

Mixed Priorities: Why Palestinian Unity is Not an Option

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Just days after the Hamas-Fatah clash last June in Gaza, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas looked firm and composed as he shook hands with members of his new emergency government. He made sure his move appeared as legitimate as possible, issuing decrees that outlawed the armed militias of Hamas, and also suspended consequential clauses in the Palestinian Basic Law, which had thus far served as a constitution.

The Basic Law stipulates that the Palestinian parliament must approve of any government for it to be constitutional. Abbas simply decreed that such a clause was no longer valid, effectively robbing Palestinians of one of their greatest collective achievements — democracy.

This system, when truly representative, is indeed precious and meaningful. Considering the impossible circumstances under which Palestinian democracy in particular was spawned and nurtured — military occupation, international pressure, extreme poverty — it was also deeply historic. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that followed the US occupation in Iraq, Arabs showed themselves as ultimately capable of carrying out democratic process.

Unfortunately, the achievement of democracy cannot guarantee its preservation.

Almost immediately after Hamas' sizable election victory in January 2006, both local and international forces scrambled to suffocate and reverse the outcome of this vote. Conceited intellectuals wrote about the incompatibility of Islam and democracy, politicians decried Hamas' victory as signalling the encroachment of militarism and extremism, and world leaders clambered to affiliate themselves with the 'legitimate' Abbas, as opposed to the 'illegitimate' Hamas. Indeed, it was a mockery.

For Israel, the clash between Abbas' Fatah and Islamic Hamas was a golden opportunity, one that is comparable to the benefits gleaned from another opportune moment, the terrorist attacks of September 11. The latter was recently — and not for the first time — described by Israeli Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu as good for Israel (Haaretz, April 16).

The Palestinian fight was also good for Israel; no longer would the nuisance of Palestinian democracy compete with Israel's self-ascribed "only democracy in the Middle East." More, Palestinians were once again depicted as the unruly mob, incapable of producing responsible peacemakers and creating an environment of 'security', which the state of Israel so often claims to covet.

As for Abbas and his ministers, they knew too well that the newfound American-Israeli

fondness for them was conditional. After all they are the same people, holding the same position and playing the same roles that they have always played. They are the ministers, aides, friends and officials of late Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, who were, like their president, repeatedly shunned. They also understood well their new appeal in representing the antithesis to Hamas. Rather than rejecting the role of the stooges, Abbas' cabinet ministers played along.

Suddenly the conflict that was hitherto seen as one between Israel and the Palestinians became one between Abbas and his supporters (Israel and the US) on one hand, and Hamas alone on the other. The problem as reported in mainstream media ceased being about settlements, occupation, and violations of international law, but rather about the anti-democratic 'forces of darkness' in Gaza as opposed to the forces of peace and civilization in Ramallah and Tel Aviv. To re-enforce these highly deceptive images with 'action', Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert initiated their quest for illusive peace. This started in Annapolis and was followed by regular, although equally futile 'rounds' of talks in Israel. Few expected such meets to yield any meaningful outcomes; they were clearly intended only to further isolate Hamas and underscore the Abbas-Israeli alliance.

In order for the show to go on, Hamas and Fatah will not be allowed to reconcile, at least not until Israel and the US decide to change tactics. Of course this doesn't mean that there is no basis for reconciliation. Palestinian factionalism equals capitulation in the face of a harsh, emboldened enemy. Recently we have seen the 2005 Cairo Agreement, the 2007 Mecca Agreement and the March 2008 Yemen Agreement. But to win the approval of Israel in the West Bank — and to avoid the tragic fate of Gaza — Abbas is not interested in the points of agreement, but rather in the points of discord. Aljazeera reported that Azzam al-Ahmad, the Fatah member who signed the Hamas-Fatah memorandum in March, was chastised openly for keeping Abbas "in the dark", regarding the nature of the agreement. Al-Ahmad insisted that Abbas knew exactly what the agreement stipulated. It seems that a document that merely highlights a course of action towards full reconciliation between the two parties was too much for Israel to accept. Not even the blood of over 120 Palestinians in Gaza, who were killed in the matter of six days in early March, seemed a strong enough motive to override Israel's threats of Palestinian unity signalling the end of the futile 'peace process'.

And, of course, there is the money trail. Just days before the Yemen fiasco, the US had agreed to transfer \$150 million in support to the Palestinian Authority as "part of past pledges to boost President Mahmoud Abbas' government." Boost against whom? Surely not Israel.

Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad reportedly said it was "the largest sum of assistance of any kind to be transferred to the Palestinian Authority by any donor in one tranche since the Palestinian Authority's inception (in 1994)." Heart-rending indeed, Mr Fayyad, but one must wonder how much of the money will go to feed the starving in Gaza, or rehabilitate the refugee camps of the West Bank?

While such noble efforts by the UN's John Dugard, former US President Jimmy Carter and Bishop Desmond Tutu have brought much needed attention to the plight of Palestinians and Gazans in particular, PA officials are too busy attending donor's conferences and issuing empty statements which few even bother to read. They act as if they are a neutral party caught in the middle of religious fanatics and Israel. Their fight no longer seems even remotely related to Palestine or its people. These are hardly the qualities of any liberation movement or leadership anywhere, in any period of history, recent or otherwise. Neither

Abbas nor Fayyad are likely to be the exception.

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