

# The struggle for Palestine's soul

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NAZARETH, 6 October 2006. The message delivered to Condoleezza Rice this week by Israeli officials is that the humanitarian and economic disaster befalling Gaza has a single, reversible cause: the capture by Palestinian fighters of an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, in late June from a perimeter artillery position that had been shelling Gaza.

When Shalit is returned, negotiations can start, or so Rice was told by Israel's defence minister, Amir Peretz.

If Peretz and others are to be believed, the gunmen could have done themselves and the 1.4 million people of Gaza a favour and simply executed Shalit weeks ago. Israel doubtless would have inflicted terrible retribution, such as the bombing of the Strip's only power station — except, of course, it had already done that to avenge Shalit's capture. But, with the Israeli soldier dead, there would have been no obstacle to sitting down and talking.

Yet, as we all know, there would have been. Because Israel's refusal to negotiate — and its crushing of Gaza — long predates the capture of Shalit.

The international community's economic blockade of the Strip, for example, has nothing to do with the seizing of the soldier; that was because Gazans had the temerity to cast their vote for the politicians of Hamas in March. The Palestinians' exercise of their democratic rights is also the reason why Palestinians with American and European passports are being torn from their families in the occupied territories and expelled.

The recent unremitting Palestinian death toll, of hundreds of civilians, is also unrelated to Shalit. That is apparently the necessary response to the homemade Qassam rockets fired from the Strip into Israel. As are the sonic booms of Israeli warplanes in the middle of the night that traumatise Gaza's children.

And what about Israel's refusal last year to coordinate its disengagement from Gaza with the Palestinian security forces? That was because Israel had "no partner for peace", even though the supine President Mahmoud Abbas, of Fatah, was then in sole charge.

Israel's bulldozing of large sections of the densely crowded refugee camp of Rafah, making thousands homeless, had nothing to do with Shalit either. That was related to weapons smuggling tunnels. And the extra-judicial executions of Palestinian political and military leaders, with the inevitable "collateral damage" to bystanders, began before Shalit attended his first school. That is supposedly an essential component in the never-ending war against Palestinian terrorism.

In other words, Israel has always found reasons for oppressing, destroying and killing in Gaza, whatever the circumstances. Let us not forget that Israel's occupation began four

decades ago, long before anyone had heard, or dreamt, of Hamas. Israel's rampages through Gaza have continued unabated, even though Hamas' military wing refrained from retaliating to Israeli provocations and maintained a ceasefire for more than a year and a half.

Shalit is the current pretext, but there are a host of others that can be adopted should the need arise. And that is because as far as Israel and its American patron are concerned, any Palestinian resistance to the illegal occupation of Gaza and the West Bank is unacceptable. Whatever the Palestinians do — apart from submitting willingly to occupation and permanently renouncing their right to statehood — is justification for Israeli "retaliation".

Absolute political and military inactivity is the only approved option for the Palestinians, both because it implies acceptance of the occupation and because then the world can quietly forget about the suffering in Gaza and the West Bank. On the other hand, Palestinian activity of any kind — and especially in pursuit of goals like national liberation — must be punished.

Heads I win, tails you lose.

All this provides the context for decoding the latest events unfolding in Gaza, as rival fighters from Fatah and Hamas confront each other violently on the streets.

This is the moment Israel has long been waiting for, from the moment a Likud government that included Ariel Sharon began seriously meddling in internal Palestinian politics by helping to establish the Muslim Brotherhood organisation that later became Hamas. Israel hoped that an Islamist party would be a bulwark to the growing popularity of Yasser Arafat's exiled Fatah party and its secular Palestinian nationalism.

Things, of course, did not go quite to plan. In the first intifada that erupted in 1987, Hamas adopted the same assertive agenda of Palestinian national liberation (with added Islamic trimmings) as Fatah. The two groups' goals complemented each other rather than conflicted.

Later, after Israel finally allowed Arafat to return to the occupied territories under the terms of the Oslo accords, the Palestinian president avoided as far as possible carrying out Israeli demands to crack down on Hamas, understanding that this would risk a civil war that would damage Palestinian society and weaken the chances of eventual statehood.

Similarly, Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, resisted confronting Hamas almost as studiously as he has avoided challenging Israeli diktats. Instead, until recently at least, we saw fighters from Hamas and Fatah in Gaza cooperating on several attacks on military positions.

But this week's clashes in Gaza are the first signs that Israel may be succeeding in its designs to deflect the Palestinian resistance from its common goal of national liberation — to achieve a state — by redirecting its energies into fratricidal war.

Or as Zeev Schiff, a veteran Haaretz commentator with exceptional contacts in the military, observed: "Lesson number 1 is that the international financial and economic siege of the Hamas government, which is being led by the United States, is succeeding."

Certainly the economic blockade has nothing to do with securing the return of Shalit, as even a senior Israeli army officer and self-styled “counter-terrorism expert” warned this week. “Due to the disagreements between the two sides [ Hamas and Fatah ], the soldier’s release is not in sight,” Col Moshe Marzouk told the website of the Israeli daily Yedioth Aharonot.

Instead, the economic strangulation of Gaza has been the catalyst for internal Palestinian conflict. Inevitably, social bonds grow weak and fragile, even tear, when nearly half the population is unemployed and more than three-quarters are living in poverty. If children are hungry, parents will contemplate opposing their government — even if they agree with its goals — to put food on the table.

But the immiseration of Gaza does not, of itself, explain why the clashes are taking place, or what is motivating the factions. This is not just about who will get the scraps from the master’s table, or even a struggle between two parties — Hamas and Fatah — for control of the government. It is now no less than a battle for the very soul of Palestinian nationalism.

It is no coincidence that the international community, at Israel’s behest, has been making three demands of the Hamas government that supposedly justify the throttling of Gaza’s economy. The conditions are now well-known: recognising Israel, renouncing violence, and abiding by previous agreements.

Let us put aside Israel’s worse failure — as the stronger party — to honour any of these conditions. Observers rarely note that Israel has never recognised the Palestinians’ right to statehood, not even in the Oslo accords, nor has it defined the extent of its own borders; it has not for one moment renounced violence against Palestinian resistance to occupation; and it has consistently broken its agreements, including by expanding its illegal settlement programme and by annexing Palestinian land under cover of building the West Bank wall.

But more strangely, observers have also failed to note both that Fatah, first under Arafat and then Abbas, agreed to all three conditions years ago and that Fatah’s compliance to Israeli demands never helped advance the struggle for statehood by one inch.

Arafat and the PLO recognised Israel back in the late 1980s, and the Palestinian leader put his signature to this recognition again in the Oslo accords. In returning to the occupied territories as head of the Palestinian Authority, Arafat also renounced violence against Israel. He headed the new security forces whose job was to crack down on Palestinian dissent, not respond to Israel’s many military provocations or fight the occupation. And of course, Arafat and Fatah, unlike Israel, had every reason to want previous agreements honoured: they mistakenly believed that they were their best hope of winning statehood. They did not factor in Israel’s bad faith, and its continuation and intensification of the settlement project.

So the lesson learnt by Hamas from the Fatah years of rule is that these conditions were and are only a trap, and that they were imposed by Israel to win Palestinian obedience to the occupation, not national liberation. During the Oslo years, the benefits of accepting Israeli conditions accrued not in a peace dividend that led to Palestinian statehood but in rewards that flowed from collaboration with the occupation, a stealthy corruption that enriched many of Fatah’s leaders and kept its followers in the large government bureaucracy at a basic standard of living.

Following the outbreak of the second intifada, a majority of ordinary Palestinians voters began to understand how terminally damaging Fatah's complicity with the occupation had become. For example, as Palestinian, Israeli and international activists tried to demonstrate against the building of Israel's wall across the West Bank, and the subsequent annexation of large swaths of Palestinian land to Israel, the protesters found obstacles placed in their way at every turn by the ruling Fatah party. Its leaders did not want to jeopardise their cement and building contracts with Israel by ending the wall's progress. Liberation was delayed for the more immediate prize of remuneration.

By signing up to the same conditions as Fatah, Hamas would be as good as abandoning its goal of national liberation, as well as forsaking the majority of voters who realised that Fatah's corrupt relationship with Israel had to end. Hamas would self-destruct, which is reason enough why Israel is making such strenuous demands of the international community to force Hamas to comply.

"The Palestinians need a government that can provide for their needs and meet the conditions of the Quartet," Rice said this week, adding that she wanted to strengthen the "moderates" like Abbas.

The struggle on the streets of Gaza is a defining moment, one that may eventually decide whether a real national unity government — one seeking Palestinian statehood — is possible.

The question is: will Fatah force Hamas to cave in to Israeli demands and co-opt it, or will Hamas force Fatah to abandon its collaboration and return to the original path of national liberation?

The stakes could not be higher. If Hamas wins, then the Palestinians will have the chance to re-energise the intifada, launch a proper, consensual fight to end the occupation, one that unites the secular and religious, and try to face down the bullying of the international community. As with most national liberation struggles, the price in lives and suffering is likely to be steep.

If Fatah wins and Hamas falls, we will be back to the Oslo process of official Palestinian collaboration with Israel and consent to the ghettoisation of the population — this time behind walls. Such an arrangement may be done under Fatah rule or, more likely, under the favoured international option of government by Palestinian technocrats, presumably vetted by Israel and the United States.

The consequences are not difficult to divine. If the hopes of ordinary Palestinians for national liberation are dashed again, if Hamas falters just as Fatah did before it, these frustrated popular energies will resurface, finding a new release and one likely to have a different agenda from either Hamas or Fatah.

If the goal of establishing a Palestinian state cannot be realised, then the danger is that many Palestinians will look elsewhere for their liberation, not necessarily in national but in wider, regional and religious terms. The Islamic component of the struggle — at the moment a gloss, even for Hamas, on what is still a national liberation movement — will grow and deepen. National liberation will take a back seat to religious jihad.

Do Israel and the United States not understand this? Or maybe, like serial felons who cannot

de diverted from the path of crime, they are simply incapable of changing their ways.

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