

Constraining Palestinian Resistance: Some Political and Economic Attempts

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There is much press over the most recent “reconciliation” and “reconstruction” “talks” that were launched in the wake of the Israeli assault on Gaza. The former has the avowed intention of putting the Palestinian’s internal house in order so that they would ostensibly present a united front to Israel when “negotiating.” Reconciliation talks have also put a very low ceiling for the achievements that they hope to accomplish. These are based on only partial and temporary band-aids related to internal governance and control problems, as opposed to fundamental issues of independence and the restoration of national rights. The reconstruction talks are focused on supposedly facilitating Palestinian rebuilding, development, and economic and political re-integration back into the fold of the “consensus” / “moderate” group of nations. Both are patent attempts by regional and international powers to channel Palestinian discontent and resistance into a route that is deemed acceptable. Both follow the same course that was prescribed and largely adhered to ever since the Oslo “peace process” created the Palestinian Authority (PA) and appointed the current crop of leaders to (ostensibly) speak and negotiate on behalf of Palestinians. Sadly, for the purposes of the “peace process” and the subsequent “roadmap to peace,” the Palestinians as a national group were intentionally circumscribed and diminished by the non-inclusion of the refugees and diaspora, as well as by the marginalization and ossification of the PLO.

Nevertheless, and despite all the odds arrayed against them, Palestinian resistance to occupation and hopes for national liberation have persisted. The recent developments are proof of the partial success derived from Israel’s failure to destroy Hamas and the faltering of the economic and political embargoes against it. And yet, the assault on Gaza also showed that the costs to Hamas are too great to bear alone, and that it cannot, by itself, lift the international embargo. Similarly, Fateh lost its bets against defeating Hamas and is now forced into dialogue with its nemesis.

Talk of “reconciliation” has even been extended to include all Arab states. It was first launched within the framework of an economic summit on January 19, 2009 that was held in Kuwait, but which also dealt with the predicament that Arab states found themselves in after Israel’s attack. Their predicament was and is that they oppose Resistance (Islamic fundamentalist or otherwise). But Hamas’ and other Palestinian groups’ persistence in the face of the violent Israeli pounding was making them a de facto party which was forcing itself onto the old comfortable political arrangements long used to “moderation,” endless “talks,” and limitless concessions. Needless to say, Hamas, the elected government, de facto ruler over Gaza, and the main party that was targeted by the assault, was not invited to the summit in Kuwait. Instead, the term-expired PA was.

As a follow-up, Qatar had offered to host an Arab summit meeting in Doha at the end of this month. Predictably, Arab leaders have agreed to disagree. Al-jazeera reported that due to Egyptian “objections,” Qatar has been excluded from participating in the preparatory mini-summit being held in Riyadh. (Qatar has previously invited Hamas leaders to “dialogue” and is perceived as being more receptive to non-PA groups and is perceived as promoting a more internationally legitimized role for Hamas.) Apparently, Mubarak saw no contradiction in excluding Qatar when he made his statements about the need to unite Arabs in the face of “external plans that come from outside the Arab region” to impede reconciliation. (1)

Even though Arabs are accustomed to the utter failure of the vast majority of these Arab summits, these latest meetings are still significant in the sense that they reveal how even the regional balance of power is stacked against any active forms of Palestinian resistance. This upcoming summit is intended to have consequences. One should not ignore that even though the title is “Arab reconciliation,” it is simultaneously trying to promote the Saudi-sponsored Arab Peace Initiative that was presented to Israel in 2002, and re-offered, ad infinitum since then. (2)

When one considers that Israel was unable to dislodge Hamas by its most recent military atrocity, and before that by the attempted coup by (Bush-Rice-Abrams backed-) Dahlan forces in June of 2007, (3) then it becomes apparent that this exclusion of Qatar is once again a continuation of Israel’s war by other means. It is now conducted on their behalf by the Egyptians (and, naturally the Saudis, behind the scenes). In fact, while Hamas is the legally elected government of the Palestinians, and while the PA’s term has expired, the PA remains the preferred negotiating and leadership partner — for obvious reasons. Consequently, even though Hamas ought to be the party choosing the composition of the next Palestinian government, this is not the case. Instead, Hamas was (reluctantly) invited to “reconciliation” talks with the Fateh-led PA, during which time they are supposed to unite the Palestinian front and to discuss thorny issues.

Viewed from that perspective, Egyptian Chief of Intelligence Omar Suleiman’s address to the Palestinian factions acquires sinister and hegemonic dimensions. He urged the formation of a technocratic government that would be able to “communicate with the world,” in order to lift the siege of Gaza. This is the obvious “stick” which is one of the remaining threats to overcome Palestinian resistance to pre-determined quasi-solutions to their occupation. The “carrot” flip side is the offer of aid for reconstruction, which the US, Europe, and Israel insist must be channeled through the (corrupt) PA and its (ex-)Finance Minister, Salam Fayyad. The US insistence on a Fayyad -led transitional government seems to have been forestalled for now by his resignation and possibly by Hamas’ vociferous rejection to that choice. While the West had shunned a previous unity government in 2006, it is yet to be seen if this one, were it to form, will be accepted. Suleiman went further in reinforcing the dire consequences of another rejection of international “consensus” diktat. He warned: “I do not want to remind you of the consequences of, God forbid, failure.” (4)

Looming on the horizon, and possibly threatening this international show of force against the expression of Palestinian resistance, is the potential of another Hamas victory in the proposed future election. A recent poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) indicates that Hamas has gained sharply in popularity over Abbas and Fayyad, although Fateh remains more popular overall than Hamas. (5) Count this as another “success” of the (war-reliant) Bush Doctrine and its Israeli manifestation. It is interesting that in a previous poll conducted by PCPSR in early September of 2007, and after Hamas’ military takeover following Dahlan’s attempted coup, only one fifth of Palestinians supported

Hamas' military actions in the Gaza Strip. Significantly, Hamas retained its overwhelmingly dominant position among refugees, a group that has been almost completely sidelined by the PA-led post-Oslo government. (6) It is also worth noting the reasons behind Hamas's lack of even greater success in the polls, given its stance against Israel. The reasons indicate that the pressures (and the associated devastation to lives, economy, infrastructure, development, etc...) of the "international consensus" are working to some extent. Ordinary citizens' concerns with ending the blockade and the unification of the West Bank and Gaza Strip are understandably predominant electoral issues. (7)

Attitudes towards the "who's" and "how's" of the Palestinian struggle for liberation recall earlier historical manifestations of Palestinian resistance and the concomitant military (and otherwise) responses to subdue it. Dispossession of the Palestinians, economic and political, has been a deliberate policy since Israel's inception. The work of Israeli historians like Ilan Pappé recounts a deliberate, multi-pronged policy whose ultimate aim was to ethnically cleanse the inconvenient indigenous population. Strategies of dispossession and ethnic cleansing included the Jewish Agency's / World Zionist Organization's buying of land from wealthy absentee landowners. Many of those had taken advantage of new land registration laws that allowed privatization of previously communal / *musha'a* land. The Zionists then not only removed and intimidated and terrorized the peasants off their ancestral lands. They also instituted economic policies that made it impossible and illegal for these suddenly homeless people to be employed by the Zionist *kibbutz*'s. Moreover, Palestinians could not be members of Israel's "trade union," the Histadrut. That organization is only a union in a secondary capacity. Its primary role was and is as an instrument of colonialism and apartheid via the promotion of land settlement, labor discrimination, exclusion, dispossession, and providing "leftist" cover / rationalization for Israel's many wars. For instance, Zeev Sternhell states in *Founding Myths of Zionism*, (1998: p.180) how the Histadrut founded the terrorist group Haganah which later evolved into the Israeli military, as well as Mapai the current Labor Party's predecessor. Similarly, Z. Tzahor argues how the Histadrut was the "executive arm of the Zionist movement" and became a "state in the making." (writing in 'The Histadrut', in 'Essential papers on Zionism', (1996, pp. 505-506)) (8)

Echoes of these policies (not to mention their lasting and destructive repercussions on the Palestinians) continue until today. Hiding behind the international "consensus" push for "peaceful negotiations" is the reality of continuing constraints and attempts at destroying any and all manifestations of Palestinian expressions and demands for liberation. The use of economic means to dispossess Palestinians and to socially fragment them, and thereby deprive them of effective representative leadership continues as well. Methods used include resource theft, land expropriation for "security" reasons and for "settlement" / colonial expansion, stealing water from aquifers beneath the West Bank and Gaza for the benefit of colonist "settlers" and Israelis, road blocks, economic embargoes and hundreds of checkpoints All are aimed at social and political control and the subjugation of Palestinians.

Sociologically also, the PA has served an important function. It functions frequently as the equivalent of a comprador class whose self-interests are more aligned with, and whose fortunes derive from, the occupation / Israel. The establishment of the PA not only eliminated the role of the indigenous leaders that had grassroots support from the First Intifada. It also brought forth an era of monopolies, agencies, "foreign aid" administration / funneling, and corruption that has wrought additional havoc with both Palestinian social structures (for example, by gutting the middle class) and the Palestinian economy in the

Occupied territories.

Economic (de-) “development” statistics from the World Bank and UNCTAD tell their own story — (Even though both institutions have a vested interest in promoting the “success” of the neo-liberal economic “reforms” and models, which are in actuality forms of hegemonic dominion over developing nations).

A recent (September, 2008) report produced by the World Bank shows that there has been a contraction of the Palestinian economy in the Occupied Territories since Oslo and under PA control. (9) Since the late 1990s, GDP was flat-to-declining. But when population growth is accounted for, then the Palestinian standard of living is 30% below its peak in 1999, and GDP per capita is an astonishing 60% of its 1999 level. (10)

The Palestinian economy suffers under multiple burdens, including the rise in restrictions from the occupation and the consequent hollowing out of the productive economy. The apartheid wall, geographic fragmentation, physical and economic destruction of Palestinian productive assets, the economic embargo, among other things have resulted in declines in agriculture, industry, education, and health care. There is also an increased reliance on “aid,” which in 2008 comprised more than 32% of GDP. Unemployment also rose to 19% in 2008 in the West Bank and to 25% in Gaza over the same period. It is likely that these numbers are all much worse now after the Israeli attack. The statistics on poverty are even more dire. The same report states that “if remittances and food aid are excluded and poverty is based only on household income, the poverty rate in Gaza and the West Bank would soar to 79.4% and 45.7% respectively and the Deep Poverty rate would increase to 69.9% and 34.1%. This illustrates the high levels of aid dependency in the West Bank and Gaza, particularly taking into account the fact that the majority public sector salaries are financed with foreign aid.” (11)

According to UNCTAD statistics, looking at the Palestinian trade deficit is also revealing. In 2006, imports surged to 86% of GDP, even while GDP fell. In that year, Israel accounted for more than 66% of the trade deficit, and this means that fully half of Palestinian GDP was used just to pay Israel. Furthermore, Israel’s regular withholding of Palestinian tax revenue has resulted in increased dependence on donor “aid.” The Palestinian economy is wholly dependent on Israel. Another facet of dependency is the “choice” of trade partners, who are overwhelmingly the “consensus” group of “moderate” states. Top ten suppliers and customers of the PA include Israel, Turkey, Egypt, US, Italy, UK, Jordan, the UAE. The UNCTAD report provided further proof that de-development had occurred between 2000-2006 (and we should expect worse now): “Long-term structural deterioration is illustrated in a 10-year comparison of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. Between 1996 and 2006, agricultural output declined 19 per cent, but in 2006 this sector employed 80 per cent more people than it did in 1996. Similarly, manufacturing value added declined 7 per cent over 10 years, yet employment in the sector increased 3 per cent.” (12) Also informative is the data on the GNI coefficient of GDP which measures per capita income and is an indicator of wealth distribution. That data clearly shows a growing gap in wealth distribution since starting in 2002, and accelerating after 2005. (13)

It is illuminating to look at what “progress” the World Bank touts as part of its “achievements” to reform and develop the Occupied Territories with the help and administration of the PA. A few example will suffice: the “revision of the unsustainable pension system;” the reduction of government employment from 180,000 in 2007 to 141,000 in the first half of 2008 (and here the PA exceeded UN expectations of 153,000);

and, the PA improved “security,” by increasing “deployment of Palestinian Security Forces” in the West Bank (naturally, security is the ever-present side-kick of economic sabotage disguised as development). (14) These “successes” will be familiar to anyone who has been following the destructive path of neo-liberal (and regressive) “reforms” that have been forced onto the developing world. Obviously, these externally promoted and imposed economic “solutions,” just like their political brethren, are in many respects destructive, and may be viewed as part and parcel of a larger method of control and hegemony over the already oppressed Palestinians.

Ultimately, it is ridiculous to pretend that the PA can have any real economic policy. Here is an entity that has no sovereignty over borders, natural resources, or movement of people or goods. It does even have its own currency (there are three currencies circulating) and monetary independence. And to top it all, it is dependent on Israel for access to even its own tax revenues and on the international community for “aid.”

Acknowledging these facts would go a long way in dealing with the reality of the Palestinian situation. In dealing with the multitudinous and multiplying constraints confronting the Palestinians, one would hope (probably in vain!) that Palestinian leaders of both Fateh and Hamas would notice that, despite the pomp surrounding their reconciliation talks in Egypt, they are actually fighting over crumbs. While Hamas talks resistance, it seems more than willing to compromise and to recognize Israel de facto if not de jure, and to maintain a “ceasefire,” however one-sided. (15) Also, Hamas displays a naiveté in its trust in those who are sponsoring the talks – Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Fateh, on the other hand, does not even pretend to even want to resist, even though it is the “leader” of the Palestine *Liberation* Organization. For Palestinians’ sake, it would help if these “leaders” made an honest assessment of their past decisions and their consequences. They should realize that when war fails Israel in the achievement of its goals, it resorts to other means, both economic, and political. Instead of focusing on the crumbs, Palestinian leaders must insist on fundamentals: resistance, liberation, real sovereignty, solving the refugee crisis, and achieving the right of return (and equality) for every Palestinian.

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Notes

(1) Al-Jazeera (Arabic), 3/11/09, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/9BC684FD-08CD-4F9F-8D1E-8D8651BECE49.htm>.

(2) See <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/03/20093116311962562.html>.

(3) David Rose, “The Gaza Bombshell,” Vanity Fair, April 2008. <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/04/gaza200804>

(4) Reuters, 3/10/2009, http://www.reuters.com/article/homepageCrisis/idUSLA936828._CH_.2400.

(5) See <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2009/p31epressrelease.html>.

(6) See <http://www.pcpsr.org/survey/polls/2007/p25e1.html>.

(7) Ibid, PCPSR, 3/5-7/2009 survey.

(8) For a more in-depth discussion of the role of the Histadrut, see Tony Greenstein, "Histadrut: Israel's Racist "Trade Union," Electronic Intifada, 3/10/2009. <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article10379.shtml>.

(9) See pp. 19-20 of <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWESTBANKGAZA/Resources/AHLCReportSept.08final.pdf>.

(10) See [http://ocha-gwapps1.unog.ch/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/EGUA-7JAPRW-full_report.pdf/\\$File/full_report.pdf](http://ocha-gwapps1.unog.ch/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/EGUA-7JAPRW-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf), p. 3.

(11) Ibid, pp. 21-22.

(12) See http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/tdb54d3_en.pdf, pp. 6-7, 11.

(13) See [http://ocha-gwapps1.unog.ch/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/EGUA-7JAPRW-full_report.pdf/\\$File/full_report.pdf](http://ocha-gwapps1.unog.ch/rw/RWFiles2008.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/EGUA-7JAPRW-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf), p. 4.

(14) See <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWESTBANKGAZA/Resources/AHLCReportSept.08final.pdf>, pp. 9-10.

(15) See this story about Hamas condemning rocket fire <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2009/03/12/news/ML-Israel-Palestinians.php>.

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