

Palestinian Violence as an Indicator of a Bigger Battle

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Labeling as ‘dangerous’ the violent escalation in the Gaza Strip between supporters of the Fatah and Hamas movements is an understatement, to say the least. The situation in the Occupied Territories is more perilous than any media account, however decent, can portray. In fact, the once distanced possibility of a Palestinian civil war is forcing its way back to the forefront, not merely as an Israeli fantasy, but a looming, albeit wicked reality.

But to reduce the Gaza turmoil to a few clichés, the likes of “If Palestinians cannot get along with each other, how should they be expected to get along with Israel”, is either politically naïve or self-serving. Viewing the current crisis outside its wider regional context, it would rightly appear as if the Palestinian clash is simply evidence of an inherently militant culture.

But if Palestinians were inherently militant, then why, under the most extreme, frustrating and intimidating of circumstances, did they manage to defy all odds on March 25, voting in droves and achieving one of the most genuine democratic experiences ever recorded in the history of the Middle East? In a land that is still under the boots of Israeli soldiers, holding democratic elections is most taxing, if not impossible altogether. But Palestinians in the Occupied Territories did it. International monitors seemed more shocked than relieved at the transparency of the voting process.

International media, including a large mass of Arab media celebrated the ‘Palestinian model’ as one to pursue in what was hoped to become a propeller of Arab democratic reforms. But something went horribly wrong: the wrong party, Hamas won the elections in a landslide that left no room for the traditional political elites of the Palestinian society. Lowly refugee camp dwellers claimed a political role that was for decades preserved for the ‘upper crust’, with their gun wielders, entrusted to protect the interests of the aristocracy.

Unfortunately, most, if not all media reports on this matter – including those with typically radical interpretations – have incessantly failed to understand this divergence. Instead, some choose to investigate the subject from the more traditional slant – that of political Islam, while others – Israel and its patrons – insist that ‘Palestinians have elected a terrorist government.’ Even some Palestinians seem unaware of the monumental social reconstruction that they’ve introduced to the region. But why is this at all significant? And how is it related to the current panic and chaos engulfing Gaza?

Consider a CNBC televised forum on May 21, where a panel of a few eloquent Arabs – joined with a friendly American Congressmen – discussing the economic and social challenges facing democratic reforms in the Middle East. The Arab guests looked and sounded pleasant, assured investors of the immense opportunities still available in their region, concluding that

a free market economy is the best option available for the region to develop economically, socially and thus politically.

Interestingly, the Arab guests were either members of ruling Arab families or they were tightly connected to Arab regimes with bleak records of human rights violations. And it is not as if the CNBC producers failed to distinguish such a fact: the affiliations of those individuals were proudly flashed at the bottom of the screen once every a few seconds. Not one person genuinely attempted to represent the unseen 'multitudes' who have suffered eternally under the iniquitous political arrangements in their respective countries and the equally unfair distribution of wealth and power in the region.

This is the typical and prevailing Western understanding of democracy in the Middle East, reflected - perhaps inadvertently, but indeed eloquently - through the lens of the media. The West - lead by the US and EU - wishes not to see serious restructuring of society, redistribution of wealth and power and rewriting of the region's destiny to serve those condemned to perpetual oppression and poverty. What they are keenly interested in is complete 'liberalization' of the economy, coupled with mediocre and highly symbolic political gestures, enough to justify their meddling in the region's affairs, but not enough to change the nature of the relationship between the Arabs and the West, where the latter has been the greatest beneficiary. Thus talks about women rights in Saudi Arabia, and freedom of assembly in Egypt have largely been smokescreens: that the US and EU are unreservedly protective of individual liberties in the Arab world, even in 'friendly' countries.

It's precisely because of this well-observed charade, maintained through decades of political doubletalk and duplicity, that the Palestinian elections ignited such anger, if not panicky responses from the West that went as far as denying Palestinians food and medicine - which has already resulted in many deaths. Those who expressed shock of why the Arabs are not doing much to quell the tragedy created by the political boycott and economic siege of the Palestinians, failed to comprehend the challenge, if not the threat, posed by the first official defeat of the elites in Palestine and its socio-economic implications on the whole region. While Fatah was effectively the loser - and a sore loser at that - in the Palestinian elections, the apprehension that such a scenario might be repeated elsewhere in the Arab world, sent shockwaves across the region, causing spontaneous, yet rational alliances that unified Western powers, Israel, Palestinian elites (the effective rulers of Fatah), the Arab League, and various Arab countries - some more tacitly than others - thus creating a highly effective state of siege, not against the Hamas government - as has been claimed repeatedly - but rather against the Palestinian people, who voted for Hamas. Of course, Aljazeera and other pan Arab television stations made sure that the rest of the Arab peoples elsewhere got the gist of the message as well: either fake democracy or starvation.

Needless to say, a wide assortment of Fatah elements are keenly interested in toppling what increasingly looks like a temporary deviation in Arab politics. One needs no 'insider information' to conclude that some in Fatah are intentionally hoping to provoke a military confrontation, for as disastrous as it may seem, it will ensure that those with the bigger guns win, and later, entrust themselves in the historic mission of 'restoring democracy'. Neither Israel, nor neighboring Arabs would find such a scenario too troubling, for a return to the status quo is of essence.

But even then, Palestinians cannot be absolved from their responsibility to prevent further bloodshed. They owe it to themselves, and to the region as a whole, to shield their

democratic experience and to use it as a means to counter their greatest challenge, that of the Israeli occupation. A violent Palestinian showdown will ensure that Israel's imperialist project will continue unhindered, and will serve to fulfill Israel's convenient claims that Palestinians are essentially chaotic, violent and "no partner of peace," purportedly leaving Israel with no other option but further unilateral 'disengagements' in the West Bank. If such unilateralism effectively means robbing Palestinians of their land, then be it, or so the Israeli logic goes, for Israel's security is too precious to be compromised, and Palestinians are too busy fighting each other to notice.

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