical nationalist, moderately socialist, state capitalist, and non-aligned. And its ranks grew very rapidly, probably far too rapidly. It was not able to absorb all the people who came to join, or establish the kind of ideological training and discipline that one usually finds in a revolutionary or national liberation organization. Ideology and organisational matters took a back seat and militarism came to the fore. The results of this we see even 20 years later. The Fateh is still not very ideologically well formed, organizationally there is a great deal lacking, there is not that much discipline, and it is very, very divided into a number of different factions.

The important point, however, is that all this hope and effort was transferred to the Palestinian resistance. The Fedai, the guerilla fighter, with his keffiah and Kalashnikov rifle, became the symbol of resistance. The Fedai was a student, a worker, a peasant, armed: it was the people in arms, it was people’s warfare. This was also, don’t forget, the time of the Cultural Revolution in China, the Vietnamese resistance, resistance in the Portuguese colonies of Africa. It was just after the death of Che Guevara. It was the time of the theory of the prolonged, people’s war.

This concept also challenged the progressive Arab regimes. Their armies were professionals who had become a new petty bourgeoisie, a new caste in that society, and had in effect taken over the state apparatus. States like Egypt were now saying to the people, 'Liberation and fighting is our business, the business of the army and the state — it is not yours, the people. You can stay out of it. You trust us.' They had trusted Nasser, and it had led to the '67 defeat. For a long time, then, there was a total lack of confidence among the Arab peoples in their own governments; all their hopes were placed in the Palestinian resistance. That is why the Palestinian resistance and the development of Palestinian nationalism became central to almost all progressive thinking in the Arab world from 1967 until the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 1982.

**SPE:** Is the current situation in the West Bank and Gaza part of the same phenomenon you have been describing?
CG: Yes. Because now, 20 years after Karameh, even the Palestinian resistance has lost the confidence of the people: they have gone from military defeat to defeat to defeat... The youth movement and progressives have been in despair. But the popular uprising in the West Bank and Gaza is once again a Palestinian phenomenon, and once again it has aroused the enthusiasm of the youth throughout the region. The response of the Arab regimes, the progressive and the reactionary, to this point has also been the same: lip service in support of the uprising, but in practice, political paralysis through fear. The few attempts at popular demonstrations in support of the uprising, in Morocco, Egypt, Syria, etc. have been stopped, and at times violently, by the Arab regimes, because every Arab state, every Arab regime, no matter how progressive it is, fears its own people, fears having the people in the streets.

So once again we have a Palestinian phenomenon of resistance to the enemy, the enemy of all the Arabs, which is how the Arabs would see Israel. Who is resisting this enemy, with their tremendous technological superiority? The Palestinians, the people. Not any state organization, but popular institutions, students, and workers, and peasants. Twenty years ago they held a Kalashnikov rifle, today they hold a stone. I think that in the next two or three years, because of this uprising, there will be a tremendous ferment in the Arab world. The stability of the Arab regimes is endangered by this popular uprising. This was one of the reasons behind the Schultz initiative. The other is divisions within the American Jewish community, part of which wants to get rid of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Ariel Sharon — they are afraid of what they are doing to Israeli society, and where such men will eventually lead Israel. But the Middle Eastern component of it is a fear of the effect of this popular uprising as a symbol, an enthusiasm of the youth, that could be expressed in secular terms, or even in terms of Islamic fundamentalism; and a fear of what this might do to Egypt, Jordan, even Syria, as well as the Gulf countries.

SPE: Can you envisage the Arab regimes, seeking to prevent the destabilisation of their own states, becoming more concerned for a peace settlement in Palestine?
CG: I think we will see greater internal repression on the one hand, and on the other hand, a greater moderation of their stances with respect to a comprehensive peace settlement. At this point all Arab countries, with the possible exception of Libya, are willing to enter into a peace agreement with Israel and recognize Israel. In reality this is what they are saying, some of them openly, others behind closed doors, but this is what they are making known both to the United States and the Soviet Union. There is much greater moderation in the Arab position today — since 1982 especially, but now, with the popular uprising, even more. They have not even yet taken an official position, a unified position, concerning the popular uprising. They cannot even get together yet, and now we are into the fourth month of the uprising. They have not even been able to meet in an emergency session of the League of Arab States in order to discuss the uprising. It shows that they are in a quandry. But what they have been saying to the Soviet Union through diplomatic channels is that, if Israelis will withdraw from the Golan Heights, Syria will sign a peace treaty and will recognize it. Jordanians will. Everyone else will. Even South Yemen — the only Marxist-Leninist government in the Arab world — will, because this is the policy of the Soviet Union: a two-state solution with recognition of Israel, security and Palestinian self-determination. Probably only Libya would refuse. So, I expect greater moderation in effect in Arab positions in dealing with the Middle East question, coupled with greater internal repression.

Now, in a certain way this is progress, in that in terms of foreign policy the Arab states are being far more pragmatic and realistic, but in another way it is regressive, in that it means accepting that Israel and other Arab states are the surrogates of American imperial power, and the projection of that power, and safeguards for American imperial interests in the region. The entire Arab state system today is willing to accept that status quo of established American imperial interests. They are not willing to face it down. No one is calling for the overthrow of the Saudi regime or the traditional monarchies in the Gulf today. On the contrary, even the progressive Arab countries are getting economic aid from these countries. Now this may well be the price of peace; and this is where the Palestinian left wing disagrees with what is
happening to a certain extent, though it also sees positive points in a peace settlement.

**SPE:** What are the main political positions within the PLO today, and how do they affect the possibilities of a peace settlement?

**CG:** The Fateh is a large group. It includes everything from Muslim Brothers to Marxist-Leninists. The idea is: 'This is a period of national liberation, therefore we must have the broadest possible national front in order to liberate our country, and therefore ideology should not play that important a role. As long as we can agree on an anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist ideology, that's enough.' This is a common phenomenon, in the Third World, a 'broad front', and it is usually led by its Marxist-Leninist wing. But in the Palestinian resistance it was the right wing that became the leaders of the broad front. As a reaction to this the left wing did not join it, but set up their own little organizations. One group, called the Qome-en el-Arab, the Arab pan-nationalists, which included various different nationalities, took the view that armed struggle was not the way to liberate Palestine. So it was the right wing that initiated armed struggle, not the left wing. The left wing then had to start catching up; and they were coming from very intransient positions, with multiple divisions between groups that still took a more or less pan-Arab line, and those that became truly Marxist-Leninists. The most orthodox Marxist-Leninists, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, are the ones who, as early as 1974, came out with a theory that terrorist acts are non-productive, because they are individual acts and they do not mobilize our people, they do not do our cause any good, and therefore terrorism should be stopped. This became the official policy of the PLO; and it was dissident groups from the PLO, not under the control of the PLO, that were responsible for all terrorist acts after 1974 — throwing bombs in airports in Europe, etc.

The other important concept formulated by the Popular Front is the 'national democratic state' under which Jews, Christians and Moslems will live as equal citizens in a free Palestine: and that being the strategic goal to attain, how do you attain it tactically? You agree to a programme of steps; you agree to set up the Palestinian state in any part of what
was formerly mandate Palestine. What this means is that you try to end the 'national question' of Palestine. Once you have a Palestinian state, even if it's just the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, once Palestinians have a passport, an embassy, and a flag, etc., then out of the three million or so Palestinians living as refugees across the map of the Middle East, only about half a million would stay exactly where they are, in much the same way that there are only three and a half million Jews in Israel and twelve million outside. The Palestinian diaspora would probably act very much in the same way — and the Palestinians know that. There are 300,000 Palestinians in Kuwait: these are doctors, engineers, university professors, civil servants; they make very good salaries. They are not going to give that up after 10 to 20 years of living there, to go back to a new Palestinian state. But they would have an embassy, they would have a passport, they would no longer be stateless refugees, and every summer they would go back and visit or send funds, and when they retired they would go back to Palestine to die.

So the focus of the orthodox Marxist-Leninists in the Palestinian movement is on the importance of reaching some sort of peace, some sort of Palestinian national entity, so that in effect you can end the national question of Palestine; and you then start dealing with the class question. They see their natural allies as being the Israeli proletariat; the Palestinian and Israeli proletariat will have as common enemies the Palestinian bourgeoisie with all of its Arab backing in the conservative Arab states, and the Israeli bourgeoisie with all of its backing in the American military industrial complex. They think that once you get rid of the national question, and deal with the paranoia of the Israelis and their fear of the Arabs and their threat to destroy Israel, on the one hand, and the Palestinian sense of having been the victims of a historical injustice, on the other, it will be possible to start dealing with issues on a class basis: a totally different dynamic will arise, a social, economic and political struggle in coordination with the Israeli proletariat to transform Israeli and Palestinian society into a democratic, secular and socialist state. The solution being proposed at present by the PLO officially is a two-state solution, going back to implementation of the UN resolution of 1947 which created Israel but never saw the creation of its Palestinian-Arab counterpart. And then of course there are
the extremist even chauvinist groups based in Damascus (Fateh dissidents, the PFLP-General Command of Ahmed Jibril) and the Abou Nidal group that refuse any compromise and any peace with Israel. These groups are not a part of the PLO today.

SPE: Does that idea have a significant counterpart within Israel?  
CG: There is an Israeli left wing, most of it anti-Zionist, but part of it Zionist, that would see this as being a natural social development of Israeli/Palestinian society. In this connection, you must remember that one of the major factors in favour of a comprehensive peace is that there is already a de facto common market between Israel, the West Bank and Jordan. Palestinian workers go and work in Israeli factories, so they go out through Jordan. Israeli goods are the major goods on the market in the West Bank and many of them go out over the bridges into Jordan, and are even sold in the Arab world. The Israelis do not print on their goods "Made in Israel," so many Israeli goods have gone out into the Arab world under the guise of having been produced in the West Bank. So de facto there is a common market: you have a passage of people and goods that in effect knows very few tariff barriers. After 20 years of this all three societies would suffer economically if this were ended. So the de facto situation would become a de jure one, they would organize a common market. In this situation the natural struggle of left wing parties would change from armed insurrection to the dynamics of social struggle, leading towards more secularization, more democracy, more socialization.

SPE: What about the political perspectives of the 700,000 Palestinians living in Israel itself?  
CG: Their attitude is the most ambiguous. These are the 700,000 Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, who refused to leave their homes when the State of Israel was created. There are basically three communities: the Druze, the Christians and the Moslems. The Druze have been coopted — they serve in the Israeli forces, they form the bulk of the border guards, and are responsible for much of the beatings and torture of Palestinian prisoners: this is how they have been used. The
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Christians and the Moslems do not serve in the army, which in effect makes them second-class citizens, because given the way that Israeli society is organized, it's only once you have served in the army that certain jobs and occupations are open to you. This population was so fearful of losing their homes in the way that their brethren did, that they remained quiet for a long time. They realised, nonetheless, that they were not first-class citizens in Israel and they felt a great deal of rancour. Some became very radical — they even joined the PLO after 1967; they tried to work inside, or they left the country and joined the PLO outside.

In 1976 a very important and strange incident occurred. Numerous Palestinian villages within Israel had been destroyed in 1947 and 1948, and the people who stayed have always wanted to return to them: there was a movement calling for the right to do so. It's just a question of moving 10-15 kilometres from one place to the other. In 1976, demonstrations calling for this were met with repression. I believe there were six or seven killed and as a result, every year since then there have been demonstrations on the 30th of March, and the day is called the Day of the Land. It reemphasizes the Palestinian identity with the land. Since then, it has also been taken up in the West Bank and Gaza, and even by Palestinians in exile: it has become a National Day amongst Palestinians.

On the other hand, in Israel people like Meir Kahane have emerged, who call for the forcible expulsion of all Palestinians from Eretz Israel, including the 700,000 who are (Arab) Israeli citizens. Kahane even tries to organize demonstrations within Israel itself in some of the Arab towns and villages, and tells these Israeli Arabs “We want to throw you out.” He is an open and avowed racist. He was considered to be marginal person; he then won election to the Knesset; the present public opinion polls would give him three seats, and in another ten years, if present trends continue and there is no end to the occupation, no radical change in Israeli society, Kahane could become a major player on the Israeli political scene. The Palestinians holding Israeli citizenship see this evolution of Israeli society, and begin to realize that perhaps their destiny is really very tied up with that of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and of those in the Palestinian diaspora, that there are those people in Israeli society who lump all Palestinians to-
gether and want none of them; and that those forces in Israeli society on the liberal left that were quite willing to live in coexistence with the Arab minority in the country are losing their influence as time goes on; and that this eventually will expose them also to expulsion. It's this feeling, and the reaction to people like Kahane, that has now produced demonstrations in the Arab towns and cities of Israel during the uprising; and strikes and demonstrations of solidarity, criticism of Israel's repressive actions, the gathering of funds and food to be taken to town and refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza.

So once again this popular uprising is affecting not just the Palestinian population under occupation, not just the Palestinian population in exile, or other Arab peoples, but even the Palestinians within the "Green Line," who hold Israeli citizenship. And this is something that I imagine Israel is quite frightened about. When they talk about the "demographic bomb" they are not just talking about the 1.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; add to them the 700,000 who hold Israeli citizenship — that's 2.2 million — and in another 25 years you will have a total Arab population that is the equal of the Jewish population. That's the demographic bomb.

SPE: As we come to the end of this interview, what do you think are the prospects for peace in the Middle East?

CG: Since 1982 the PLO has gone from defeat to military defeat, yet it has gained one major political victory: it has reestablished the existence of the Palestinian people in public opinion. In 1967 the West had forgotten that the Palestinian people existed. Now Palestinians see the PLO as the national identity card of the Palestinian people, and as the institutional framework for Palestinian nationalism. They no longer see the PLO as something separate from themselves. Especially in the popular uprising, an entire population — women, children, young men, the elderly — are saying, "We are the PLO." The PLO has ceased to be only an institution or a government in exile and has become the symbol for the national existence of the entire people. The people see themselves in this symbol, recognize themselves in this symbol, use this symbol to represent them. This means that a pragmatic solution for the
Middle East has to be comprehensible, global. It has to ensure the security of all states in the region, including Israel, and it has to secure the national rights of all the peoples in the region, including the Palestinians; and that includes the right to Palestinian self-determination.

There is an international consensus at the present time, which includes all the countries of western Europe, eastern Europe, the non-aligned countries, the Arab countries and the PLO itself, that there should be an international peace conference under the auspices of the United Nations, and that the necessary guarantees for a peace should come through the United Nations. This would include the five permanent members of the Security Council, and the different protagonists in the region; and it would have to include the Palestinians, because neither the Jordanians, nor the Syrians, nor the Egyptians, nor anyone else represents the Palestinians. If you want to deal with the Palestinian problem and not talk to the Palestinians, then you are not being realistic about peace.

This implies a two-state solution, going back to the original plans to partition Mandate Palestine into a Jewish state (Israel) and a Palestinian state. And it requires all the necessary military measures to ensure security. Today in 1988 there is no such thing as a militarily defendable border, but there are secure borders, such as the Canadian-American border, or the border between France and Germany. Alsace-Lorraine was once the cause of many wars, but that border today is secure (although it is not capable of military defense) because there is a political consensus, an agreement, and that is what guarantees the security of a border. It is recognition that guarantees security, not arms.

**SPE:** What countries are not part of the international consensus you have just described?

**CG:** At the present time they are Israel, South Africa, the United States, and Canada.