

Who will save Palestine?

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These days the Hamas acting government and Fatah “emergency government” are sapping the interest from any news story that might report on Israel’s criminal deeds inside Gaza and the West Bank. Both these Palestinian enclaves are still under Israel’s military occupation – one shunned and isolated by political intrigue and the other apparently working at cooperating with the occupier, and there’s the tragedy of it all. Nothing that has happened in the last fortnight has stopped Israel in its tracks. Life for the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories is just as bitter and just as terrifying as it ever was only with a new dimension – no one knows whom to believe or if there is a viable Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) left to champion their struggle against Israel’s unrelenting land theft, apartheid practices and violent human rights abuses.

Israel swaggers on the world stage as if it has had no hand in the whole miserable Palestinian drama. This arch enemy – never given to negotiating a genuine peace – is now being sought out as a negotiating partner when it has never accepted any Palestinian leader on an equal footing, much less given an inch. Its highly vaunted disengagement from Gaza did not give the Palestinians their freedom: instead, they found themselves in a vice-like grip from outside. In the West Bank, Israel has continued its settlement expansion uninterrupted, and for all the talks, Palestinians have only ever seen their land and property rights taken away and their freedom further curtailed. For the Palestinians to forget that in the current climate, would truly spell the end of the final status issues for which so many have given their lives and so many others have waited decades to see justly resolved. If such a travesty of justice were to occur, peace would be forever elusive.

It would be nice to think that Israel is simply weary of occupying 4 million people after 40 years, but Israel’s economy is booming and there is a chilling reason for the rapid growth in what Israel calls the homeland security sector. Writing in the Guardian (16/6), Naomi Klein says that “Israel has learned to turn endless war into a brand asset, pitching its uprooting, occupation and containment of the Palestinian people as a half-century head start in the ‘global war on terror’.” How that will marry with the new political developments that should see Israel ease the punishing restrictions in the West Bank and opening the way for a Palestinian state, is anyone’s guess. Chaos in the occupied territories has been extremely lucrative for Israel, enabling it to experiment with ever-more rigorous methods of population control using hi-tech surveillance systems. And a majority in Israel are not in the least perturbed by the mess of humanity squirming under Israel’s formidable “security” matrix, as long as the demographic threat is controlled, even eliminated.

If we take just the past week when Israel’s Prime Minister Olmert and the Palestinian President Abbas met with other leaders in Sharm el-Sheikh to discuss the way forward for Palestinians, what emerged was the usual proviso – any concessions made by Israel would depend on Abbas’ progress in bringing an end to violence. This completely ignores the

ongoing violence of Israel's occupation and, in effect, requires the Palestinians to submit to that occupation before they will get any concessions from Israel. A cursory glance at the realities on the ground in the occupied territories would show just why Abbas would find that as difficult to achieve as his predecessor Arafat. Even as these leaders spoke and smiled for the world's cameras, Israeli army tanks lumbered into the Gaza strip backed by Apache helicopters and F16 fighter planes while around 80 Israeli army jeeps rolled into Nablus city in the northern West Bank. In Gaza, 14 Palestinians were killed and many more were injured; in Nablus some 30 Palestinians were arrested after Israeli soldiers began randomly shooting and blowing open the front doors of homes as they went from house to house in search of militants.

This is Israeli violence which apparently does not need to be reined in – a violence the Palestinians are living with daily. People are constantly being arrested in large numbers: Israeli jails are overflowing with more than 11,000 Palestinian prisoners, amongst them women and children. People can be held for up to 18 days without charge and with no way of telling their families; they have no recourse to a fair trial and most are tortured. It makes a mockery of the 250 prisoners from the Fatah party whom Olmert has offered as a goodwill gesture to Abbas' "emergency government". Abbas may well find himself in the same position as Arafat when he was given the role of policing his own people after Oslo. Then, Arafat's police force was constantly subjected to arrests and attacks from the Israeli military in what soon became clear was a deliberate attempt by Israel to dismantle Arafat's administration. Emasculated, Arafat was unable to stop Palestinian armed resistance to the occupation and Israel took matters into its own hands and punished the Palestinians. Last week, Israel did not even bother to wait for Abbas to stabilise the situation in the West Bank. Its military decided to enforce "order" arbitrarily by raiding homes and arresting those it suspected of armed resistance. As long as the Palestinians remain under Israel's belligerent occupation, Abbas or anyone else, will find it very difficult to build good governance as every attempt is sure to be undermined by Israel.

If Abbas needs a more recent reminder of just how impossible it is to normalise the governance of his people under Israel's conditions, he need look no further than the ceasefire he and former Israeli Prime Minister Sharon announced in 2005 to kick start US President Bush's "Road Map" negotiations and the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state. Abbas was required to end violence and suppress all armed resistance to Israel; Sharon agreed to end "operations". Well, Israel's belligerence did not stop then and it continued to take Palestinian land. That week, the Israeli government announced the construction of 400 housing units in a new illegal Jewish settlement near Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem just after the Israeli High Court had decided to allow building to continue on the Apartheid Wall, contrary to the opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Weeks later, Israel announced another 3,500 housing units in the largest illegal settlement of Ma'ale Adumim, effectively cutting Jerusalem off from the West Bank. And to put that in perspective, every one of those housing units and every addition to the Wall, has taken land away from the Palestinians and has made more Palestinians homeless. They have had to watch their homes being demolished, crops and trees uprooted, land razed and not a single penny paid in compensation.

Interestingly, Hamas did agree to a ceasefire or hudna which they held for 18 months, and other militant groups also complied, but it made no difference. Israel refused to enter into this ceasefire with Hamas and continued to assassinate its leaders even though Hamas held resolutely to the ceasefire. It was Hamas that held out the olive branch and Israel that

rejected it. None of this should give any Palestinian party confidence in Israel's current promises or offerings. Over and over again, Israel has demonstrated a complete disdain for negotiating peace with the Palestinians.

The danger in cooperating with Israel when it is continuing to violate international law and ignore the ICJ advisory opinion is that it actually "normalises" Israel's colonial efforts and may also prejudice any final status negotiations. Israel has been repeatedly told by the UN and the US to freeze all settlement activity, but it has not done so and has not been pressed to do so. Neither is Israel admonished nor held to account. The attempts to treat the Wall as a humanitarian rather than a political issue by the UN, also takes the pressure off Israel. There has been little talk of bringing the Wall down as advised by the ICJ, but plenty of talk about its path; without anyone realising it, the Wall becomes "normalised". Every official discourse has edged away from insisting that the Wall violates international law: it has become expedient to ignore the rule of law, especially amongst those who should be upholding it. Without checks and balances in place and adhered to by everyone, Israel will always do what it wants and it is very evident from Israel's unresponsive past that waiting for Israel's cooperation alone will not be enough gain its compliance.

The situation is so dire now that Palestinians and their supporters are finding other ways of forcing Israel's compliance. Already, there is a growing move towards boycotts and sanctions which is being taken up globally, despite nasty campaigns to intimidate those prepared to take such non-violent action. This form of resistance is very powerful because it is really the only effective way of bringing Israel's economic boom to a halt, particularly in the area of homeland security which impacts so drastically on the Palestinians under occupation. That is not in anyway to minimise the courageous non-violent resistance against the Apartheid Wall and other Israeli violations in communities affected all over the West Bank. The Palestinians' on-the-ground experience of the Wall's insidious effects on their personal lives and society has mobilised them as neither the Palestinian Authority nor the PLO has been able to do. They are refusing to accept any "normalisation" of the Wall's presence, not just its path. The ICJ opinion is very clear on that - the wall must be dismantled. Their non-violent, but determined protests challenge its legitimacy with barely a mention in the Western media, if at all. In response, Israel uses tear gas, rubber bullets, beatings and arrests. This is what ought to be making the headlines, not whether Abbas or Hamas are fit partners for "peace".

The divisions that have caused so much bitterness internally threaten the national liberation framework. It is not helpful for Abbas to demand that the Hamas movement be isolated, especially since Hamas is calling for the resumption of the unity government. And, it does not look good that Israel's interference in Palestinian affairs is helping Abbas. Israeli Shin Bet interrogators have offered to release imprisoned Palestinian members of parliament and government officials, mostly from the Hamas party, only if they resign from their posts. They have refused. According to Palestinian Basic Law, it is the Legislative Council which must approve any new Cabinet or Prime Minister (Article 78) and with most of the members of parliament in Israeli prisons, no quorum can be formed to "legitimise" Abbas' "emergency government".

It would be far better for Abbas to urge both the Fatah and Hamas parties to come together in a show of solidarity and give the people some sense of resisting Israel's arrogant demands. Risking the disintegration of the Palestinian national agenda for a few crumbs will never satisfy the Palestinians: certainly, there is no reason to believe that cooperating with Israel will bring the final status issues any closer to the negotiating table. Olmert has

already withdrawn his “peace” offer to Abbas that would have removed some roadblocks in the West Bank.

Any party that assumes the mantle of government must encourage unity and must recognise the human potential in every Palestinian regardless of religious or political affiliation. For it is in the people that Palestine has its strongest saviour. Familial and community loyalty, their millennia-long history, their deep attachment to the land and their capacity to endure have made the Palestinians unbelievably resilient. Real leadership must build on that loyalty, not divide it. It means working with the people on a campaign of organised non-violent civil disobedience against Israel’s inhuman abuses rather than the hopeless rounds of negotiations that have never delivered a single promise to the Palestinian people and have only further entrenched their occupation and tightened Israel’s control.

Non-violent civil disobedience inside Palestine will allow Palestinians in the Diaspora and their supporters to increase their own protests even more effectively and inspire others to become involved. We have already seen how horrified people were when they saw the brutality of Israel’s actions in its war on Lebanon. Crying “war on terror”, “victim”, “Israel’s security” and “Israel’s right to exist” too many times is already beginning to rebound and people are asking what is the other side of the story. In many places now and through different media, people are beginning to listen to the Palestinian narrative, especially as people are becoming more and more sceptical about the honesty and motives of today’s leaders.

One does not have to look far for inspiration to save Palestine. There are Palestinians in Beit Hanina, Beit Surik, Biddu, Dahya, Ram, Saffa, Beil’in, Hebron, Budrus – and the list goes on – who protest non-violently and creatively in organised groups against the Wall, against Israel’s land theft and destruction, against the uprooting of trees, and against home demolitions. These grassroots movements should be emulated at every level of society until those who run the government have no choice but to listen and change. The smallest committed group can have a profound effect in influencing others and it is happening around the world. Churches have begun to divest from Israel; trade unions and universities have begun boycotts; doctors, members of parliament, writers and actors have signed petitions; retired ambassadors, statesmen and even a former US president are speaking out; and there are also Israelis who refuse to accept their government’s policies and practices and are saying “not in our name”.

There is more than the quivering of a movement. The awakening does not always happen immediately, but eventually the “butterfly effect” – that notion that the flapping of a butterfly’s wings will have a far-reaching ripple effect on events that seem impossibly removed in time and space – takes hold. It already has. We can feel it here in distant Australia. One can only hope that this will give succour to the Palestinians struggling for liberation. If the leaders cannot do it, then the people themselves and everyone who believes in justice and peace the world over may yet indeed find a way to save Palestine – and not before time.

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