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The Gaza-West Bank Split

A Palestinian State without a single territorial unit

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September 20th, 2007

Three months have passed since the June military coup d'état in Gaza which shocked the Palestinian people and distorted their concepts of a Palestinian national identity. In order to understand the implications of this political split between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, it is important to examine the four main components of the current Palestinian political situation. They are the following:

- a) the message from Gaza
- b) the realities in the West Bank and Jerusalem
- c) the Quartet agenda with a newly appointed representative (Tony Blair)
- d) the various negotiation venues

When considering these four components, so-called Middle East experts as well as politicians invariably sink into the details of each and are led into looking for individual solutions to separate crisis management scenarios rather than focusing on the need to end the Israeli occupation of 1967 and to accommodate Israel as a part of the Middle East rather than its present status as a military ghetto.

It is worth mentioning that Palestinian and Israeli political representatives lost the initiative and the political will, and are overwhelmed if not contained by the regional and international political agenda. This new agenda covers global issues such as Islamophobia, Terrorism, Iraq, Iran, as well as new Tools of Security to be shared between the governments of the Middle East and the West to contain the anger and frustration of the oppressed people in the region. It is high time to recognise that weak,

corrupt political regimes and their alliances with the Western powers is opening a new chapter of uncertainty vis-à-vis the abovementioned issues, and this will lead me to portray the four components of where a future Palestinian state can be headed while we are witnessing a deep, painful separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem is coming under an increasing Israeli hegemony day by day.

The message from Gaza is bitter and singles out many contradictions. The first note in my recent conversations with prominent activists from various factions in Gaza, including Hamas, was:

We Gazans, who represent 40% of the people in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, know that we are living in a closed, isolated prison under siege not only by the Israelis but by many others as well. We know that we have very limited resources. 1½ million Gazans sharing a 5km-wide strip of only 340 square kilometres, 60% of them registered refugees, are dependent on daily subsidies of food and water from UNRWA and other international agencies. 70% are unemployed and living below the poverty line, and what used to be approximately 50,000 civil servants of the Palestinian Authority are haunted by uncertainty about their status as officials recognised by Hamas or Fatah, or about being replaced by force. The five major gates of our prison (Erez, Nahal Oz, Sufa, Kerem Shalom, Rafah), are sealed not only by guards and guns, but by endless security tools, as well as a lengthy 500m-wide security space separating the borders of Gaza from Israel. Our airport was destroyed and our project for the construction of a seaport impeded. Now the Israeli government is about to declare Gaza an "enemy entity" and as such its borders would be permanently closed.

On top of that, there is a new political system being forged. True, it is inexperienced, politically illiterate and certainly not political Islam in the making. But Hamas is building up an authority with a military "Executive Force" comprising more than 5000 troops. For the first time in years, it has succeeded in enforcing law and order and half of the people now feel their security and safety are now assured. The only opposition is what is left of the secular Fatah bodies and representatives as well as individuals who complain as much about the hard fist of the new regime in the making as about the confusion between loyalty to Gaza or Ramallah. And of course, the complaints of the voices of opposition focus on the thousands of students who are denied

access to Egypt to continue their higher education, as well as the poverty, unemployment and shortages of fuel, electricity and food. The imposed restrictions on import and export for the middle classes are a collective punishment, as many of them own small factories which could serve $\frac{1}{3}$ of the population's daily needs if they were not forced to close as a result.

The message continued from Gaza saying:

We look at you in the West Bank and see you in a worse situation than ours and it is you who should be worried, if not living in a nightmare, of what lies ahead. In Jerusalem, where Israel has succeeded in changing the status quo, creating facts on the ground and forcing 250,000 Jerusalemites to adjust and accommodate themselves to a new reality on the ground and finally becoming an Israeli city similar to the case of Jaffa and Tel Aviv, as well as enduring the continuous obsessed and powerful Israeli demand and de facto practice of sharing the compound of Muslim holy sites.

The land of the West Bank has been divided as follows: the Jordan Valley, which represents 28.5%, is closed and completely dominated and controlled by Israel and allowing 3500-4000 settlers to control 85% of the water resources, and Palestinians are not allowed to live, work or even invest in their own properties. On the other side, you see the Wall "slicing the flesh of the Palestinian body," annexing more land (9.5%) which, in addition to settlement block areas (8%), leaves you with access to only 54% of the West Bank. In addition, there are over 400,000 settlers including those of East Jerusalem controlling all the roads with powerful security forces supporting them with more than 570 checkpoints, as well as the main three prison gates: Huwara in the North isolating the triangle of Nablus, Jenin and Tulkarm; in the centre, the Kalendia Gate controlling Ramallah cantons and access to Jerusalem; and in the South, the Tunnel Road at the entrance of Bethlehem, while Hebron – a city of over 200,000 – is closed and governed by settlers of Kriyat Arba and by the more than 700 settlers in the heart of the old city.

If one should compare between the "two entities," the West Bank and Gaza, one will find the conditions in the prison of Gaza are less painful than in what is left of the old West Bank in terms of land, authority and the fragmentation of the national Palestinian identity into local city and family identities.

The message continues from Gaza:

Any invitation to reunite the two positions is to provide a political horizon or a convincing political agenda with leadership to carry out the mission, which is not available in the short term.

According to a recent poll survey,

" Hamas has failed in convincing the people to accept its narrative vis-à-vis government and resistance. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority government led by Salam Fayad has failed to meet the public expectation in the two of its most important needs: enforcing law and order and fighting corruption."

The final message from those covering Gaza was:

Why and on what conditions should the new rulers in Gaza reconsider their current separation, and how would that benefit them in the future?

The message from **the West Bank** takes a different perspective:

The day after the brutal coup d'état of Hamas, people questioned the power of a newly emerging political system, parallel and competing with that of the West Bank. Ismail Haniyeh, the deposed Prime Minister, claimed in one of the Friday sermons that the reason for the closures, the siege, the boycott and the collective punishment they are facing in Gaza is because Hamas represents "a model for political Islam in government and politics." This portrayed an image in contradiction with Hamas's platform during the election in 2006 which was of reform, fighting corruption and sharing a national coalition government. We have seen the brutality of their security forces, the arrests and beatings of journalists and public figures, the plunder of Arafat's house and those of many other PLO leaders, and the arrests and interrogations under torture, as well as the dismissal of people from their offices, and finally with the new interpretations of the verses of the Quran banning Friday prayers in public places – a ban enforced partly by throwing sewage in the streets and public places to prevent people from praying there. All of the above not only shake and weaken the image of what a political Islamic system represents, but lead to a conclusion that Hamas is simply a political body using an Islamic narrative to govern. This is leading to more splits and divisions in the more than 1½ million Palestinians of Gaza, bringing a

“culture of fear” among Gazans who originally saw the coup as a means or tool to change the old, corrupt authority.

The other message from the West Bank was the following:

Although the separation is painful, there is no logical or practical venue to overcome it in the short-term; but in the long-term, it will be from within Gaza that this unexpected, painful separation will be ended. In addition to the above two cases of the lack of a venue and difficulties of an internal movement for change, the Israeli military establishment led by Ehud Barak will continue the ongoing military incursion and the killing and arresting of Hamas activists; in doing so Barak will maybe seize the opportunity presented by the weak and divided Arab states as well as the current fear of a war with Iran haunting the Middle East to lead an operation to decapitate the Hamas leadership.

The Quartet and the mission of Tony Blair

It is true that its political agenda has been hijacked by Washington and has limited its mission to two baskets: one covering the ongoing *ad hoc* meetings between Olmert and Abbas concerning internal issues such as security, economy and negotiations. The other basket is the new mission of Mr Blair for institution-building and reforms in the PA and in Palestinian society. Of course, the umbrella has been the US president’s speech for a two-state solution and the Arab initiative of 2001 and endorsed for the second time in 2007, embracing Israel as a member of the region when it ends its occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

On reform for Fatah, it is common knowledge that Fatah has been defeated and humiliated in the election and is facing a serious crisis in the post-Arafat era, i.e. leadership, management of fragmented institutions and the lack of a socio-political agenda after forty years of resistance. Europeans have been investing in serious ongoing projects to reform the Fatah movement without success. The core of Fatah youth, mid-professionals and leadership are either among the 11,000 Palestinians in Israeli prisons with Marwan Barghouti, or caught between two edges: their loyalty to the movement and fear of a split from the old guard, and the closed political horizon for successful negotiations to end occupation or ever changing the painful reality on the ground. Of course, Israel is not interested in a new, strong, secular Fatah movement, otherwise it could release Marwan Barghouti and his colleagues in order to work with the

many skilled professionals in the Occupied Palestinian Territories to lead the needed reform in Fatah.

On security reform, we have been witnessing various scenarios and overlapping training and educational programmes by the European Union and the United States for a Palestinian security system. The US security coordinator, Lieutenant-General Keith Dayton, introduced various plans to strengthen the "President's Guard" and to establish 5 major security bodies to govern what is left of the West Bank. At the same time, there are ongoing training episodes for various branches of the current security bodies when what is really needed is to put a grand plan for a national security system closing the gaps between resistant committees or factions or the young generations ripe for recruitment by Hamas, and "Palestinian National Guards" loyal to Palestine and not affiliated with small agendas. A national system is needed into which all factions and the many unemployed youths can "melt," and which can provide people with loyalty to Palestine, national pride and rule of law where equality and justice has to prevail. Most European countries after the Second World War created a system in which their resistance movements and bodies "melted" with loyalty for one unifying national cause. It is crucial that Palestine should not be an exception to such formulae. Otherwise, the gap between what is called resistance and a functioning security system will continue to widen, crippling the process for state-building.

On economic development, there have been ongoing small projects in response to the need for investment and development. Yet there is no national development plan; according to a World Bank report, "the PA requires a minimum of \$1.62 billion in foreign aid per year, 91% of which will go to meet recurring expenditure needs rather than be allocated for development. The West Bank and Gaza face an expanding labor force and a shrinking private sector." What is planned for the Jordan valley with the support of Japan will be at the expense of the hinterland of the West Bank. In addition, it is bringing in colonizing settlers as the new owners of the Jordan Valley, forcing them to be recognised as partners in terms of all projects including export via Jordan to the wider Middle Eastern region. There are many other episodes which can prove that there is no Palestinian economy or any development as Israel has the upper hand to shape and implement current and future development plans since the Paris Protocol of 1995.

As for the reform of the government, the Palestinian Legislative Council and the civil society, ten years after the establishment of the PA, are witnessing that the 160,000 civil servants will continue to be a huge

burden for any reforms. It is not enough to formulate a pension law or to portray a process of offering a national medal, a president's degree or a pension salary, for most of these people to accept the reality of the high time for retirement. The election law has been amended by the President but not accepted by the Hamas movement, which will continue to be an obstacle in its implementation. It has been said that no election can take place while the separation is still in effect. So reforms can be made on paper but not on the ground, and what is needed is a national consensus for a reform plan on all of the above.

Negotiation venues

There have been more than five venues of negotiations, dialogue and expert meetings between Palestinians and Israelis for the past five years, similar to the early 1990s which led to Oslo in 1993.

In November 1995, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli Jewish fundamentalist, and his thesis on negotiations and implementations was crippled. Rabin portrayed the Palestinian-Israeli process in a triangle: a) portions of land (Gaza and Jericho), b) phases of time (3-5 years), c) testing of power, ie the transformation of the PLO from a liberation movement into a state-building institution.

Those who succeeded Rabin – Peres, Netanyahu, Barak and Sharon – avoided this mission after Rabin and tried to establish their own unsuccessful agendas.

Sharon's triangle thesis, unlike Rabin's, did not address negotiations or phases but was based on his "Kadima unilateral thesis" which refused to recognise Arafat or any Palestinian partner and involved: a) withdrawal from Gaza evacuating the settlers and shifting the burden onto the shoulders of the Palestinians and Arabs, b) erecting a Wall separating what is left of the West Bank from Israel, annexing land, controlling water resources and empowering the three main blocks of settlers to shape not only the high-roads and bypass roads, but also ownership and development of the land, and c) Israelization of Jerusalem in addition to enforcing the sharing of the holy sites.

The post-Sharon era introduced new challenges for Israeli decision-makers. On the one hand, they lack Sharon's political will, his military

image or his powerful, decisive, unilateral actions; nor do they have enough public support or enough constituency for political survival.

The negotiating venues were, in the early days of Sharon's disappearance, discussions between Shimon Peres and Abu Ala and their draft of the old documents for a two-state solution. But gradually, Shimon Peres freed himself from such responsibility since his election as President of Israel.

The second venue has been portrayed as "four eyes;" Abu Mazen and Olmert's several meetings in Jerusalem and one in Jericho. Their venue has been encouraged and supported with high expectations from Washington, and in particular its Secretary of State. Abu Mazen has been very discreet about the details; Olmert's public statements and leaked information, however, refer to a joint statement, not an initial agreement nor a comprehensive political agenda on the framework of negotiations and with no hint of any agreed item.

The third venue has been two technical groups discussing final status issues, namely Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders and security arrangements. The importance of such a venue was indicated by the presence of the Deputy Prime Minister Haim Ramon and the adviser to the Prime Minister in the last few meetings. In addition, these groups studied carefully and compared notes on the accumulated negotiated documents of Camp David in July 2000, Taba in 2001, President Clinton's parameters and many others, such as the Geneva Accords of 2003.

The fourth venue: it is said that the general secretary of the PLO, Yasir Abed Rabo, has been renewing his dialogue with Yossi Belin, trying to combine the old 1995 Belin-Abu Mazen document with the Geneva Accords of 2003.

A fifth venue has been the Palestinian Prime Minister Salaam Fayad and the Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni as well as the Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak as they discuss the economy, security and the Arab initiative.

None of the above negotiations recognises the other or even admits to its existence, with the obvious exception of the "four eyes."

In the last meeting between the "four eyes," Abbas and Olmert, the decision was taken to appoint two committees to combine most of the above into a draft document. The Israeli Committee is to be formed from

advisors of the Prime Minister (Youram Torbovitish and Shalom Torjuman), of the Minister of Defense and of the Foreign Minister, while the Palestinian Committee has been appointed from among the old senior negotiators: Abu Ala, Abed Rabo, Sa'eb Earakat and Rafiq Hussein, Mahmoud Abbas's Chief of Cabinet.

The Israeli media is preparing its public opinion on an 8-point proposal by Vice-premier Haim Ramon, which addresses a) the sharing of Jerusalem, b) a land swap and an adjustment of the "green line" along the 1967 borders, c) compensation for Palestinian refugees, and d) the three main blocks of settlements in the West Bank.

It is obvious that the Olmert government has been using all of the above venues as a "testing balloon" and an Israeli argument with the US is that the Israeli public is not willing to endorse any of these ideas. At the same time, they do not see in Mahmoud Abbas a strong partner to legitimise and implement any agreement, especially after the separation of Gaza.

As long as the Palestinians are divided and separated and the Israelis divided and facing a crisis of leadership and a struggle for power between Olmert, Netanyahu, Barak and Livni, no joint declaration can be endorsed or accepted by the two people.

Closing statements

Palestinian, independent civil society activists are debating on the following:

- a) the urgency to end the military coup in Gaza
- b) the establishment of a professional independent government for one year, responsible for serious painful reform, ending corruption, establishing a national security system enforcing law and order, and formulating a national development plan for one country and one people.
- c) the preparations for an election for Parliament and the Presidency
- d) how to build consensus behind a national agenda to be endorsed by the Arab states and the European Union, to end occupation and establish a Palestinian state.

The above issues require people to overcome their pain and to heal their wounds, and to build a comprehensive effort by all parties to end occupation. Under current circumstances, this would seem to be an impossible mission.