

Palestinians consumed by 'culture of the prison'

Political analyst Abdel-Hadi is concerned population may look to Jordan

Rami G. Khouri (Daily Star staff) **interviews Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi**

BEIRUT: The Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem are likely to focus heavily on local issues and services in the years ahead, as their major population centers remain isolated from one another and the world, according to a respected Palestinian political analyst.

Dr. Mahdi Abdel-Hadi, founder and chairman of the Jerusalem-based Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), also warns about the potential of Palestinians responding to their difficult situation by trying to emigrate to Jordan.

He said in an interview with The Daily Star last week that, "the Palestinian people are not talking much any more about a two-state solution and where we go from here. They're talking about the culture of the prison."

He used the prison analogy to refer to Jerusalem, Nablus, Ramallah, Hebron, Gaza and other cities that were being totally isolated by the Israeli separation wall, settler roads, and land confiscations.

"In each prison a culture and a different agenda develop. There's no consensus where all Palestinians stand together around one position."

He characterized Nablus as a city of "militias, high unemployment and poverty, the absence of a real authority governing society or a municipality offering services, or an active chamber of commerce, businessmen and professionals."

Ramallah is a "prison of culture - cinemas, theater, workshops, seminars, lectures, visitors, as well as the new component of Ramallah prison, which is Arafat's mausoleum. In Hebron you find a classical, traditional Palestinian Islamic society, surviving in a unique way, in spite of the settlers, closures, and land confiscations. Jerusalem is off the map - isolated and strangled."

Abdel-Hadi is a leading analyst of Palestinian issues. He was born in Nablus, educated at Damascus University, and obtained his doctorate in 1984 from the School of Peace Studies at Bradford University in the United Kingdom, then spent a year as a fellow at Harvard University.

In the current conditions, he says, "people are asking themselves how they can survive in these prisons. How can we maintain our culture, identity, heritage and faith, without surrendering or giving up?"

The answer, he replies, is that Palestinians have "discovered the local society, the municipality address," meaning a focus on local services like water, sewage, education and health. Few people talk about liberation, independence and freedom, or even much about negotiations right now, instead focusing on how to ensure basic services that function efficiently.

"People are not looking for liberators, heroes or leaders, but rather representatives for a transitional phase, and this is where the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority come in."

Asked if this means that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) in such a context is little more than a mayor, he replied: "In this transitional role Abu Mazen is not a hero, an icon, or a symbol. He's the pragmatic, political national elite with a mission to put the house in order - law and order - go for reforms, stop corruption and centralize the security authority."

Abdel-Hadi says that Abu Mazen has two burdens on his shoulder: how to retire some 10,000 old guard of the PLO and Fateh who have lost their constituency and are out of touch, and how to liberate the 8000 Palestinians in Israeli prisons.

The general sentiment among Palestinians seems to be that Abu Mazen will remain accepted and popular in the public eye as long as he generates something tangible for the people on the ground.

"The Israelis and Americans are in a position now to cripple Abu Mazen and force him back to his old sulky mood and resign, as he did previously when he was prime minister. Or he will be encouraged by the results that may flow from his visit to Washington last week, if he has something in his basket for his people," Abdel-Hadi believes.

Abu Mazen's vulnerable position is exacerbated by what he calls "a real crisis among the old guard of Fateh, in the prime ministry, the president's office, the Parliament and elsewhere."

As Palestinians focus more on domestic issues, he suggests, Hamas has done well in recent municipal elections due to its reputation for efficient service delivery and lack of corruption, but it now stands at a major crossroads. It must choose between remaining a symbol of resistance, and participating in local governance and Parliament, but without joining the government or getting involved in negotiations with Israel. Such an approach would logically see Hamas enter into a coalition with Fateh, as the best way for Palestinian society as a whole to get through this transitional phase.

The other serious school of thought, he says, especially in Gaza, "wants a green march," meaning it's time for Hamas to move into government in a big way. This is feasible, some Hamas members feel, because they have proven their legitimacy in society, are being indirectly courted by Europeans and Americans, and should not miss the opportunity to have a big say in political life, perhaps even to represent Palestinian society, Abdel-Hadi explains.

At the same time, Abdel-Hadi expects "a major component of moderate, pragmatic Fateh young generation" to assert itself in the years ahead. He sees this as currently represented by two emerging faces, one in prison and one outside prison. Marwan Barghouti in prison represents the intifada generation, and also the tactics for negotiations. Outside prison, "Nasser Kidwa has come back as foreign minister and seems to be a rising star in terms of reform, putting the Foreign Ministry in order, and changing the role of Palestinian diplomacy in the world. These are the two emerging faces to watch for now."

The internal political battles among Palestinians can be stopped and overcome if people see progress on the political and daily life issues that concern them, especially Israel's separation wall and settlements, he adds.

The separation wall "is a sharp knife cutting our flesh and creating the new culture of the prison. It's changing people's lives and aspirations because it impacts on all living conditions - contacts, money, travel, business, future plans," he explains, noting that the consequences may be severe.

The most dangerous one, if Israel and Jerusalem are closed to people in Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron and elsewhere, he says, "is that people will probably look east, to Jordan. They will see Jordan as still open to them and a new lung that allows them to breathe."

This may also reflect the fact that Ramallah's role as a rising commercial center for Palestine has been hit by the recent Israeli raids on some Jordanian banks there. Israel confiscated money from the banks, accusing Hamas and others of having accounts and engaging in money laundering.

"This has shaken investors' confidence in the banking system and the economy in general and prompted a shift of money back to Jordan. If Palestinians also see new regional developments in Jordan - a dynamic new county or governorate in Maan, in Mafraq, in Irbid, in Amman - and each one has a Parliament and government, developing and building cities and economies, industries, roads, and services, then Palestinian refugees might be attracted to move there. This would make the buffer state of Jordan developing into the new Palestine, which is the reality that Ariel Sharon has always wanted to see - Jordan as the alternative answer for the Palestinians."

We must simultaneously assess the potential significance of a scenario for Palestinian statehood just released by the Rand Corporation study. This "speaks of an arc of Palestinian areas, with a train coming from Gaza to Hebron, to the prison of Ramallah and the prison of Nablus, with tunnels and bridges to connect these isolated cantons and prisons."

He says many Palestinians might jump on the idea of a sophisticated, modern train connecting them, facilitating movement among people, but this changes totally the idea of the integrity of the land and a normal life in a Palestinian community.

"You'll have a small airport in Gaza and Jenin and flights between them, and you forget totally about the idea of a normal Palestinian state. You start thinking like a businessman on a working trip, with a suitcase, a briefcase, a checkbook, a contract, hotel reservations and a travel agenda, hopping from one Palestinian area to another without a place to stay permanently, forgetting about the concept of a single state."