

The Palestinian National Project: No Rallying Plan In Sight...Yet

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As I watched the proceedings in Ramallah of Masarat's landmark [ninth annual conference](#) from my home in the US while also being bombarded on social media by the unfolding shameful travesty of the Israeli-Emirati [detente](#), my need for comfort was desperate in its urgency.

For those participating in the sixteen conference sessions from various locations, especially among the young, the need to vent naked pain and strongly held beliefs was palpable.

Ideas for change, however, remained mired in a babel of voices. Because of that, there was ultimately no comfort to be had from this conference — no comfort in [the old order](#) and no comfort in the opaque promise of the new.

No comfort but ultimately hope from a conference titled "Palestine after Trump's vision: What's to be done?"

"The achievement of Masarat's ninth annual conference is that it has signaled, loudly and clearly, that change in Palestine is inevitable and that it is Palestinians themselves who will shape it."

We already knew coming to the conference that the old is useless. What this conference made clear is that, if the new is to rise up at all, it has to be nothing short of a tidal wave that sweeps away disagreements and divisions, and plants in its wake a unified vision that rallies all Palestinians around it.

That's a tall order for a conference; it is a radical order for a revolution.

The conference was meant to explore how "to change reality by acknowledging it and dealing with it without submission and surrender, extremism or adventurousness... .. We ask 'what is to be done?' because the old has collapsed and appears incapable of renewal, change or reform, and the new has yet to be born, and will be born from the womb of the old by preserving its achievements and strengths, and bypassing mistakes, sins, weaknesses and shortcomings."

But as Hani Al Masri, Director General of Masarat, continues in his [summing up](#), what emerged from this conference is far from a rallying cry. He minces no words in pointing out the degree and depth of disagreement:

"The most prominent characteristic of the opinions and observations that were presented in the conference was their diversity, and indeed wide disagreement, for everyone sings to their own drummer without the aid of a crystallizing single vision. There is an absence of a common denominator or consensus or a decisive central current that enjoys the support of a clear majority. There were many self-justifying, defensive and evangelizing interventions that lay blame on opponents without presenting an effective, initiative and integrated alternative."

"To me, this conference seems like the first vote of a sequestered jury in a complicated criminal case who still need many days of deliberation before reaching a unanimous vote."

Hani Al Masri describes the plethora of beliefs and opinions as follows (my translation from [*Why is the question of 'what to do' still on the table?*](#)):

The conference reflected disagreements about almost everything. There were disputes over what we want, how to achieve it, and why we have reached the catastrophic situation in which we live. Is the latter the result of external or internal factors, or both?

Disagreement arose over the plan, the goals and the required action, how to deal with leaders, with existing forces with the tools at our disposal; there was dispute over whether to have a clean break from the existing political system as something that must necessarily be demolished or simply to bring down the leadership. There are those who justify and defend each proposition and those who criticize both deeply and call for change, even though the seeds of change have not matured yet despite the intensified need for them. This could mean that the collapse of the old order without an alternative will create a vacuum and ensuing chaos that the occupation is able to take advantage of, especially in light of its desire to alter the Palestinian Authority for the fourth time in sync with the new reality created by racist settler colonialism, which has striven for decades to create a fait accompli and facts on the ground that make the Israeli plan the only solution on the table, and the only game in town.

In this context, differences arose among the advocates of the one state and the so-called "two-state solution." There is more than one school among those who advocate for the liberation of Palestine and the establishment of a single democratic state on the ruins of the settler colonial project: a bi-national state, a state for all its citizens, a state with multiple regimes, a racist Jewish state within which to struggle for equal rights, or a state based on the historical reconciliation between the Zionist movement and the Palestinian national movement ... etc. Needless to say, neither of these two propositions is within reach, and there are different approaches to achieving each of them.

There are those who are calling for adherence to the negotiated settlements, while moving away from US sponsorship and expanding the framework of the Quartet.

And there are those who are calling for an end to the attempts to revive the negotiated settlement that Israel killed long ago and now wants to bury in the annexation plan it developed and is waiting for the appropriate time to implement.

There are those who do not see a contradiction [in working toward several goals at different stages or simultaneously] — ending the occupation and creating a state within the borders of 67, achieving individual and national equality for the Palestinians of the interior [citizens of Israel], the right of

return, and at the same time struggling to establish a single democratic state on the ruins of the settler-colonial apartheid project. This group recognizes the limits of what can be achieved at this stage. At the same time, they refuse to abandon Palestinian national and strategic goals and the historical context of the struggle.

Disagreements [among activists] about how to organize also arose over questions about whether the Palestinian Authority could be reformed and rebuilt, or whether it has committed suicide in Oslo and since then, and therefore a new and creative way must be found to deal with the current reality [of Israeli expansionism]. There were also disagreements about what to do with the existing power structure [the Palestinian Authority], whether it is necessary to preserve it or whether it has to collapse –i.e., be dissolved, handing its keys over to the occupation, whether to preserve it despite the occupation’s plan to destroy it, or transform it into a tool of the national program within the Palestinian Liberation Organization after rebuilding the latter, or transform the existing power structure into a state.

Debate and disagreement arose again about the question of holding elections; should they be both presidential and legislative or only legislative? Or elections for the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian Liberation Organization? Or just for the National Council? And is this to be done electronically or in person? Are elections the magic wand that is able to resolve the Palestinian predicament, or are elections a means rather than a goal, one of the general tools of democracy within a comprehensive Palestinian resolution. Additionally, speakers disagreed on the form of resistance required [for liberation] — whether it ought to be armed or peaceful popular protest, or include all forms of struggle?

Hani Al Masri has long been clear on what needs to be done — to revive and redefine (resuscitate) the Palestinian national project that’s been hollowed out by the Oslo agreement [the hoped-for state] dwarfed into bantustans, leaving us with divided dysfunctional powers under occupation.

“The most that can be achieved in the current situation is to keep the Palestinian cause alive,” Masri concludes, “and to make it possible for the Palestinian people to continue to exist in their homeland within a general and organized national framework that includes wider representative participation by all political blocs, independents, youth, women and Palestinians in exile, as well as by new developing forces and groups, especially since the old order has collapsed and seems incapable of renewal, change or reform, and the new has not yet been born, and it will be born from the womb of the old by preserving its achievements and strengths, and bypassing mistakes, sins, weaknesses and shortcomings.”

How and in which direction to go remains an open question, but the great achievement of Masarat’s ninth annual conference is that it has signaled, loudly and clearly, that change in Palestine is inevitable and that it is Palestinians themselves who will shape it.

To me, this conference seems like the first vote of a sequestered jury in a complicated criminal case who still need many days of deliberation before reaching a unanimous vote.

Featured image: Hani Al Masri, the highly respected Director General of [Masarat](#) — The Palestinian Center for Policy Research & Strategic Studies, during its ninth annual [conference](#) titled “Palestine after Trump’s vision: What’s to be done?”

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