

Western Donors to Palestine: What Mission?

"Aid" has turned into a tool which supports Israeli ambitions

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RAMALLAH, 6 September 2006. The Palestinians have been too grateful and too helpless for too long to be critical of the political agenda of their donors who have practically nailed them down as political hostages to the donors' money, which was promised initially to help build an independent Palestinian state, but ended as a political instrument effectively used by the Israeli occupying power.

Donors have embroiled themselves in an internal Palestinian political crisis they themselves created when they withheld their aid as a collective punishment to squeeze out of power a political movement not of their liking, which ironically came to power in a fairly and transparently democratic elections that were financed and monitored by none other than themselves.

The internal political crisis is only a result of the deeper economic and humanitarian crisis, which is crushing the Palestinian people to the brink of a "social revolt," especially in the "ticking time bomb" of Gaza Strip, (1) and the donors-sustained Palestinian Authority (PA) to the brink of collapse since the donors tightened the Israeli military siege by imposing a suffocating financial blockade early in the year.

The ensuing Palestinian divide is being further exacerbated by the donors' public siding with one party of the divide, to the detriment of the people whom the donors are trying in vain to reach out for.

On September 1 the donors meeting in Stockholm pledged about \$500 million in mostly selective humanitarian "handouts." But how could this meagre amount make any difference when \$7 billion could not?

The amount was pledged as an Israeli military court was extending the detention of the Palestinian finance minister, Dr. Omar Abdul-Razeq, an irony which puts in spotlight the overall policy of donors.

The end political as well as the economic result of at least seven billion dollars of donors' aid over the past ten years is raising both Palestinian and international voices to ask whose political agenda the donors are serving, what is their true mission and which role they are playing.

Their initial plan was to bail out a Palestinian Authority representing the 3.5 million Palestinians under Israeli occupation since 1967 — within the context of the Madrid Middle East peace process in 1991 and the ensuing Palestinian - Israeli Oslo accords in 1993 —

until the end of the Palestinian autonomous interim period ends in July 1999, when the final status negotiations were scheduled to hopefully lead to the creation of an independent Palestinian state living peacefully alongside Israel.

However the bullets that killed the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Tel Aviv “on God’s orders” by the “law” student, Yigal Amir, in November 1995 had also assassinated the Oslo accords.

From the start the Israelis have envisioned an autonomous PA as the end goal. Rabin was assassinated to curb whatever “peace” illusions a few of the Israelis might have otherwise developed. And when comatose former prime minister Ariel Sharon announced his acceptance of a Palestinian state in accordance with the U.S. President George W. Bush’s vision of a two-state solution he attached 14 conditions thereto and embarked on a unilateral policy, inherited by his successor Ehud Olmert, that negated the existence of a Palestinian partner and downsized the area of the perceived state to 42 percent of the West Bank.

Then, the donors should have posed and reconsidered the framework of their aid, but they didn’t.

The donors’ money continued to flow nonetheless with or without awareness that thereafter their aid had shifted to serve a completely different and contradictory political Israeli agenda and became an instrument of Israel’s foreign policy and thus became part of the problem and not of the solution, without alleviating the Palestinian economic plight.

Donors have turned to finance either the Palestinian submission, compliance, passivity or collaboration and collusion vis-à-vis the Israeli U.S.-backed unilateral plans, with a questionable indifference to the death of the peace process and the reoccupation of the PA autonomy, while showing an astonishing exemplary tolerance towards Israel’s destruction of the state-building infrastructures financed mainly by money paid by European and American taxpayers.

Their aid has turned into a tool in Israeli hands to appease disillusioned Palestinian population who are witnessing daily the infrastructure of their promised state either being demolished by Israeli military bulldozers or bombed to rubble by the US-made Israeli Apaches and F-16s, because Israel has decided unilaterally to allow into being only a Bantustan-state in Gaza Strip and to demarcate its borders deep into the West Bank after slicing it into two southern and northern parts by extracting Jerusalem, the heart of any viable and sustainable Palestinian state.

Thirteen years on, the Israeli destructive offset factor, the PA corruption, the high management costs, the conditions attached to their aid, and the political deadlock have all drained the donors’ efforts into a zero-sum result economically and politically, leaving the donors’ taxpayers as the main loser next to the Palestinians and the Israeli Occupying Power as the sole beneficiary.

The donors have relieved Israel from its obligations under international law as the occupying power and at the same time used their aid to appease the Palestinians. That’s why Israel played the fundraiser for the Palestinians, but withheld their dues when their January elections changed the rules of the game.

A show case of how donors squander their taxpayers' money was their financing the Palestinian presidential and legislative elections with more than \$250 million, which they strictly monitored, only to immediately refuse the outcome and give ammunition to Palestinian accusations that their democratic rhetoric was a sham.

At least this is how the donors' role has become to be perceived, not by a minority but by the mainstream Palestinian, as was proved both by the landslide victory of the Hamas-led opposition in the January 25 legislative elections and by the failure of the "Oslo camp" to avert that victory in spite of the billions of dollars channelled to it by the donors.

The donors' collective punishment against the Palestinian people after the victory of Hamas has only reinforced that perception among the Palestinians and at the same time added fuel to the fire by exposing the donors' aid as also devoid even of its widely-promoted humanitarian aspect to be seen as it is: A conditional political funding.

Their financial and diplomatic embroilment in the Palestinian internal dialogue has affected their image from bad to worse. The donors and their democracies are now publicly criticized as being in collusion with a plan to bring down the Palestinian government and to bring the PA to its knees politically.

The Palestinians have no resources under the Israeli occupation and it is difficult for them to negotiate the type of aid they get. Either they take it or they leave it. If they take it, they take it with conditions. If they don't, they end up with nothing, which sums up their current dire situation.

The Fatah-led Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the former ruling government of the PA, had accepted the conditions from the start and the survival of the PA became hostage to the ensuing status quo, but the Hamas-led incumbent government who won the January elections is refusing to subscribe to the same conditions; hence the internal crisis.

Taking sides in the crisis by the donors is a position encouraged by Israel, with an eye on escalating a dispute into a conflict with the aim of doing away with the outcome of the January elections, including the winning Hamas, its government and its ideology that adopts all forms of resistance to the Israeli occupation, hopefully to bury for the foreseeable future any expectations that such an ideology might inspire.

Meanwhile the people's plight keeps worsening. The PA bureaucracy went on an open-ended strike early in September, paralyzing the Fatah-dominated rank and file of the government, whose executive, legislative and local branches were brought to a halt by Israel's kidnapping of more than 60 cabinet ministers including a deputy premier, MPs including the parliamentary speaker, and mayors.

Only the PA presidency is kept floating politically and financially, thanks to the donors, who are now in a predicament trying to whitewash their collective punishment and counterproductive role by meagre and selective "humanitarian" aid.

True the donors' money has been a vital lifeline for the survival of the grateful Palestinians under the Israeli occupation, but it neither alleviated their economic plight nor served their political goals of liberation and self-determination, and doesn't promise to do so in the

foreseeable future.

“The Palestinians are today the largest per capita recipients of foreign aid in the world. (But) According to the 2004 World Bank report, they are suffering ‘the worst economic depression in modern history.’” (2)

The World Bank predicted that the PA’s GDP per capita will fall to \$1,063 in 2007; the unemployment rate will rise to 31%, and the poverty rate to 50%.

“The paradox is that although at the declaratory level there has been a growing acceptance of the two-state solution, the feasibility of its materialization dramatically decreased as the decade unfolded,” Anne Le More, of Oxford University, wrote in a study titled “Killing with Kindness: Funding the Demise of a Palestinian State.” (3)

“In the course of the last decade, the international donor community has financed not only Israel’s continued occupation but also its expansionist agenda—at the expense of international law, of the well-being of the Palestinian population, of their right to self-determination, and of the international community’s own stated developmental and political objectives. Looking ahead, this bodes well neither for the emergence of a viable Palestinian state nor for the security—collective and individual—of the Israeli and Palestinian people,” Le More concluded. (4)

It is high time for the Palestinian donors to reconsider their mission to be conducive to peace-making.

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Notes

(1) Agencies quoting United Nation’s top aid official, Jan Egeland, in Stockholm on August 31, 2006.

(2) Ghada Karmi, The Guardian, December 31, 2005.

(3) International Affairs, Volume 81, Issue 5, Page 981 - October 2005.

(4) Ibid.

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