

A Palestinian Wrong Way to Peace

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Global Research, March 12, 2011

12 March 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

When allowed to turn freely, the metaphoric Palestinian compass points in one direction — that of Palestinian struggle. But most of the time, someone is interfering with this compass, rigging it to other directions, as in the case of the continually failing peace process.

Now, with much of the Arab world up in arms against its autocratic rulers, the Palestinian compass is given another nudge, also in the wrong direction. The Palestinian public is seething, and yet Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) officials are telling us that the only way forward is through more negotiations. The “peace process”, we’re told, is the only thing worth saving from the current sea of Arab discontent.

It’s all topsy-turvy in the land of discontent. A Day of Dignity has been called to presumably restore unity in Palestinian ranks. Most likely it will lead to further disunity. Allow me to elaborate.

The Day of Dignity, held on 11 February, was not meant to end occupation but to terminate Gaza’s spirit of civil defiance. “Say no to division and occupation and yes to national unity,” is the slogan another group of organisers chose for planned protests on 15 March. On that day, the PLO plans to call for new presidential, legislative, and local elections in the hope of regaining enough credibility to pursue its favourite goal, that of negotiating for peace. The organisers tell us that they want a Palestinian state by next September. How many times have we heard this before?

WAFA, the PLO-run news agency, is trying to give the impression that this is the only path available to the nation. We’re either going to negotiate for peace, or we’ll protest and then negotiate for peace. If there is a point to this argument, I don’t see it.

Does anyone remember why the current split in Palestinian ranks happened? It all started when PLO officials, the endemic believers in peace, refused to honour the outcome of democratic elections held in 2006. So much of current dilemma is due to the simple inability of the PLO to reconcile peace with democracy.

So far, we’ve had a peace process that wasn’t so much about ending the conflict as it was about managing it.

The kind of negotiations we’ve been having, as Rashid Khalidi, the prominent Columbia University professor said, were never about self-determination or about ending the occupation, but about allowing Israel to impose its point of view, with US blessing every step of the way. This has been the case since the Madrid Conference of 1991. The only practical use of the peace process was to allow Israel time to build more settlements, with US approval. A US veto only a few days ago, on 18 February, should put to rest any lingering

doubts in this regard.

But American officials are still conducting “quiet” talks with both sides, as Dennis Ross told the 2011 J Street Conference. Abbas thinks this is the only way forward, but some Israelis are not so sure.

Uri Avnery, long-time peace activist and founder of the peace movement Gush Shalom (the Peace Bloc), says that the Palestinians have other options. “What would happen if hundreds of thousands of Palestinians started walking to the Separation Wall and pulled it down? What would happen if a quarter of a million Palestinian refugees in Lebanon gather on our northern borders? What would happen if protesters gathered in numbers at Al-Manara Square in Ramallah and Al-Baladiya Square in Nablus to challenge the occupation?” he asked.

The Israeli peace activist is not saying that this may happen today or tomorrow. But, judging by the way things are going, it cannot be ruled out. This is perhaps why Obama’s chief Middle East advisor Dennis Ross admitted that the current situation was “untenable”.

And yet PLO negotiators are helping the Israelis prolong the situation, by giving the false impression that something will happen when everyone else knows that things are going to stay the same. The PLO seems to be holding out for the day when the US, or the EU, put their foot down and broker a fair peace. It’s not going to happen.

Meanwhile, the PLO continues to suppress the only two forces capable of turning things around: national resistance and a citizen-led Intifada. The PLO is blocking any chance of forward movement while giving everyone the impression that it is doing something for the people. All it is doing is to help the Israelis perpetuate a basically untenable situation.

On 2 March, the newspaper *Haaretz* reported that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was working on a plan for establishing a Palestinian state with temporary borders as part of interim peace arrangements. We’ve heard it all before.

The Netanyahu plan is nothing new. It is a reproduction of earlier plans, all aiming to give the Palestinians a reduced version of the West Bank. Former defence minister, Shaul Mofaz, who is now chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, came up with a similar idea that would have given the Palestinians back about half of the West Bank.

An earlier version of the Netanyahu strategy was tried by Labour when Ehud Barak was prime minister. Barak, unable to complete a promised three-phase withdrawal from the West Bank, dragged PLO negotiators to a summit in Camp David in 2000 and then made sure that the summit would lead to nothing.

Kadima tried the same thing when Ariel Sharon was prime minister. Arafat snubbed him and was subjected to a cruel siege that ended in his death. Were Abbas to snub Netanyahu, he may face a similar fate. But Abbas doesn’t seem too eager to take a stand.

Arafat stood firm, even when he ran out of options. He told his people the truth. He told them that he cannot give up their rights, froze the PLO’s participation in the talks, and told the Palestinians that they would have to live and die for their rights. “Millions of martyrs will go to Jerusalem,” were his famous last words.

You cannot have a national unity government without having credibility. The most Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad have so far proposed is a government of technocrats. How can technocrats resolve an issue that is so political at heart? Reconciliation is a political quest, and the concessions it requires are not “technocratic” in nature.

The PLO cannot partner with Hamas before reconciliation is achieved, Fatah Central Committee member Jamal Moheisen told *Gulf News* on 28 February. This makes a lot of sense, but reconciliation comes at a price. And so far I don’t believe that the PLO is willing to pay that price. The way I see it, the PLO cares more for peace talks than it does for national unity.

You cannot have negotiations without resistance, just as you cannot have democracy without fighting for it. We’ve always known that, and we have the Intifada to prove it. We cannot be united until we’re willing to struggle against occupation together. And we cannot be democratic until we’ve learned how to share. So far, the PLO is neither sharing nor struggling, and its quest for peace is therefore doomed.

The writer is a veteran Arab journalist based in Birzeit in the West Bank of the Israeli-occupied Palestinian Territories. This article was translated from Arabic and published by Al-Ahram Weekly on 10-16 March 2011.

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