

Resistance and National Sovereignty in the Arab World

Forcing Non-Consensual “Peace” in this Era of “International Consensus”

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Proclamations (and delusions) of sovereignty in the Arab world create and necessitate resistance. As a political concept, sovereignty means the independence and power to exercise control over a political and territorial entity free from external interference. But in this age of selective and externally-defined “democracy,” of “fighting terrorism,” of “international consensus,” and of “globalization” and its concomitant neo-liberal privatizing “reforms,” how can any Arab state or an aspiring-to-be-a-state like Palestine be sovereign?

The reality or non-reality, as the case may be, of sovereignty in the Arab world is especially frustrating. Sovereignty in Arabic is generally described as *sulta* or *siyada*. But descriptively, it also extends to kingship (*mulk*), hegemony (*haymana*), control (*saytara*), and rule (*hukm / tahakkum*). (1) In ancient times, the legitimacy underlying sovereignty originated in a (claimed) divine right (2) – and we still see extensions of that today in non-constitutional monarchies in the Arab world, which as a region, has the most monarchical regimes of any other place in the world. Elsewhere however, that concept of sovereignty went out of style hundreds of years ago.

Especially in this post- axis-of-evil Arab world, the reality of sovereignty within a state much more resembles *mulk* and *tahakkum* than it does a more social-contract type of relationship between citizens and their governments. Internally, and legally-speaking, it is assumed (but increasingly contested) that the sovereign has the right to exercise exclusive control over subjects (*de jure*). I use “subjects” intentionally because Arab people are under no delusions whatsoever about being considered citizens. Yet the “exclusive” control has been contravened and more than willingly abdicated by Arab governments repeatedly, for example in cases of prisoner renditions. As for the practical (*de facto*) application of sovereignty within, the Arab state compels its subjects to obey in one of two ways. One is by the intelligence (*mukhabarat*) and internal police and military outfits. Another is by borrowing from Western methods of rhetorical control. Arab governments use terms that may imply democracy or republicanism or claim to stand for the sovereignty of the people, but the reality is distant from those claims. True to Western Orwellian speech, the words have been thoroughly eviscerated and denuded of their meanings. This may have serious implications for the subjects’ / public’s habit to obey.

Externally, the concept of sovereignty usually requires that other states recognize the power of a ruler / government over subjects / citizens as legitimate. In a situation where there is imperialism, the imperialist believes that power is derived from the ability to exert and extend control of the strong state over a weaker party, basically denying the sovereignty of the local individual and / or state for the “good” of the whole. We see parallels of that in the

conduct of US foreign policy in the Middle East, especially concerning the protection of energy resources and of Israel. Rhetoric like “protecting our way of life,” “freedom,” “energy independence,” “security,” and “stability” are all examples of the greater “good” of the world being served by hegemonic interventions. As I will illustrate below, this has led to even more enhanced dependency and is therefore increasing instability, the very opposite of the hegemon’s intent.

Recent Examples of Diminished Sovereignty in Relation to Israel: Egypt and the Occupied Territories

First, an Egyptian court on 4/3/2009 ruled that the Camp David Agreement that was signed between Egypt and Israel in 1978 is not unconstitutional. A lawsuit had been filed by an Egyptian lawyer and member of Parliament who argued that the agreement contradicted Article 58 of the Egyptian constitution regarding state sovereignty over and defense of all national territory. The treaty specified that two-thirds of Sinai be weapons-free and it also changed the legal status of the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of ‘Aqaba from Egyptian territorial waters (which they technically are) to international ones. In rejecting his claim, the court said that on this matter, “sovereignty” was beyond the jurisdiction of the court and that the question of sovereignty was the exclusive domain of the state. (Al-Jazeera, 3/30/09)

Most recently during the Israeli assault on Gaza, despite proclamations of sovereignty over Egyptian territories, the Egyptian government turned a blind eye to Israeli bombing of the border area of Egyptian Rafah and also allowed the stationing of foreign forces in the Sinai to counter any potential Palestinian spillover effect.

Second, two days later, on 4/5/2009 another Egyptian court voided the ruling of a lesser court to halt shipment of Egyptian natural gas by a private investment company to Israel at significantly below-market preferential pricing. (al-Jazeera 4/1/09) A similar non-jurisdiction justification was given. The court refused to circumscribe the actions of the state due to a very narrow definition of the legitimate locus of sovereignty, locating it within the government’s foreign policy making arm and not with the Egyptian people or even with the state writ large. This illustrates the precedence given to external political powers as well as the subservience of Egyptian economic interests to those powers. It also negates the sovereign control of the Egyptian people and even the state (given that the company in question is private) to their own national resources. Even though these examples are more blatant confirmations of state attitudes that were previously disguised, the implications are enormous. Does sovereignty have any meaning left when Egyptians do not own or control what is rightfully theirs? And, what has the state become if not an agent of foreign control, i.e. an extension of foreign sovereignty?

Third, right next door to Egypt in the Occupied Territories, Saeb ‘Ereiqat, head of the PLO negotiations committee, and a member of the Palestinian Authority (*Sulta* – please excuse the term, as it is a bit of a stretch considering that there is a forty plus year Occupation with no end in sight) delivered Quartet diktats. He told Hamas that while they don’t need to explicitly accept Israel’s right to exist, they must join the PLO and must accept all the previous treaties signed by the (unrepresentative and hegemonically appointed) PA with Israel. ‘Ereiqat added that this would allow Palestinians to “co-exist with the international community,” i.e. “consensus.” (al-Jazeera 3/30/09) In other words, he was telling Hamas, which Israel could not topple with its military machine, nor could Dahlan and the PA topple them with their “special forces” and attempted coup, that they must implicitly and surreptitiously accept the three main demands of the Quartet / international community /

consensus. These demands, applicable only to the Palestinians, effectively mean the nullification of any hope of future Palestinian sovereignty, since they must give up resistance, recognize “Israel’s right to exist” thereby denying their own inherent rights to statehood and self-determination and accepting the usurpation of their land and rights; and also must wait for the world and Israel to tell them what their fate will be. (Just like they did pre-1948, and post-1948 when Palestinian “leaders” relied on Arab leaders to save them.) None of the treaties, including the Oslo Agreements, promise Palestinian statehood or sovereignty. So in short, they must accept Occupation, and *maybe* then the consensus community will consent and give it a pretty new name, along with the bribe / “financial and economic development aid” to make it all palatable. (3)

Fourth, and in a similar vein to the natural gas controversy in Egypt described above, the Palestinians too are dealing with their own controversy regarding the development of natural gas deposits for delivery to Israel by a private “investment” company that had granted the concession to British Petroleum (majority stakeholder) via a contract signed with Finance Minister Salam Fayyad of the PA. (4) It is important to note that the private investment company, Consolidated Contractors International Company is not Palestinian. It is based in Athens and is owned by two Lebanese families, Sabbagh and Khoury. Israel (Sharon) tried to contest Palestinian legal ownership of the deposits, and when that failed, Tony Blair intervened on behalf of Israel to scuttle initial plans to deliver the gas to Egypt instead of to Israel. (5) Until now Israel wants to lay claim to the offshore gas fields and integrate them via pipelines that connect to their other energy installations, most notably in Haifa.

Fifth, for their part, the dominant powers show increasing disregard for maintaining even the semblance of “sovereignty” for the subservient states of the Arab world. That is why a blatantly racist and fascist government like the one Netanyahu just announced (al-Jazeera 4/1/09) can be accepted, supported and legitimated internationally. Likud, Labor, and Yisrael Beiteinu are all one big happy family now as the masks have fallen off of the ostensibly (but deceptively) more “moderate” and “pro-peace” parties. They are now holding hands with a party whose leader wants to expel Israeli Palestinian “Arabs” and also has a (leaked) secret agreement with Likud to increase the settlements in Occupied East Jerusalem. I mean, really, how much more moderate can moderate get?

Looking at the specifics (if one can call the extremely vague Israeli politico-diplomatic discourse as such) of Netanyahu’s government’s “peace proposal” to the Palestinians, it quickly becomes apparent that Palestinian “sovereignty” is not even a remote possibility in this proposed “peace.” Netanyahu did not speak about a Palestinian state (two-state solution formula), but he is offering some economic support and limited self-rule if and when the PA is able to combat “Islamic terrorism” and “extremism” (as if Israel and the US were successful in that department) and accept Israel’s “right to exist.” Absent is a concomitant obligation on Israel. Not only is it the perpetrator of so much terrorism in the Arab world, but it is also a categorical (although that is often veiled in diplomatic sweet-talk) rejectionist of Palestinian sovereign statehood. And the only reason Netanyahu’s government is insisting that Palestinians must adhere to signed international treaties (thank you PA), is because, all these “negotiated agreements” are hegemonic diktats. Ironically, but not surprisingly, Israel, the PA (all protestations to the contrary notwithstanding) and the “moderate” Arab states are all now members of the “international consensus” and speak the same threatening language against the targets of that consensus, for example Hamas and, when convenient, Iran.

The “Consensus” Eviscerates “Sovereignty” and “Peace”

For their part, the “consensus” dominant powers continue to try to preserve and extend their means of control over the Middle East in various ways. Ideologically (and propagandistically), the terminology and framing of issues is repeated *ad nauseum*: for example, “international consensus / legitimacy,” “economic reforms / growth,” and “globalization”. Politically and diplomatically, organizations and proposals are touted as having the best interests of the populations in mind: for example, the “Quartet,” the Saudi-sponsored ever-available “2002 Arab Peace Proposal,” and the Egyptian midwived Palestinian “reconciliation talks.” And, economically, the granting or withholding of resources is quite powerful and effective: for instance, the multi-string and contingent “aid” for “reconstructing” Gaza or for paying the salaries of the functionaries and “security forces” of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

But the public knows now more than ever that sovereignty is denuded of any meaning. Palestinians know and fear (and increasingly resist) that their aspirations of liberation, statehood, rights, economic growth and democracy are threatened by this new world of international “consensus” and “legitimacy.” For what does it mean to have a national economically sovereign strategy when the “Authority” / government economy is funded externally, and circumscribed and strangled, forced to submit to conditions from donors, and forced to submit to “technocratic” (appointed), “transparent” and “independent” oversight committees and institutions? What does it mean to have sovereign territorial and political control when fair elections are internationally denounced and subverted (Hamas, 2006) and when the “Authority” appropriates the right to speak for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories – and completely ignores the millions in the Palestinian diaspora (*al-shataat*) and “negotiates” treaties that are only tools of hegemonic control? All of these are increasingly exposed as false to the Palestinians and to the general Arab public.

But the good news is that there is potential in this reality and in this knowledge. For Arab governments’ “sovereign” ineptitude functions counter-intuitively when it induces poverty, subservience and humiliation. It feeds public resentment at their own governments as well as hegemonic powers and their policies in the region. It feeds Resistance.

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(1) *Sulta* originated during the Ottoman Empire to describe the ruler of a Muslim country. *Mulk* has absolutist connotations. It is one of the names of Allah meaning king (*malek*). And during the Ottoman Empire, it was a form of land ownership which was outright and on which no tax was paid.

(2) Among the earlier transformations was the social contract variation first introduced by Hobbes where subjects contracted with the ruler giving obeisance in exchange for protection from a lawless world. Later, the French Revolution evolved the concept of sovereignty further so that it derived from the people and their nation and not from the ruler. Since then, other concepts of sovereignty include, anarchy, libertarianism, democracy / popular sovereignty, among others.

(3) This is similar to a previous peace agreement called Camp David, where economic growth and plenty were the promised outcomes of “peace” with Israel. Sadat’s economic

Opening policies *Infitah* combined with billions in US aid were supposed to create prosperity *rakhaa'* for Egypt. A quick look at that country's economic performance since then, especially per capita national income and the GINI (measure of inequality) index, should disabuse anyone of the illusion. Of course, most people living in Egypt don't need the World Bank or the IMF to tell them that their conditions have deteriorated.

(4) <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article9245.shtml>

(5) <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=11680>

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