

Palestine: Democracy Defeated

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Global Research, June 22, 2007

22 June 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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All my forewarnings have suddenly been actualised, all at once: Gaza has descended into total and utter chaos; Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has capitulated to Israel and to the United States without a shred of reservation; and the Palestinian democratic experiment, which was until recently an astounding success, has been smashed to pieces.

For years I have been warning of a civil war starting in Gaza. I wrote about it in my last book, *The Second Palestinian Intifada*. I warned via every media platform available that there are too many hands working to ensure the demise of the Palestinian national project, both from within and without. I urged Palestinians not to fall into rhetoric. I saw very clearly that the fragmentation of Palestinian national identity — an outcome of two combined realities: one stemming from the post-Oslo political culture, the other from Israel's Bantustan ghettos imposed in the West Bank and the total isolation of Gaza — was almost perfected. I've toured many cities in many countries taking on Palestinian division, worried that Palestinians will reach a point where they no longer identify themselves as such, but as ideological and tribal extensions of factions and sub-factions.

In recent months I became belligerent — in the eyes of some — in my frankness. Not one public speech I gave would conclude without a few Palestinians abandoning the gathering; either Fatah loyalists furious over my chastisement of Abbas, Fatah leader Mohamed Dahlan and the rest of the clique for their corruption and deviation from the aspirations of their own people; or Islamists, angry for my suggesting that Hamas shouldn't act as the sole proprietor of the Palestinian narrative, despite their parliamentary majority, but merely as a conduit for Palestinian constants and the will of the Palestinian people. My comments were not always popular: they ruffled many feathers, and recently they cost me my job.

The devastating embargo imposed on Palestinians after the Hamas landslide victory in January 2006, didn't produce the results publicly projected. To the contrary, it greatly hampered the American "democratic" experiment in the Middle East. Everywhere I travelled since, I have witnessed a sense of giddiness and much hope being pinned on Hamas's rise in politics. Thus it was resolved that Hamas had to be removed, with Abbas's Preventive Security Forces, riddled with corruption, entrusted with the task. Dahlan, man of the hour, was given the Israeli and American nod. His Palestinian "Contras" wreaked havoc: kidnapping, assassinating and provoking endless feuds.

One can well imagine what impact such meddling would have, knowing that Gaza is essentially a huge open-air prison. I was a prisoner there until the age of 21. I remember how people picked fights for no convincing reason — isolation, hunger and hopelessness lead to self-destruction. The US and the EU took part in the siege and embargo, and Israel's bombardment never ceased, not even for one day. Hundreds of besieged Palestinians have

been blown to shreds by Israeli bombs. Their only mechanism of defence has been makeshift Qassam “missiles” that have killed no more than a dozen Israelis in six years. Thousands of Palestinians were killed in Gaza during the same period. Gaza bore all the signs that warned of disaster and civil war was looming, it was one assassin’s bullet away — one provocative statement, one kidnapping.

The pressure Hamas faced as a result was insurmountable. The movement had reached the limits of political concessions; any more would be considered a retreat from its political platform and could lead to fragmentation within its own ranks. Yet a state of isolation from within (Fatah’s total control over the 10 branches of the security apparatus), and from without (the US-led international embargo that called for Hamas’s removal), was sure to weaken Hamas and eventually deprive it of popular support. The decision was thus made that Hamas must take its chances and push for what it termed the “second liberation of Gaza”.

Now the situation is very bleak. Hamas is in control of Gaza, and Abbas and Fatah are in control of as much in the West Bank as Israel allows. This places Palestine’s destiny back in the US neo-conservative court.

Dividing the West Bank and Gaza appears central to the agenda: “This turn of events frees Abbas to focus on the much more manageable West Bank, where he can depend on the Israeli Defense Forces to suppress challenges from Hamas, and on Jordan and the United States to help rebuild his security forces,” wrote Martin Indyk, the pro-Israel lobbyist in Washington, in *The Washington Post*, 15 June. Most American mainstream editorials are sounding the same message. And various Arab governments, the EU, the US and Israel are flocking to back Abbas. Money, weapons and political legitimacy are being bestowed upon him from all directions. The once irrelevant leader is now the darling of the international community; the sanctions set to be lifted on his emergency government, which he has appointed after sacking the unity government, an unconstitutional act by all standards.

Israeli officials cannot imagine a more satisfactory scenario. The new experiment suggests that the West Bank will be lavished with aid and Gaza will be starved further. This is the pinnacle of injustice, and as always the US and Israel take centre stage, directing the show. Abbas and his men are presented as the true heroes, already making their debut as the true and legitimate face of Palestinian democracy, a democracy determined by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, not the Palestinians.

Ramzy Baroud is a Palestinian American author and editor of PalestineChronicle.com; his latest book is The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People’s Struggle (Pluto Press, London)

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