

Engaging Hamas: Will History Repeat Itself?

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The political outcomes of the Gaza war are yet to be entirely decided with any degree of certainty. However, the obvious political repositioning which was reported as soon as Israel declared its unilateral ceasefire promised that Israel's deadly bombs would shape a new political reality in the region.

In the aftermath, Hamas can confidently claim that its once indisputably 'radical' political position is no longer viewed as too extreme. "Hamas" is no longer menacing a word, even amongst Western public, and tireless Israeli attempts to correlate Hamas and Islamic Jihadists's agendas no longer suffice.

The Israel war against Gaza has indeed proven that Hamas cannot be obliterated by bombs and decimated by missiles. This is the same conclusion that the US and other countries reached in regards to the PLO in the mid 1970's. Of course, that realization didn't prevent Israel from trying on many occasions to destroy the PLO, in Jordan (throughout the late 1960's), getting involved in the Lebanese civil war (1976), and then occupying south Lebanon (1978), and then the entire country (1982). Even upon the departure of PLO factions from Lebanon, Israel followed its leadership to Tunisia and other countries, assassinating the least accommodating members, thus setting the stage for political 'dialogue' with the 'more acceptable peace partners'.

The history of the Arab-Israeli conflict has taught us that political 'engagement' often follows wars; the military outcome of these wars often determines the course of political action that ensues afterward. For example, a war, like that of 1967 (the astounding defeat of the Arabs), strengthened the notion that a military solution is the primary option to achieve 'peace' and 'security.' Of course, this logic is erroneous when it is applied to popular struggles. Conventional armies can be isolated and defeated. Popular struggles cannot, and attempts to do so often yield unintended and contradictory results. Israel's victory (thanks in part to US and European military, financial and logistical support) drove Israel into the abyss of complete arrogance. Arabs responded in kind in 1973, and were close to a decisive victory when the US, once again came to the rescue, providing Israel with the largest transport of arms recorded since WWII.

Still, the 1973 war created new realities that even Israel could not deny.

Then, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat earned prestige (as a statesman) following the war, as US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (Israel's most dedicated friend of all time) conditioned any American engagement of Egypt on the latter's departure from the Soviet's camp. To win American acceptance, Sadat's language and perception on the conflict began to shift, while a 'peace process' fragmented the conflict, from its previous totality, into a

localized version, which eventually saw the exit of Egypt from the Arab-Israeli conflict altogether.

The PLO, dominated by its largest faction, Fatah, found itself in a precarious position. Its political stocks were rising, true, but its liberation rhetoric was expected to shift in favor of a more 'pragmatic' and 'moderate' approach. Kissinger was keen on ensuring that the 'maximalist' Arab agenda, including that of the PLO would be transferred into a minimalist one. That was the price of recognition and political legitimacy. Not only Sadat, but the PLO, like Hamas today, was asked to moderate its expectations, but the real buzzword then was accepting UN resolution 242. The price of legitimacy of the Palestinian struggle remains unchanged, but the new era yielded new demands and conditions. Neither then, nor today, was Israel ever asked to reciprocate.

The more the PLO of the 1970's met conditions, the more Yasser Arafat rose to prominence. In June 1974, Fatah-led PLO revised and approved a political program that adopted a 'phased' political strategy which agreed to establishing a Palestinian state "over every part of Palestinian territory that is liberated," as opposed to Fatah's own previous commitment to a "democratic state on all (of) Palestine ." The phased strategy split the somewhat unified PLO between 'moderate' and 'rejectionist' fronts, but allowed for political gains, such as the Arab designation of the PLO, in Rabat as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people". More, Arafat was invited to speak at the UN General Assembly, where the PLO received the status of an "observer". In his speech on November 13, 1974 , Arafat uttered his most famous statement: "Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom-fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand."

Let historians contend on whether Arafat was tricked by a peace ploy, which saw the softening of the PLO's position, while the Israeli position continued to harden unchecked. The fact is, however, the seeds of Palestinian division were planted during these years and Palestinians were compartmentalized - between moderates, extremists, maximalists, minimalists, pragmatists, rejectionists and so on. However, the political gains of the PLO of those years were made irrelevant, and were later used exclusively for personal gains, starting in 1974, passing through Oslo , the subsequent 'peace process', and finally reaching today's dead-end.

World Media are now reporting that European countries are in direct contact with Hamas leaders, although officials are insisting that this contact is independent and not linked to larger government initiatives. More, several US congressmen visited Gaza , again with similar disclaimers. US Senator John Kerry, who led the US delegation, claimed that the US position regarding Hamas has not changed, and repeated the conditions that Hamas must meet before any engagement is possible.

One has to be wary of the history that rendered the once influential PLO, the trivial organization that it is today. History often repeats itself, true, but it doesn't have to if one remembers such historical lessons. Peace is not a 'process' - at least not in the Kissinger sense - and true dialogue and positive engagement require no stipulations and conditions. Hamas is now in the same precarious position that the PLO was in earlier years. Its future decisions shall influence the coming stage of this conflict, thus the fate of the Palestinian people in inconceivable ways.

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