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A PALESTINIAN VIEW

An earthquake deferred

an interview with Mahdi Abdul Hadi

bitterlemons: What relevance does the turmoil in Iran have for the Palestinian street?

Abdul Hadi: It has both direct and indirect relevance to the Palestinian cause. I believe there are three major regional players who are directly and indirectly affecting the Palestinian street. These effects have been observed very closely in recent elections in Turkey, Israel and Iran and all have different impacts on the Palestinian-Israeli.

In Turkey, the rise of the Islamists and the corresponding position of the army was a signal as to how political Islam can be accommodated in a secular framework. Alongside this, the public relations battle during the Gaza war, when Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan confronted Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos, brought Turkey closer to Palestinians, while maintaining the country's position as an umbrella for Israeli-Syrian political normalization.

The Israeli elections, meanwhile, brought a right-wing government with the harsh rhetoric and stubbornness of Avigdor Lieberman and Binyamin Netanyahu. Israel has been confronted not only by traditional antagonists like Iran, but also by a new global leadership represented by Barack Obama.

That new leadership role has now come under renewed scrutiny with the Iranian elections. The election of Obama and the atmosphere he brought opened the door for Iran to move through and come in from the cold. Everyone expected Iranians to rise to the challenge, to allow Mir Hossein Mousavi to move Iran into the international community and onto a closer footing with Obama and Erdogan.

What happened, however, from a Palestinian perspective, is a political earthquake deferred.

bitterlemons: So Palestinians would have preferred Mousavi?

Abdul Hadi: Yes, because it would have brought Iran onto the stage that Obama has set and enabled the country to take advantage of the new international climate. It would have brought Iran closer to the international community, closer to the language of Obama and to the culture of what is missing in the Middle East, namely challenging others in their own language instead of simply sitting in our tents and demanding the same thing in the same language that we have been demanding for the past 61 years since our first nakba.

bitterlemons: In terms of the actual unrest on the streets of Tehran, does this hold any special resonance for Palestinians?

Abdul Hadi: There are three layers to look at. The first is within Hamas. We are now seeing different language coming from the movement. We saw this especially in Hamas leader Khalid Mishaal's speech next to Secretary-General Amr Musa at the Arab League recently. Mishaal watered down the movement's hard line and came closer to reconciliation and accepting to share the future along the lines of the Egyptian formula, rather than remaining in his bunker.

This softer approach is coming mainly from Hamas in Gaza, where officials are saying that the movement cannot afford to maintain the status quo. Even formerly hardline Gazan Hamas leaders like Mahmoud Zahar are saying Hamas is willing to reconcile and implement the three main issues in unity talks: exchanging prisoners, ending the siege and beginning the reconstruction of Gaza. With hardliners in Gaza moving to the political center, they are inviting the Damascus leadership to do the same.

The second layer is Fateh. Fateh members are also moving to the center, meaning they will not oppose PA President Mahmoud Abbas holding the Fateh sixth general convention in Bethlehem and will not stand on the sidelines and sulk. There are three main groups: the military group, who are demanding a 50 percent membership and a share in the central committee; the political/technocrat group, represented by over 160,000 civil servants in the PA; and what used to be called the young guard, headed by Marwan Barghouti. All are beginning to coalesce around the center with Abbas, also in order to take advantage of the new international climate.

The third layer is among Palestinians generally. There, people

either see in the Iran events a form of perestroika, Moscow-style, a western conspiracy to bring down the Iranian regime, or the will of the Iranian people, who are demanding change. The latter group is urging Palestinians to follow that example in criticizing the regime, in protesting the military authority of General Keith Dayton in the West Bank and in demanding progress in the unity talks in Cairo.

bitterlemons: Will the outcome of the turmoil in Iran be important in shaping the short-term future here?

Abdul Hadi: The political earthquake of 2006, when Hamas won elections and formed a government, was contained. The result was the division of Palestinians. The same may apply to Iran.

bitterlemons: And how important is what is happening in Iran to the general trend favoring political Islam in the region?

Abdul Hadi: Political Islam will remain and be relatively unaffected. The wealth and richness of political Islam will stay, but it is moving to the center. There is more moderation, there is less the language of take-it-or-leave-it. This was something that was reflected in the speech by Ismail Haniyeh, next to Jimmy Carter, when he said Hamas would accept a state on the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital and the return of the refugees. This is the language of the center, the language of moderation.

bitterlemons: So this includes what is happening in Iran?

Abdul Hadi: With or without Mahmoud Ahmedinezhad, Iran's position on Palestine is clear and unchangeable. But what is happening in Iran means greater internationalization of Iran's policies and thus greater moderation.- *Published 22/6/2009 © bitterlemons.org*

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