

The Arab Revolutions-in-the-Making and Palestine

The president of Israel, Shimon Peres, was among the first in Israel to make the connection between the upheavals in Egypt which began on January 25, 2011, and the conflict in Palestine. Speaking at the 11th annual Herzliya Conference during the first week of February, he said that because of what is happening in Egypt, there is a need to make a settlement with the Palestinians.¹

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By contrast, Ehud Barak, the Israeli Defense Minister could only warn of the "earthquake" rattling Middle East regimes. Speaking at a convention in New York in late March, he warned of an "anti-Israel diplomatic tsunami that is rising against Israel".²

The President of Israel was speaking from the perspective of the interest of the State of Israel in light of the changes in Egypt. This is not the view of the Israeli Cabinet yet, nor will it be in the short term. The interests of politicians and parties, especially a right-wing Cabinet like the one governing Israel at present, are local, electoral, careerist, and even mercenary. Only when the interest of the state appears to be under threat, and when this is also clear to the

general public, do they make the shift. And the time has not come yet, even if the President of the State saw the outlines on the horizon.

The same applies to US politicians who work as lobbyists for the State of Israel. The lone veto cast at the UN Security Council on February 18th against condemning the illegal settlement enterprise on Palestinian land was very embarrassing for the Obama Administration given that the text of the proposed resolution reflected its own position on the issue. President Obama was prevailed upon by various Senators and other lobbyists working of behalf of the present Israeli government. This at a time when upheavals were rocking various authoritarian regimes in the Arab World that have so far acquiesced to US policies in the region especially its de facto support for Israel's occupation, against the wishes of the vast majority of Arabs.

Various American writers also began warning of a possible strategic shift in the region and its implications for US policy including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even Hungary's Foreign Minister, whose country is chipping away at the EU's name that it is imperative to resume the political process with the Palestinians because this is "the core issue."³ Still, it is too early to know where the dust will settle and when. Already, various Egyptian writers are warning that a "counter revolution" is afoot with the collusion of external actors as well.

A Hundred Years of Defeat

Not only governments were surprised by the turn of events, but practically all Arabs as well.

¹ Haaretz, 6 February 2011.

² Haaretz, 23 March 2011.

³ Haaretz, 22 February 2011.

Tunisia provided the first “shock”. And when Mubarak’s foreign minister Ahmad Abul Gheit was asked if there was any possibility that Egypt will be next, his answer was simply “nonsense”. The mood in Israeli official circles was described as “near panic” especially in relation to Egypt. But from an Arab point of view, it is important to understand what these events meant, and the depth at which they ran.

Since the end of World War I, several generations of Arabs grew under colonial regimes or Arab regimes subservient to the colonial metropolis. The Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948 which saw two-thirds of Palestinians expelled from their land was a major Palestinian and Arab trauma. Several revolutions and coup d’état’s took place in Arab countries as a result. These included Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Libya. Arab unity was sought under Nasser as a means to empower the Arabs vis-à-vis direct and indirect colonial hegemony by Western Countries including Israel. The defeat of several Arab armies in the 1967 war was another major turning point, at least as traumatic as the Nakba.

The “six-day war” of 1967 was a pivotal moment in more than one way. A new genre of writing emerged that came to be described as “self-criticism after the defeat”. A plethora of books, studies, and articles sought to locate the causes not only of the defeat at the military level, but the defeat of Arab society and culture no less, and at every level. Such self-criticism was often so harsh and so deeply felt that it betrayed an existential crises that verged on extinguishing any hope for the future. A classic example of this genre is Sadiq Jalal al-Azm’s book “Self Criticism After the Defeat” and the post 1967 poetry of the great Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani.

For close to half a century then, Arabs languished under authoritarian regimes that ruled by fiat, and were corrupt and corrupting, and unaccountable to their people and their needs, wishes, and hopes. Two factors kept those regimes in existence: the violence

perpetrated by their security forces, and external support by the US and other European countries. For the “generation of defeat”, first Tunisia, and then Egypt, was a stunning jolt of hope, almost difficult to absorb, that seemed to come from nowhere. In an interview on al-Jazeera TV, Muhammad Hasanein Haykal, the famous Egyptian writer and journalist

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who is 87 years old, expressed what many of this generation felt. He said: “I am happy and thankful that I lived to see this day”. By mid April, ten Arab countries were rocked by upheavals.

Palestinian Hopes and Fears

From the daily Palestinian press that exercises self-censorship, it was difficult to tell what ordinary Palestinians felt. But talking to people and looking at the various alternative media, the joy was palpable and the hope was clear. A veritable revolution appeared to be taking place, from Morocco to Bahrain. It is true that the demands in Morocco, Jordan, and Bahrain were reformist and did not aim at regime change, nevertheless, such reforms were still capable of giving a voice to the people in policy no matter how partial.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) was more reticent. Egypt under Mubarak was a close ally, but the PA was also afraid of any spillover effect in the Palestinian context. The predicament of the PA was threefold: First, the political process appeared quite dead and the establishment of a Palestinian state appeared nowhere in sight. The political program of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu-Mazin) on which he ran for elections in January 2005 ran aground. He had declared that he is opposed to the “militarization” of the second Intifada and was for negotiations. For a whole

year after he was elected, the government of Israel gave him the cold shoulder and hardly any negotiations took place. The “Annapolis Process” that began at the beginning of 2008 under the Bush Administration ended with no results. When President Obama was elected, the PA received a new lease on life in the hope that he was the hope for progress. Obama made the right pronouncements but two years into his presidency he gave in to internal pressure and was not able to stop the settlement process. Political will is not generated in a vacuum and the Israel lobby including a majority in Congress proved more powerful.

Since the Madrid Conference in late 1991, nearly twenty years of negotiations have taken place. The PA simply does not have the luxury of another twenty years of similar negotiations. And since Palestinians did not envision that the PA should function permanently as a large municipality to administer the affairs of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, the justification for the very existence of the PA, is at stake. It was no surprise therefore that when the upheavals rocked Arab countries from the “Ocean to the Gulf” as Arabs are wont to say, renewed calls for the dissolution of the PA were filling the alternative media.

Second, The PA has not done anything to fight corruption within it, one main reason why Hamas won the parliamentary election of January 2006. And even if corruption is routine in Arab countries, Palestinians are simply not willing to tolerate it if they have a choice.

Third, the recent revelations of “Jazeera Leaks”, the so called “Palestine Papers” revealing details of negotiations between the PA and Israel, dealt the final coup de grace, since the revelations were widely read as showing weakness and unacceptable concessions to Israeli demands.

At present, the PA has its back to the wall. It is attempting to change course to gain credibility, hence it did not relent in the face of pressure from the US to withdraw the proposed resolution placed before the Security Council, in the hope of gaining some credibility.

Its options for the future are limited. Various plans were announced then withdrawn, but some form of “diplomatic resistance” is now envisioned including encouraging various states to recognize a Palestinian State within the 1967 borders, and at some point in September 2011, putting the matter before the UN General assembly.

Revolution and Counter Revolution

In spite of the euphoria that gripped Arabs and Palestinians as a result of the upheavals in Arab countries, caution needs to take precedence. In Tunisia and Egypt, the revolutions are still in the making and counter-revolutionary forces both inside those countries with support from outside are at work. The removal of Mubarak or Ben Ali does not change the regime as demanded by the demonstrators in Tunisia and in Tahrir square. Unlike Libya where the regime will change if Gaddafi departs, the regimes of Tunisia and Egypt are more institutionalized and entrenched.

Two processes are now at work in Tunisia and Egypt: internal pressure to change the regime, largely through the pressure of multitudes, in millions as the case in Egypt.

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The second, a determined attempt to delimit and contain change in so far as possible by remnants of both regimes with the support of external actors. It was no accident therefore that the demonstration in Tahrir square in Cairo that took place on Friday April 1st was called “the Friday to rescue the revolution”.

One should expect that such a process

of contestation will continue for some time to come. It will be in stages and may well last for several years even if in stages. Revolutions-in-the-making do not end in one fell swoop. One should expect that in the case of Egypt and Tunisia at least, that there will be periods of internal contestation, interspersed with periods of relative relaxation, the thermidors of the revolution-in-the-making.

Still, one should expect that if there are free and unrigged elections for new parliaments, particularly in Egypt, those new parliaments will have to reflect public opinion to some degree or another in relation to policies, both internal and external. This is the dilemma for the US and Israel, and this is the crux of the matter as far as Palestine is concerned. It is here where hope lies from a Palestinian point of view, a

hope that the Mubarak regime succeeded in blocking for thirty years. An early possible sign of the changing political drift in Egypt, is the invitation extended to Mahmoud Abbas to visit Cairo on April 7th expressly to discuss steps for reconciliation between Gaza and Ramallah. Opening the Rafah crossing from Gaza to Egypt is the first item on the agenda.

To the extent that the ferment now taking place in several Arab countries leads to similar changes, the balance of diplomatic power in the region could shift in the interest of the Palestinian cause. This is the hope that most Palestinians have. But it is not necessarily the promise. We are at the beginning of a process, and the end is not quite in sight. But the beginning is indeed glorious.