

Gaza : A New Middle East Indeed

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As Israel unleashed its military fury against Lebanon for several weeks in July-August 2006, it had one major objective: to permanently 'extract' Hezbollah from the South as a fighting force, and to undermine it as a rising political movement, capable of disrupting, if not overshadowing the 'friendly' and 'moderate' political regime in Beirut.

As Israeli bombs fell, and with them hundreds of Lebanese civilians, and much of the country's infrastructure, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sprung into action. She too had one major objective: to delay a ceasefire, which the rest of the international community, save the US and Britain, desperately demanded. Rice, who is merely, but faithfully reiterating the Bush Administration's policy, hoped that the Israeli bombs would succeed in achieving what her government's grand policies failed to achieve, namely a New Middle East.

In a friendly meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Jerusalem, on July 25, 2006, Rice eagerly, although rashly wished to interpret to equally eager journalists the political promise that lies within the Israeli onslaught. "As we deal with the current circumstances, we need always to be cognizant of and looking to what kind of Middle East we are trying to build. It is time for a new Middle East," she said. Olmert nodded.

Neither Rice, nor Bush, nor Olmert were indeed interested in shifting the status quo in the Middle East in anyway that might jeopardize Israel's regional standing, as a powerful ally with astounding military outreach. Indeed, there was hardly anything new in the New Middle East. Like the old one, the New Middle East was also meant to be achieved from behind the barrel of a gun. But why the element of 'newness'?

It was very clear to both Israel and the United States that their Middle East policies were failing, and miserably so; but both governments were still insistent that the problem is not in the use of force, but rather, not using enough of it. It's, perhaps, the kind of arrogance that accompanies power. But arrogance can also be the powerful downfall.

As world patience began running out, especially following the second Qana Massacre of July 2006, Rice still insisted on beautifying the horror in Lebanon. The Israeli war against Lebanon, despite the tremendous hurt it caused was, according to Rice, the "birth pangs of a new Middle East".

And a New Middle East it was, although not the one that Rice and Olmert reflectively envisioned in Jerusalem; a different one, which changed the political landscape in Lebanon in favor of Hezbollah, and denied Israel any sense of victory.

In fact, the new 'New Middle East' did more than that. It once more renewed a long

abandoned idea in the minds of many Arabs, especially Palestinians, that resistance was not futile after all.

Hezbollah's triumph, and its ability to thwart various attempts at igniting a civil war in Lebanon, accompanied by the group's leader, Hasan Nasrallah's fiery speeches began penetrating the Arab psyche, defeated and accustomed to defeat. Nasrallah became the new Jamal Abdul Nasser, and like Abdul Nasser of Egypt, he too polarized Arabs: peoples vs. regimes.

New terminology also sprung. Words that were not uttered, at least not in any realistic context, in decades, began encroaching into Arab vocabulary: 'victory', 'resistance', 'Arab nation' with 'one fate', 'one future', and so on. The language and the culture it espoused proved immensely threatening to the US camp, which too enjoyed its own language and designations: 'friendly', 'moderate', etc.

Rice's New Middle East has failed. It has failed because the representatives of the old Middle East prevailed: Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, but most importantly the people through the region, which began once again, constructing a sense of collective identity. The new 'axis of evil', somehow managed to withstand immense pressures, and in the case of Hezbollah and Hamas in Gaza, numerous bombs. Israel's pressure on the US to go after Iran failed for various reasons. Israel's own Middle East project remains on hold, jeopardized by Iran's rising influence in the region, Hezbollah's proven formidability in the north, and Hamas' irritating ability to hold onto power, and its insistence to govern by its democratic mandate, even if in besieged Gaza.

As both Olmert and Bush were readying to hand over the torch to their successors, and as folders of the New Middle East project were about to be tossed into the recycle bin, Israel opted for one last chance at proving the viability of its military prowess, for force is the only language that Israel is capable of thoroughly communicating, and is under the odd impression that it's also the only language that its enemies understand. Olmert, once again unleashed his country's military fury, this time against Gaza. The Strip was supposedly an easy target, for the tiny stretch of land, blocked from all directions, lacks everything. It is home to a largely young population, the majority of whom are malnourished as a result of the Israeli siege.

Israel hoped that Gaza would grant it a victory, any victory, even if a small token of triumph. Starting December 27 and for many days, Israel pulverized entire neighborhoods, killed and wounded thousands, mostly civilians, mostly children and women. Another New Middle East was in the making with its own "birth pangs." Entire families perished; children died in droves, in their homes, in schools; a panicking population ran in circles, hopelessly trying to flee the death machines that hovered everywhere, but there was no escape. Borders remained sealed as the region's 'moderates' watched the demise of the 'extremists.' Rice, again, grinned, brazenly justifying Israel's new war. The world watched in horror as the drama unfolded. But Gaza fought back, withstood, resisted, and the language once again was altered. Arabs are now speaking of 'victory', hailing the 'resistance', singing the praise of the Palestinians in Gaza.

Gaza's resistance is nothing short of a 'miracle', said Aljazeera's military expert. Millions of Arabs around the world agree. The New Middle East defined in Lebanon in July-August 2006, was confirmed in Palestine in December-January 2008-2009. A new language with new terminology and a new culture is springing up from the ashes and the rubble of Gaza. Arabs

are eager to define themselves and shed years of defeat and defeatism. A New Middle East, indeed.

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