

Bring Back the PLO: Palestinians Must Redefine Struggle

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It's never easy, although a sure assertion, to maintain that the Palestinian front, at home as well as abroad remains as fragmented and self-consumed, thus ineffective, as ever before, but most notably during the disastrous post-Oslo period.

Such a realization wouldn't mean much if the inference is concerned with any other polity; but when it's made in regards to a nation that is facing an active campaign of ethnic cleansing at home, and an international campaign of sanctions and boycott – as shameful as this may sound – then, the problem is both real and urgent.

Palestinians in the West Bank, especially in areas that are penetrated by the imposing Israeli imprisonment wall – mostly in the north and west, and increasingly everywhere else – are losing their land, their rights, their freedoms and their livelihood at an alarming speed, unprecedented in their tumultuous history with the Israeli military occupation. The 700 kilometre wall, once completed, will further fragment the already splintered West Bank – Israel's settlement project since 1967 has disfigured the West Bank using Jews-only bypass roads, military zones and so forth, to ensure the viability of the country's colonization scheme, but rendered Palestinian areas disunited and isolated, thus the entire two state solution, under the current circumstances simply inconceivable.

Gaza, which Yitzhak Rabin had once wished would sink into the sea, and which Israel has laboured to dump on any one foolish enough to take responsibility for it – so long as it's not part of any comprehensive agreement that would include Jerusalem and the West Bank – maintains its 'open air prison' status. Palestinians there are being reduced to malnourished refugees, manipulated into violence and discord, a spectacle that Israel is promoting around the world as an example of Palestinian lack of civility, and their incapacity to govern themselves.

Occupied East Jerusalem has completely surrendered territorially to the Israeli colonial scheme; the Israeli government insistently refuses to consider Jerusalem as an issue that warrants negotiations; nothing to talk about, according to Israeli officials who see Jerusalem as their state's undivided and eternal capital. Vital movement from and into Jerusalem is increasingly impossible for West Bank Palestinians. Muslim and Christian properties in the city are interminably threatened, targeted or desecrated. The most recent targeting of al-Haram al-Sharif – underground digging and similar Israeli schemes – is intended to further exasperate Muslim fury, and emphasize the point that Israel retains the upper hand in its relations with the Palestinians.

Other major issues such as settlements, water, refugees, borders, etc, continue to be

dictated by Israel's unilateral actions, while the Palestinian role is relegated to that of the hapless, submissive and often angry victim. It goes without saying that if such decisive matters go largely unchallenged by a solid, popular Palestinian strategy, one mustn't be surprised if other issues: such as the need to restructure the progressively more fragmented Palestinian national identity, the need for a powerful, sustained and articulate Palestinian voice in the media and an influential body that unites and channels all Palestinian efforts around the world to serve a clear set of objectives, are receiving little or no attention whatsoever.

It must also be acknowledged, as uncomfortable as this may be to some, that the Palestinian democratic experience is rapidly succumbing to Israeli pressures, American meddling – tacitly or otherwise coordinated with Arab as well as other governments – and the fractious Palestinian front that has been for decades permeated with ideological exclusivism, cronyism, and corruption. Though one cannot help but rail against the American government's abortion of what could have been the prize of Arab democracy, still, the joint American-Israeli anti-democratic scheme would've faced utter defeat if Palestinian ranks were united, rather than self absorbed.

The Palestinian Liberation Organization, since its formation by the Arab League in 1964, but most significantly since its reformation in the early 1970s under Palestinian leadership, was for long regarded as the main body that eventually brought to the fore the Palestinian struggle as – more than a mere question of a humanitarian issue that needed redress – a national fight for freedom and rights. There was, more or less, a national movement that spoke and represented Palestinians everywhere. It gave the Palestinian struggle greater urgency, one that was lost, or willingly conceded by Arafat on the White House lawn in September 1993, and again in Cairo, May 2004.

Aside from snuffing out the Palestinian national project, reducing it to self autonomous areas, rendering irrelevant millions of Palestinians, mostly refugees, scattered around the world – thus demoting the international status of the PLO into a mere symbolic organization, Oslo had given rise to a new type of thinking in the rank of Palestinians adopted by those who see themselves as pragmatic and whose language is that of real politic and diplomacy. This, as it transpired, revealed itself as the most woeful case of self-defeatism that continues to permeate most Palestinian circles whose new 'strategy' is confined to the acquiring of qualified funds from European countries, which eventually dotted the West Bank with NGOs, mostly without a clear purpose, examined agenda and no coordination. Involving oneself in such useless projects is ineffectual, while rejecting them without a clear alternative can be equally frustrating, if not demoralizing. An official within the Abbas circle chastised me during a long airplane ride once for subscribing to the Edward Said's school, whose followers, I was told, wish to parrot criticism from the outside, and refrain from "getting their hands dirty", i.e. getting involved in the Palestinian Authority's institution building, and so forth.

While such a claim is utterly fabricated, no viable institution can possibly come out of the current setting: an amalgam of a most violent occupation and the utter internal corruption, sanctioned, if not fed by both Israel and the US government. The truth is that there have been no serious collective Palestinian efforts to redress the mistakes of Oslo and to breathe life into the PLO. (The Intifada was a popular expression of Palestinians disaffection with Oslo and the occupation, but, alone, it can hardly be considered a sustainable strategy). Neither a religious movement like Hamas, nor a self exalted one like Fatah, is capable of

approaching this subject alone, nor are they individually qualified to alter the Palestinian course, which seems to be moving in random order.

The problem is indeed more exhaustive than a mere ideological or even personal quarrels between two rival political parties; rather, it's an expression of a prevailing Palestinian factionalism that seems to consume members of various Palestinian communities regardless of where they are based. My frequent visits and involvement in many activities organized by Palestinian groups seem to leave me with the same unpleasant feeling: that there is no collective national strategy, but incoherent actions undertaken mostly by groups, however well intended, whose work never boasts a unified national agenda.

With the absence of centrality everywhere, individuals hoping to fill the vacuum are offering their own solutions to the conflict, once more without any serious or coordinated efforts and without a grassroots constituency, neither in the Occupied Territories nor among major Palestinian population concentration in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, etc. Others like the Geneva Initiative enthusiasts find it acceptable to negotiate a solution on Palestinians' behalf – without any mandate whatsoever – and obtain sums of money to promote their ideas, though the whole enterprise is run by a few individuals, who has no representations or sustained grassroots work among what one would expect to be their primary constituency, Palestinians themselves.

Oslo has lost its relevance as a 'peace' treaty, but the individualism it imposed on Palestinians still prevails; its legacy was that of self-preservation, instead of the collective good, and in my mind, no Palestinian party, including Hamas is immune from subscribing to its luring values. To avoid further debacles, Palestinians must ditch their factionalism and quit thinking of their relationship with their struggle in terms of funds, ideology (though flexible to fit political interests) or religious interpretations. They are in urgent need of strenuous efforts to formalize a new collective strategy that pushes for specific principles which can only be achieved through national consensus. Waving flags in the face of passers by, and the proverbial 'preaching to the choir' alone will lead nowhere. Individual 'initiatives' will further confuse the Palestinian ranks. Only a consistent, cohesive and reasonable strategy that emanates from the Palestinians themselves can engage international public opinion – with the hope of breaking the patronage system that unites the West, especially the United States to Israel – can possibly slow down the Israeli army bulldozers currently carving up the West Bank into a system of cantons, and high walled prisons. Reforming and revitalizing the PLO is not an option – it is a must.-

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