

Gaza Bombings Rock Palestinian Reconciliation

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It is ironic that the annual commemoration of the death of Yasser Arafat should turn into an occasion for rekindling the flames of internal strife. This was clearly the aim of last week's bombings that targeted the homes of Fatah leaders in Gaza, as well as the podium for the commemorative ceremonies of Arafat, who strove to make Palestinian national unity one of the pillars of his political legacy.

How desperately those concerned need to be inspired by the political legacy of that great president.

During a visit to demonstrate solidarity with the West Bank village of Al-Mughayyar, where settlers, under the protective eye of occupation soldiers, set fire to a mosque, Director of the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) Kamel Abu Aliya remarked that his ministry have documented 20 similar attacks on mosques in the West Bank since 2011.

In targeting mosques, the occupation is clearly targeting major symbols of national and popular unity. Mosques, by definition, gather people together rather than drive them apart. Inside the mosque all the factions of the national struggle that are at odds with each other assemble as one with their fellow men, in solid ranks with a single heart.

The occupation has never foregone any means at its disposal to drive a wedge into the Palestinian national ranks. This has not changed. So it is ironic that the bombings would become an occasion to present the occupation with the gift of factional polarisation and a war of words, at a time when the factions most need to be united, and that they would serve to turn the national compass away from Jerusalem, on which Arafat had set his national compass until his dying breath.

But here is another important point. Both sides of the dispute — Fatah and Hamas — have condemned the attacks, denied all charges of responsibility and insist on the need to conduct an investigation into bombings as quickly as possible.

If these two factions can agree on these points, what would keep them from agreeing to form a joint fact-finding committee that would include representatives from all other factions (most notably the Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front) and independent figures from civil society that would be committed to publishing its findings in fulfilment of the right of the Palestinian people to know the truth?

Moreover, why couldn't the creation of a joint committee such as this become a new mechanism for enhancing national reconciliation and ending acrimonious exchanges before they spiral out of control?

In this regard, when Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas says that he is not interested in "an investigation by them" — referring to Hamas, of course — but does not propose an

alternative investigatory mechanism, he is not helping efforts to unearth the truth, which his people are more eager to learn than the two factions whose protracted dispute has exhausted their people.

But the most appalling irony resides in their aversion to turning the finger of accusation in the direction of the ultimate beneficiary from all this — namely, the Israeli occupation authority and its state. A focus on that beneficiary would suffice, in and of itself, to contain the dangerous repercussions of the bombings on national unity and, simultaneously, to expose the truth about the existence of parties who fear their interests would be jeopardised by the end of the rift in both the occupied West Bank and blockaded Gaza Strip.

These parties are exploited, knowingly or not, by the occupation, and collectively they form a “fifth column” that works to obstruct the process of national reconciliation in order to safeguard their interests.

But even if those who carried out the bomb attacks were Palestinian this does not obscure the identity of the first and foremost beneficiary. This, moreover, comes at a time when the occupation is escalating its aggression against the Palestinian people under occupation.

It is increasing its forces in the West Bank, intensifying its repressive measures and moving to augment its budget for settlement expansion. More significantly, the Israeli government recently approved a bill of law to extend the laws of the Israeli state to the Jewish colonies in the West Bank, as is the case in East Jerusalem and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. In other words, we are effectively speaking of another Israeli annexation bid.

The history of dissension and strife is repeating itself. A statement by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) urges Fatah and Hamas to exercise restraint and to remain alert to the conspiracies that are being woven against the Palestinian people.

It cautions the two factions against falling into the Israeli trap of igniting Palestinian discord and urges them to give competent agencies and relevant political authorities sufficient time to unearth the threads of the crime.

Yet this statement, which applies perfectly to the current situation, was issued by the PFLP in July 2008 after four Ezz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigade members were killed in a bombing on Gaza beach. At the time, Hamas accused Fatah and the Fatah charged Hamas with carrying out an “internal purge.”

Nothing appears to have changed, apart from the fact that today Fatah accuses Hamas of planting the bombs and the latter responds that the attack was related to an internal conflict inside Fatah. In both cases, the occupation power and its government come out innocent!

That rush to judgment and finger pointing before the smoke has cleared is suspicious and raises questions regarding the political motives behind such reactions. One is reminded of a similar case of accusations that were hurled after the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Al-Hariri in 2005.

Before his blood had dried some fingers in Lebanon pointed to Syria, even though it was palpably evident that Damascus could not have been behind the crime as it was fully aware that it could only be harmed by the consequences.

The same applies to Hamas today. After its long political experience it would realise that it could only stand to lose from the Gaza bombings.

The hands that carried out the bombings in Gaza might be Palestinian and even Fatah or Hamas hands, but those who issued the orders could not have been Palestinian decision-makers. Anyone familiar with the history of Palestinian assassinations knows this.

The perpetrators may have been motivated by personal interests but the consequences cannot possibly serve Palestinian interests, factional or otherwise. They can only serve the occupation authority and its state, especially as the victim is certainly the Palestinian people and their national unity.

The fifth column that benefits from Palestinian division and that feels threatened by its end is still searching for opportunities to sabotage Palestinian national reconciliation. It must have seen the Gaza bombings as a perfect opportunity to fan the flames of discord, offering a service free of charge to the occupation (presuming the best possible intentions under that situation), or not free of charge (presuming the worst).

It does not take much effort to reach the above conclusion. However, building on it by containing the unpatriotic repercussions of the attacks requires great thought and effort in order to prevent outbursts of factional acrimony or to keep them contained in order to safeguard national reconciliation from collapse.

This is essential to ensure that the reconstruction of Gaza moves forward, to sustain the national unity government and to return the focus to solidifying national ranks in the face of the occupation's ongoing aggression against the Palestinian people, their security and wellbeing and their sanctities, and behind the political battle that the Palestinian presidency is waging in the international arena.

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