

Palestine: In Place of Appeasement

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For a people either rootless or under occupation, the Palestinians have made more than their share of diplomatic initiatives. The norm, one would think, would be for an occupied people to fight for liberation until they win or else maintain resistance, compelling the international community or the occupying power to come up with solutions to situations that are no longer tenable. The norm, then, is for the resistance to either accept the proposals and throw down its arms, or to reject them and keep on fighting until it is presented with more reasonable ones. The actions of the resistance, moreover, are presumed to be guided throughout by a central aim: liberation and the realisation of self-determination.

In the Palestinian case we see the reverse: they have come up with so many initiatives and proposals that the Palestinians, themselves, find it difficult to recall the aims of their struggle; not only the original aim but the latest one too. In the process they have lost the distinction between strategies and tactics, between tactics and self-deception, and between tactical goals and pleasing others. Not that their attempts to please others have been very successful; rather, they have whetted the appetite of others, who believe such attempts that are a sign of weakness, to up their demands. Israel will never agree to Palestinian ideas because it finds them pleasing; it will agree only if implementing these ideas suits its interests or if it is forced to agree. For example, when suicide bombings reached their height during the second Intifada, Israeli capital and big business forced their government to choose between resuming the peace process until a settlement could be reached or building the separating wall. The government chose the wall.

The Palestinians and Arabs have put forward more than enough initiatives and proposals for settlements and interim phases. Israel has consistently refused to take them up; clearly, it is waiting for more, undoubtedly out of the conviction that with every new proposal the ceiling of demands will lower. Surely it is about time for the Arabs to wait for Israel to come to them with proposals or initiatives that they can either accept or reject, as opposed to letting themselves be pushed around by the logic of unilateralism and the construction of separating walls. In the meantime, if they need some kind of unifying inspiration, they can always draw on the Palestinian national consensus document, which represents the broadest common ground, as well as the resolutions adopted by the PLO in successive National Council sessions. Since neither Israel or the US are about to produce an acceptable proposal for a solution in the foreseeable future, the Palestinians, especially following the agreement between Hamas and Fatah, should drive home the message that they, too, have no further proposals to make and that it is not their job to make proposals but rather to fight against the occupation, against the separating wall, against the Judaisation of Jerusalem and other national objectives.

Jerusalem, for example, does not exist in a vacuum. Its representatives in the Palestinian National Assembly were arrested and there has arisen no properly organised and financed

leadership to take the place of Orient House and the neighbourhood people's committees. What happened? Somewhere down the line people stopped thinking in terms of the national rights of Jerusalem as a Palestinian Arab city and in terms of its inhabitants as a part of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian national project, and began to think in terms of Israeli civil rights. Sixty per cent of the children in Jerusalem go to schools that fall under the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem. The brutality of the circumstances they face inevitably force us to demand their rights — by which we mean their Israeli rights — from the Israeli Ministry of Education. However, as necessary as this process is, because it is taking place outside the framework and compass of the Palestinian national project it has merged into the process of the Israelification and annexation of Jerusalem and its people. I suppose, therefore, that I should not have been all that surprised, recently, to see a group of 12 school children from East Jerusalem on a visit to the Knesset as part of their civics programme, as if they were Arab students from inside the Green Line.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque, as an architectural structure, is in danger, but Palestinian and Arab Islamic sovereignty over it is in greater peril; it has been virtually non-existent for some time. The people who are presumed to exercise this sovereignty — the Palestinian people inclusive of Palestinian society of Jerusalem — are also imperiled. The Arabs inside the Green Line pray there regularly and do their best to maintain it as a mosque but they are Israeli citizens and cannot exercise the rights of sovereignty. As admirable as their efforts are, they are not a state, nor even a state in the making. They are citizens of the occupying power itself. The transformation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, through closure and through the absence of an Arab challenge, into a mosque for Arabs inside the Green Line is hardly a bulwark against the peril. Is world opinion aware that Israel refuses to allow Muslims from the West Bank and Gaza access to one of Islam's most holy shrines, thereby violating their fundamental rights of worship? Yet the liberation of Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque and the exercise of Arab and Muslim sovereignty over the sanctuary are curiously absent from all the Arabs' political and diplomatic moves connected with the "peace process". So, too, for that matter, is the protection of Arab society in Jerusalem, of the sanctity of their persons and of the Arab identity of Jerusalem, inclusive of the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

If we add to this the erosion of the status of Jerusalem and the reduction of Palestinian refugees from a vital and primary component of the Palestinian cause to a collection of humanitarian causes of varying severity depending on the countries in which the refugees are living, we find that the Palestinian cause has been abbreviated to negotiation over a Palestinian state, as Bush and Olmert define it. The dependency on the "peace process" — with the heaviest emphasis on "process" — has left an enormous gap in Jerusalem, in the Palestinian Diaspora and in the Palestinian national project as a whole. "The process" has become an aim in itself: some politicians feel that their political careers and lives are not worth living if they don't meet an American official on a shuttle tour to the region, don't get themselves photographed with him or her, don't comment on the importance of their meeting and don't reprimand the US for its pro-Israeli bias at least once a negotiating season. The process similar to that of an extended family: it leaves stray waifs if it breaks down and plays Cupid for others until some calamity has the lovers bewailing their miserable lot in the coffeehouse. The process is everything, and those connected with it will be sure to tell you that America is in earnest this time; contrary to the general impression, they have detected a new sense of responsibility in whatever American official they have met. They will also tell you to be on guard against those who are working to give America an excuse to wash its hands of this region, and will be quick to remind you of Arab demagoguery and brinkmanship. The Arabs are the ones who lost Palestine, and while they

are on the subject they'll open the whole historical record of black marks against Syria and Iran and against everyone who hasn't recognised Israel, and against the Arabs in general, those who are pressuring the Palestinians to sacrifice their national rights exempted.

Now that the Palestinians have made the transition from the chant, "Down with Zionism", to "Say no to internal warfare" two Palestinian delegations headed off to Mecca. They are under great pressure to come to an agreement over means to avert conflict, which both teams presume to be a form of crisis management. However, certain parties see this as a strategic opportunity to dictate the rules of the "game of nations" to Palestinians living under occupation, on the grounds that the agreement must be capable of securing the lifting of the blockade. The only interpretation of this stance is that the blockaders were right and the proof is that the blockaded party has "come to its senses" and changed its position. The inevitable corollary, of course, is that the politics of might works, that "might is right".

This will have important implications for the future of the "political process". Some members of the delegations have already threatened to call for early elections, which under the current state of tension is tantamount to a call for civil war.

Only a united front in standing up to the blockade can halt the blockade. The blockade loses its point if its architects can find no one in Palestine to capitalise on the blockade to build up an opposition powerbase and exploit the wretchedness of the people to foment anger against their elected government.

Since the signing of the National Concord that was based on the Prisoners' Document the scramble to climb aboard the political dictates train has been the cause of each new clash that followed a truce. Under the circumstances of the blockade any agreement produced as the result of arm-twisting, blackmail, threats that the blockade will persist and calls for referendums and elections becomes the basis for yet further demands, triggering another bout of violence. If one's intentions are good there is nothing to be proud of in succeeding in bringing about new elections and quite a bit to be ashamed of in refusing to accept the results of legitimate elections. But establishing one's good intentions entails abandoning the logic of imposing conditions under the banner of the blockade and building upon a common political agenda of the nature of the National Concord. Indeed, this document is very suitable as a platform for a Palestinian government. That Hamas contributed to it and agreed to it represents nothing less than a revolution in its thinking and political outlook. Hamas had never been party to the drafting of the original National Charter, nor its subsequent amendments. The resolutions adopted by successive National Council assemblies, and the substance of the document itself, represents an enormous compromise on Hamas's own charter and, indeed, its electoral platform. That should be sufficient for the purpose of reaching an understanding internally.

If the purpose of some is to placate powers abroad, though, the path to the next round of domestic conflict is well marked: an agreement tailored to lift the blockade, authorisation of the PA president and his advisors to commence negotiations, agreements arrived at secretly with Israel, the announcement of these agreements accompanied by the threat that if Hamas refuses to accept them there will be a call for new elections or for a referendum, and so on. That there are pressures in this direction is clear from the announcement of a forthcoming meeting in Jerusalem between Olmert and Abbas, with Rice attending. If Olmert comes back from these, and subsequent talks with Israel and the US, with proposals that fall short of the minimum Palestinian demands and then threatens to put them to a referendum

the Palestinians will be tearing at each others throats again. If, on the other hand, the Palestinian unification agreement rests on calls for a halt to the blockade and a halt to violations in Jerusalem and other such demands, it will strengthen the Palestinian people's ability to resist the occupation.

To produce and adhere to such an agreement requires that Palestinian leaders alter their way of thinking and acting. They must completely de-bug their operating platforms and eradicate the viruses that have programmed them into the tactics of dictating conditions in order to appease outside powers. If the agreement that resulted from the Mecca meeting is to succeed — and there is no question that it must — they need to learn to work together towards the fulfilment of common Palestinian objectives instead of playing to an audience outside.

In this regard it would be useful, and undoubtedly spare considerable acrimony, if they put the business of who receives what ministerial portfolio into proper perspective. It makes little difference, for example, whether the minister of foreign affairs belongs to Hamas or to Fatah as long as he is clearly subordinate to the president, as the ultimate foreign policy decision-maker. If, on the other hand, the decision-making process is a shared one between the government, the presidency and parliament, then it would be preferable if the foreign minister belonged to neither this faction nor that. Such independence would enhance his credibility and efficacy in implementing decisions that are the result of a balance and it will facilitate his reception abroad.

The same need not apply to the minister of interior. In all democratic countries, the minister of interior or security, as is the case of the minister of foreign affairs, is generally a member of some political party or other. Which party is of little consequence. Accepting the political affiliations of ministers is part and parcel of democratic life in which political parties form the primary identities involved in the political process. What is important is that the security apparatuses themselves are non-partisan. In the post-Oslo period Palestinian security services have been Fatah-based, in constitution, allegiance and lines-of-command. These services must be unified, neutralised politically and rehabilitated so as prevent partisan considerations from affecting internal appointments and operations. In this case there would be nothing wrong with a Hamas minister of interior, especially if such an appointment formed something of a counterweight to a Fatah president in his capacity as supreme commander of security forces. Conversely, it means nothing to have an "independent" as a minister of interior if the security forces themselves are not non-partisan and unless a distinct line has been drawn between security forces whose task it is to safeguard security and security forces as a surrogate army for the suppression of the resistance.

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