

Politicising Gaza's Misery

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Intense debate over Gaza is subsiding as the status quo is delineated — predictably — by those with the bigger guns. But to what extent can human suffering be politicised, turned into an intellectual polemic that fails to affect the simplest change in people's lives?

Hamas's political advent in January 2006 as the first "opposition" movement in the Arab world to ascend to power using peaceful and democratic means was successfully thwarted in a brazen coup, engineered jointly by the United States, Israel and renegade Palestinians factionalists. Following this, history was rewritten, as is usual, by the victor. Thus Hamas, a party embodying democratic institutions in the occupied territories, became the party that "overthrew" Abbas's "legitimate" democracy. As strange a notion as that is (a government overthrowing itself), it went down in the annals of Western media as uncontested truth.

All parties involved, directly or otherwise, were expected to determine their position from this fallacious claim, and they did so to meet their own interests. Some had little problem in disowning Palestinian democracy altogether. The United States government, Israel, the European Union, and various non-democratic Arab governments were delighted by the outcome of Palestinian infighting. They celebrated Abbas and his faction as the true and legitimate democrats, and chastised those who disagreed. Countries such as Russia, South Africa and some Arab Gulf states followed suit, with some hesitation and disgruntlement, but too weak or indecisive to confront the status quo.

On the Palestinian front, the choices were harder, but nonetheless those who were previously aligned neither to Fatah nor Hamas now positioned themselves quickly on the side that served them best. Renowned leftists, for example, who normally spoke as though they were representatives of the voice of reason, now couldn't risk losing what few ineffective NGOs they operated in a management style more reminiscent of "grocery stores" (the actual name that many Palestinians use to mock many of the NGOs in their midst).

Fear of losing freedom of movement and access to US and European financial institutions motivated many Palestinians to disown Gaza completely. The sympathy millions of people worldwide felt towards the perpetually suffering Gazans translated mostly in the realm of the intangible. Helplessness prevailed and quickly joined the prevalent sense of powerlessness and incapacity long affiliated with Palestine in general and Gaza in particular.

To distract from this issue, Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert were hurriedly rushed to Annapolis for a badly needed photo-op. Exalted by the self-proclaimed champion of democracy, President Bush, both leaders are on a new quest for peace. The US-sponsored sideshow has achieved its aim. Dates such as January 2006 among others are now completely cast aside; new dates, new rhetoric and new promises are replacing the old

ones; all eyes are now on Abbas and Olmert, Ramallah and Tel Aviv, with calls for future conferences and painful compromises. And Gaza is becoming a forgotten or irrelevant footnote.

The Strip is under a harsh and unprecedented siege, with people dying as a result of the lack of medical aid. Israel has cut diesel supplies to 60,000 litres, when 350,000 litres are required daily. How can an already underdeveloped economy run on such a meagre amount of energy, let alone hospitals and schools? Electricity is also being drastically cut, as per the recommendation of Israel's High Court, and unemployment is at the highest level it has ever been (past the 75 per cent mark). One and a half million inhabitants are literally trapped in a 365-square kilometre prison without any breathing room whatsoever and little food, little energy, and are told, more or less, that they deserve their fate.

If the media mentions Gaza at all, it does so in a politicised context. For example: three militants killed by Israeli missiles; Israeli army says militants were on their way to fire rockets into Israel; Hamas leader remains defiant, and so on. Much of the coverage is now focussed only on augmenting the sins of Hamas, whereby every single conduct or misconduct is blown out of proportion. The bottom line is that whatever suffering Gazans endure, it is caused by the Hamas militant menace and their "forces of darkness". Whether Hamas's violations of human rights are at all related to the state of siege, murder and chaos created by the many circumstances that preceded it, remains completely irrelevant. Gaza has become the needed leading precept for Palestinians, and others, reminding them of what they cannot dare do if they want to be spared the same fate. Palestinians in the West Bank are being asked to contrast the images of angry, bearded Hamas police officers cracking down on protesters with the soft-spoken bespectacled Abbas in international conferences brimming amid healthy, overfed faces.

The true reasons behind Gaza's suffering are entirely omitted, except by a few Arab and progressive newspapers like this one. The debate is now being moved from the immediate concern of media circles into academic conferences, books and long essays; parallels are abundantly invoked between Gaza and other spheres of US influence.

This is not to deny credit to those who have had the courage to take the right stance on the dramatic events unfolding in Gaza. Many possess enough humanity to separate the politics that led to Gaza's complete isolation from the fact that real people with feelings and hopes and aspirations are suffering, enduring and dying unnecessarily before our very eyes. Israel's camp is relentless in justifying Israel's racism and the brutality inflicted on Palestinians, using the same tired arguments, such as Israel's security and right to exist, and accusing their detractors of anti-Semitism at every turn. But what argument could there be for those who are troubled by human suffering and yet losing sight of Gaza's misery? I cannot think of any justification for apathy before a dying child, whether black, white, Arab, Jewish or any other.

Let's not allow inhumanity to become the accepted norm. If we allowed it to triumph in Gaza, we are deemed to repeat it elsewhere.

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