

Trying Times for Palestinians

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The political and ideological division separating Palestinian society in the Occupied Territories has metamorphosed into a formidable chasm, despite the urgent need to consolidate Palestinian national unity in this current crisis.

And a time of crisis it is. Never since the concoction of the Israeli state and the subsequent ethnic cleansing of nearly one million Palestinians in 1947-48, has an Israeli government been as determined as that of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to settle its account with the Palestinians, in so vile and careless a way.

There is a growing realization among Israeli politicians that mirrors a sense of fear and anxiety from a possible relegation of the political hegemony and import of the United States. The US has served – and paradoxically inconsistently with its own interests – the role of the protector and provider, leaving Israel emancipated of any regional and international accountability, free to pursue its own agenda – imperialistic and violently racist, as it were – at the expense of the Palestinians and its Arab neighbors. The Israeli heyday may be over soon, due to growing predictions that the American project – for various reasons, notwithstanding the disaster-prone Iraq war – is likely to diminish in coming years. And without US patronage, Israel is much less capable of serving as the region's bully.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon seemed fully aware of such a reality. As one of Israel's last pioneers and also the last of its great Zionist elks, he wished to 'secure' Israel, by unilaterally claiming whichever territories he found strategic – based on military logic, access to water aquifers and fertile lands – and ditching smaller pockets of land that were a demographic liability and were strategically irrelevant.

Sharon's unexpected incapacitation didn't mean the end of his historic mission. To the contrary, his sudden absence helped his successor, Olmert to rally overwhelmed Israelis around Sharon's Kadima party – established precisely to carry out Sharon's vision of a secured Israel. Olmert has acquired three significant mandates to follow with what Sharon has already started in his 'disengagement' from the Gaza Strip: that of the Israeli voters through the country's recent elections, another of a subtle understanding among the Knesset's major political parties, not withstanding his Labor partners and a less convincing nod from President George W. Bush, which was understood by the Israeli media as a 'green light' to carry out his 'convergence' plan.

The term 'convergence' is another Israeli newspeak and is as deceiving as Sharon's 'disengagement'. It's aimed at usurping the West Bank's most fertile land in the west and the inclusion of major Jewish settlements blocks – all illegal under international law – to become part of so-called 'Israel proper'. Moreover, Olmert's plan also intends to seize large swathes of Palestinian land in the east – parallel to the fertile Jordan valley – estimated by

some 40 percent of the total size of the West Bank. The remaining Palestinian 'controlled' territories of the West Bank will be carved up into several major pockets, very populated, some completely fenced and movement in and out of such enclaves necessitates an Israeli permit. Such a system has already been put into practice, especially between Occupied East Jerusalem and surrounding areas. With the conversion of the Israeli military check point at Qalandia - adjacent to Jerusalem - into an 'international border' point, Palestinians in the West Bank are treated like foreigners wishing to enter alien territories. In other areas, Palestinian farmers are urged to acquire permits to farm their own land, as school kids queue up everyday, sometimes for hours in front of Israeli fences, walls, and checkpoints just to be allowed passage to their schools and back.

One need not be a world-class economist to deduce that such physical restrictions will make it impossible for any economy to thrive in the Palestinian territories, even after the Israeli unilateral disengagement from the West Bank, expected within two years. Needless to say, the Israeli scheme in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is a violation of international law and represents the most obscene disregard for human rights, as it aims to imprison an entire population, holding its hopes and aspirations hostage to the decisions of some Israeli boy soldiers manning hundreds of checkpoints dotting the West Bank.

To achieve its grand design, Israel needs time and money; the latter has been provided with enthusiasm and in abundance - courtesy of Uncle Sam, who is, ironically broke. But to acquire time, Israel is relying more than ever on Palestinian divisions and infighting.

The internal Palestinian strife preceding the advent of Hamas' rise to power, resulted in numerous gangs uniting under the Fatah party umbrella. The gangs are largely managed by rich war profiteers, who were affiliated with the PA and served as Israel's allies in the region. (Through their VIP cards, they traveled around, in and out the Occupied Territories without any hindrances.) Neither the profiteers, nor their clan-based gangs held to any ideological preference, nor did they seem wary of the encroaching Israeli danger and what it means to the Palestinian people and their enduring struggle for freedom.

Through their privileges - with the Israelis, the PA and outside 'donors' -they knitted an intricate system that is based on nepotism and corruption. While the PA's top echelons turned a blind eye to the belligerence of this crowd, both Israel and the US fully supported them: Israel with free travel access and often weapons, and the US with political validation and cash.

The results were devastating and pushed ordinary Palestinians to the brink. The March Parliamentary elections in Palestine were a reflection of the bitterness that followed. Palestinians from all walks of life voted for what they perceived as the only viable political alternative: Hamas. They did not vote for Islamic governance, nor did they wish to see a rise in suicide bombings. (It's unfortunate that the media's inane understanding of the conflict insists on seeing Palestinian politics within these unrepresentative parameters).

The Hamas win was perceived as dangerous, yet embodied an opportunity of sorts for Israel. It was an opportunity in the sense that it would absolve Israeli completely from ever engaging in any sort of dialogue with Palestinians; it was dangerous, because if the elected Palestinian government managed to moderate its position, it would heap pressure on Israel to engage Palestinians, which could slow down the ultimate Israeli project in the Occupied Territories. To use the opportunities and avoid any possible repercussions, Israel schemed to

isolate the Palestinian government internationally – through cutting funds and any diplomatic contacts – and internally, by using its Palestinian allies to create wide disturbances, instability and a state of chaos. Ironically, Palestinian security forces have been sent on a mission aimed at ensuring the opposite of both. The fact that a wider conflict has been averted thus far is, in my opinion, a wonder.

Time is running out. Palestinians are under total isolation, aside from friendly but superficial gestures from some Arab and Muslim countries. Coupled with their failure to transcend above factional divides and, pitiful and untimely quarrels, Palestinians are allowing Israel the time and the pretense to carry out Sharon’s racist vision to the last letter. The Israeli wall – in its most literal and figurative senses – is closing in, and ordinary, defenseless Palestinians are feeling the brunt of the siege and the inhumanity of the Israeli occupation more than ever before. It’s time for Palestinian factions, and those who still possess the wisdom and the courage to unite, to speak out and to divert their energies to serve their nation’s honorable fight for freedom. Indeed, Palestinians are living in one of the most critical and historic times. Let it not be the most shameful as well.

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