

A 'Palestinian Spring'? Not Yet.

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The 'Palestinian Spring' is the only one of the 'Arab Springs' to be announced from the General Assembly platform of the UN. 'At a time when', Mahmoud Abbas declared in his speech for UN recognition of Palestinian statehood, 'the Arab peoples affirm their quest for democracy—the Arab Spring—the time is now for the Palestinian Spring, the time for independence'. This link between the bid and the democratic revolts taking place in the Arab world was repeated the next day in Ramallah. Abbas told cheering supporters who came out to greet him: 'We told the world that there is an Arab Spring, but the Palestinian Spring exists here: a mass, popular, peacefully resisting spring that seeks to achieve our objectives.... raise your heads for you are Palestinians' (*Al-Hayat*, 26 September 2011).

It is important to note that Abbas' UN speech did emphasize Palestinian rights of self-determination and of return for the refugees. And it was a powerful indictment of Israeli rejectionism and colonialism. This doesn't change the fact, though, that there is something deeply troubling about Abbas' Palestinian Spring announcement. Here we have a Palestinian leader whose only distinction in the last 20 years is mostly secret negotiations with Israeli leaders. A leader:

- whose presidency of the Palestinian Authority has expired;
- whose Fatah faction has lost the last elections in 2006 to Hamas;
- who has spent most of his time as President clamping down on popular movements like Hamas (as well as Islamic Jihad) in the West Bank, closing down hundreds of Islamic charities, firing imams sympathetic to Hamas, and controlling the content of Friday sermons.
- A leader who, finally, continues to coordinate security on a daily basis with the Israel occupation forces (his CIA-trained battalions are there to protect Israel from the Palestinians rather than the reverse).

How can Abbas now welcome Arab democracy when only yesterday he was regretting the fall of Mubarak, and when even today he prides himself on the fact that if the US pulls its \$200 million in security support for the Palestinian Authority, the Saudis will provide the amount instead, for which read 'the most undemocratic and authoritarian regime in the region'?

Again: there's something very strange about a US-backed, Western dependent leader going against his main sponsor in the name of Arab democracy. How can we explain Abbas' diplomatic maneuver?

First: it's an act of political self-preservation on the part of the Fatah elite. After 20 years of negotiations, the occupation has deepened, settlements and settlers have more than doubled (numbering more than half a million settlers now), and the areas Israel controls have increased. Settlers' attack on Palestinians and their property are on the rise: mosques are burnt on a weekly basis. East Jerusalem is all but lost to the Palestinians, with no way for other West Bankers to get there and no freedom of worship. There's also no freedom of movement within the West Bank. Hundreds of checkpoints and roadblocks continue to exist.

In fact: in the last 20 years the Israeli occupation has only become more entrenched, and looks more permanent than it ever was before. So in order to avoid a real Palestinian revolt against a subservient and Western-backed Palestinian Authority, Abbas decided *to preempt and contain it* by declaring it himself, in order to keep himself in power. Fatah elite self-preservation here undercuts a self-organized popular democratic mobilization against the effects and fruits of Oslo, and replaces it with even more Palestinian diplomacy. Fatah was here before: its response to the mass revolt of the

first intifada was cooptation, and its channeling into the secret diplomacy of Oslo. Here the measure is preemptive.

The ploy seems to have been successful since most Palestinians seem to support the bid; because most Palestinians understand statehood to mean an end of occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. Even Hamas' objections to the bid were not on matters of principle: they were about the means of achieving statehood rather than its desirability. Hamas also criticized Abbas for not completing the reconciliation and unity talks before heading to the UN, and only came out against the bid when Turkish and Egyptian mediation efforts between the factions failed just before the bid.

By going to the UN, then, Fatah tried to change the Palestinian popular perception of complete subservience to Israel and America: of being a negotiator under any conditions. And this was successful since the US worked very hard to stop the bid and failed. In an interview with Katty Kay in BBC America on 16 September 2011, for example, the US representative to the UN, Susan Rice, called the bid 'unproductive' and even threatened that 'there won't be sovereignty and there won't be food on the table' as a result of it. No food on the table sounds familiar in the Palestinian context. What Rice was basically saying is that Ramallah risks being starved like Gaza if the PA persists in the bid. Quite an amazing threat to make so openly and without challenge. In any case, frustrated with Israeli intransigence, Fatah utilized the UN platform to expose the brutalities and crimes of the Israeli occupation. It also raised the bar for a return to negotiations: not only a freeze of settlements in all of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, but also an acknowledgment by Israel that 1967 is the basis for negotiations.

The second and crucial reason for Fatah's diplomatic confrontation with Israel is regional developments. The Arab revolts have weakened the US in the region. Coupled with the military and political defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan (empowering its main foe Iran in the region), the US seems to be losing its tight grip over the Arab world. The Arab tyrants, whom the US uses to protect its access and control of oil, are weaker today. Some have been banished even as their regimes persist. Democratic movements are forming and slowly becoming more powerful. The US clearly understands that Arab democracy is contra its interests. Giving people more say in and control over their politics and resources in an area which has seen several American and Israeli wars can only mean a weaker US in the region (the latest catastrophe, for example, in Iraq resulted in 1 million deaths and 5 million internally and externally displaced Iraqis).

Democracy in Bahrain means the end of the US naval presence there: the largest in the region. Democracy in Saudi Arabia would be catastrophic for the US. Oil in Arabs hands used for self-development and possible projection of regional power: a real strategic threat. Democracy in Jordan means an end to the monarchy and in its place a state governed by the Palestinian majority. Democracy in Egypt, finally, means the end of the peace treaty with Israel, and Egypt back in the Arab-Israeli conflict (reversing one of the US's main diplomatic achievements in the region and ending Egypt's subservience to the US and Israel). The US then is trying to do everything it can to stifle democracy in the Arab world, and to ensure that the so-called 'democratic transitions' are as long and destructive for Arabs as the Oslo peace process has been for the Palestinians. The analogy is actually quite precise: the Oslo process came on the heels of the precursor to the Arab Spring: the mass mobilization of the first Palestinian intifada.

Like the good political opportunists that they are, the Fatah elite smells this US regional weakening. It's a good time, they believe, to bank this politically and diplomatically, especially since there are no serious Israeli concessions on offer, only more occupation. The bid cannot be understood without this regional context. Fatah's ability to resist US pressure is also a reflection, it is worth mentioning, of Saudi Arabia's wish to deflect its internal domestic pressures for democratic reforms onto the external Palestinian issue. Containing Arab democratic aspirations with support for the single most important Arab cause is a tried and tested Arab regime maneuver. No democracy at home, but Israel is seemingly confronted. Such are the populist measures taken to avoid more structural political changes domestically.

What does this brief political sketch tell us about the Palestinian cause today? That: (1) the

stronger Arab democracy becomes the better it is for the Palestinians. That: (2) a real Palestinian mass mobilization is yet to come. That: (3) the Palestinian people are currently exhausted after the defeat of two intifadas, the deepening occupation and Oslo capitulation, and the internal factionalism and division. And that: (4) they are waiting for better circumstances of struggle which can only come from the regional developments that would change the balance of power between the Arabs and Israel, forcing the latter to withdraw and reconcile with the neighborhood.

What are the tasks of a solidarity movement in the West under these changing conditions? These can be summarized as follows: principled anti-imperialism and consistent support for the democratic right of Palestinian self-determination. I think the first one is clear: the US out of the Middle East; full withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq; no troops or military camps to remain. Politically it means sympathy and support for Arab democracy and the peoples' free will to govern themselves: popular sovereignty. So, if anything, the first task is to fight imperial elites here at home: their policies and worldview.

The second is to support Palestinian self-determination. I'll say a little more about this, because there's more confusion here about what solidarity work entails and who should decide its tactics and mechanisms. It is not the job of the solidarity movement to tell Palestinians which political outcomes they should go for: ending occupation or going for one state, negotiating with Israel or not, voting for Hamas or not, etc. What solidarity work is about is defending a democratic principle of self-government for an oppressed people, within the limits of international laws and universal norms. The right of self-determination basically means that ALL Palestinians (wherever they happen to reside) have a right to actively participate in shaping their political future. That's how one activates and safeguards Palestinian rights—without fetishizing them or assuming that they are carved in stone.

Self-determination requires Palestinian democracy and can only mean participatory democracy in action. Solidarity work is deciding what the best way is to support this principle. It's not a mantra. Nor does it mean that solidarity tactics are the same in every context. What is possible in Europe, for example, is not yet possible in the US, where a lot of education and information about the occupation needs to be diffused.

Who should be making these judgments about effective tactics and modes of support? Each solidarity movement itself. Democratically and openly. The solidarity movement should be sovereign in deciding how to defend Palestinians against injustices and human rights violations. Americans clearly know the US more than the Palestinians who reside in occupied Palestine do. They know what's possible politically, how to operate in this environment, and how best to gain support for Palestinian justice. Solidarity activists should insist on their freedom to pursue their own modes of organization and objectives.

The good news is that the US public is becoming more open to supporting the Palestinian cause. After Gaza, the truth of Israel as a cruel occupier is clearer than ever for all Americans to see. Polls show that a younger generation of American Jews is less identified with Israel as a result. There are also symptoms of discontent within the American elite: General Petraus himself said to Congress that support for Israel costs American lives in the Middle East. Bill Clinton recently blamed the lack of movement in the peace process solely on Netanyahu. These developments should empower solidarity activists to aim to build the broadest possible movement in the US.

What, then, to prioritize and where to begin in the struggle? The answer is: with the issues that have the broadest support. Take as an example the International Court of Justice ruling on the annexationist Wall in 2004: it called for dismantling the Wall and illegal settlements, and ending the occupation: 'all States are under an obligation not to recognize the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory...[and] to see to it that any impediment, resulting from the construction of the wall, to the exercise by the Palestinian people of its right to self-determination is brought to an end' (clause 159). The Advisory Opinion also recommended that 'further action is required to bring to an end the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall and the associated regime' (clause 160). Until that happens, shouldn't

the 'further action' be sanctions against Israel, especially after the Gaza massacre in 2008-2009 and the continuing siege and blockade of 1.5 million people? This ruling is a huge asset for the solidarity movement in the West. Educating people about it is crucial. Sanctions are the best way to alleviate Palestinian suffering. It is crucial to create a strategy around that in the US: to push the US government to end its military support for Israel and to push American companies to divest from the occupation.

These are big goals. But that is how one can help Palestinians achieve their freedom. And be free to decide for themselves both what they want and how best to resolve one of the longest anti-colonial struggles in contemporary history.

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