

Palestine After the Arab Spring

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ABSTRACT *Many expected the Arab uprisings to strengthen official and popular Arab support for Palestinian self-determination, and, for a time, they did. Since then, internal strife, the return in several Arab states of the ancien regime, and an intensified regional Cold War have left the Palestinians isolated and vulnerable. But historical precedent as well as existing tendencies counsel against despair.*

When a series of uprisings across the Arab world in 2010-2012 overthrew a number of autocratic rulers and weakened others, the initial expectation was that these developments would significantly strengthen Arab official support for the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, and remove various restraints on popular support for the Palestinians and the latter's freedom of action in the Arab world. The response to Israel's late 2012 assault on the Gaza Strip, Operation Pillar of Defense, appeared to validate such assessments, as—in sharp contrast to Operation Cast Lead in 2008-09—Arab leaders beat a path to Gaza City amidst intense bombing

to demonstrate their solidarity with not only the Palestinian people but a Hamas government most of them had previously spurned.¹ Similarly, there were few constraints against popular expressions of support for the beleaguered Palestinians. One notable consequence of this mobilized Arab-Muslim support was that Pillar of Defense was much less destructive than Cast Lead.

Since then the situation has shifted dramatically. On the one hand, a growing number of Arab states have been consumed by internal strife and foreign intervention, and are no longer capable of pursuing a coherent and active foreign policy beyond—at

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2014-2015 academic year in Gaza started in a two weeks delay in the classrooms demolished by the Israelis.

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best— regime preservation. In other states, most notably Egypt, the old order has returned with a vengeance, attributing many of its problems to contrived Palestinian subterfuge and encouraging unprecedented levels of anti-Palestinian hysteria in the media.

More broadly, regional upheaval has intensified the regional Cold War. In this equation, several key conservative Arab states have sought out Israel as a valuable ally in their rivalry with Iran. Rather than outbidding each other in support of the Palestinians, or seeking to control the “Palestinian card,” as was the case in previous eras, this time around the Palestinian question is all but ignored, seen primarily as an obstacle and nuisance to more important affairs of state.

From the vantage point of 2015, the prospects for Palestinian self-deter-

mination could hardly be worse. A regional agenda no longer exists, and rather than serving as a unifying factor for rival camps, the Palestinian struggle is overwhelmingly absent. For their part, competing Palestinian factions have become subordinate elements of these regional coalitions, desperately seeking supporters (and funders) rather than leveraging the autonomous (symbolic) power of the Palestine cause. To an even greater extent than during the height of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, Palestine is absent from the Arab agenda.

The implications of regional isolation for the Palestinians were apparent in two important developments last year: the diplomatic process engineered by US Secretary of State John Kerry, which collapsed after nine months in April 2014; and Operation Protective Edge, Israel’s summer 2014 massacre in Gaza.

The Kerry Process

In July 2013, Secretary Kerry launched a diplomatic initiative for resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict. In retrospect, the timing made perfect sense. Previous rounds of negotiations had come to naught largely because the Palestinians had refused to sign on to an agreement granting Israel's long-standing bottom line demands: the annexation of its major settlement blocs on some 10 percent of the West Bank and the nullification of the Palestinian refugees' right of return. But the Palestinians in 2013 were politically the weakest they had ever been since the occupation began in 1967. This was due to four principal factors:

- Regionally, as discussed, the Arab world was completely shattered. Its officials and to some extent public opinion as well evinced a sharply diminished interest in the Israel-Palestine conflict, and it was in no position to resist US demands relating to it. Kerry was meticulous in preparing the grounds for Palestinian defeat. When he asked the Arab League to amend its 2002 Peace Initiative to include a reference to land swaps, it amended the initiative. When he asked it to meet and endorse his guidelines for the diplomatic process, it met and endorsed his guidelines.² The Palestinians were completely isolated.
- Hamas, which had been the principal obstacle to the Palestinian Authority (PA) imposing its will, had seen its role and influence sharply reduced. Responding to the Arab

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uprisings, Hamas placed its bets on a regional triumph of the Muslim Brotherhood and placed its eggs in the basket of the Morsi government in Egypt, severed ties with Syria, and was consequently ostracized by Iran. When the Egyptian military overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013, it left Hamas in its most desperate state since its founding.

- The Palestinian people had never been more despondent and resigned. Talk of a third intifada bore no relation to the reality on the ground: apathy, exhaustion, cynicism and despair.
- The PA was more dependent on the US than ever, while its leaders lacked even the residue of nationalist principle possessed by former Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yasser Arafat.

The Kerry initiative was an attempt by Kerry and President Barack Obama to exploit the Palestinians' unprecedented weakness in order to foist on them Israel's bottom line demands and in that way to end the conflict. While this reflected a shrewd reading of the political landscape by Kerry and his advisors, it was not without precedent. The 1993 Oslo Accord was in many ways a similar attempt by Israel and the US to capitalize on the

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PLO's political isolation and financial desperation in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. They sought to recruit the PLO as Israel's enforcer in the territories, and ultimately to groom a Palestinian leadership willing to decisively relinquish Palestinian rights. In this they were largely successful: the interim Palestinian authority established by Oslo cooperated as Israel's diplomatic dance partner, while relieving it of the administrative, military and financial burdens of occupation. As one senior advisor to Prime ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert put it, thanks to Oslo, "Israel has the authority of the sovereign in the territories –without the obligations."³ Yet Oslo's success was not total; while Arafat was prepared to help Israel maintain the status quo, he refused, at the Camp David summit in 2000, to formally legitimize it.

The Kerry initiative in this respect marked a significant advance. As American officials subsequently revealed, the Palestinian leadership during the Kerry talks conceded everything. Whereas Palestinian objections to Israel's annexation of

the settlement blocs had derailed previous negotiations in Annapolis in 2008, this time around the blocs barely figured on the agenda. The reason, as confirmed by American officials involved in the process, was that their fate had been decided.⁴ Paradoxically, it was Benjamin Netanyahu who kept alive the prospect of a resolution of the conflict based on the international consensus of a two-state solution; presented with a Palestinian capitulation awarding Israel permanent control over the choicest chunks of the West Bank and limiting the implementation of the right of return to a level acceptable to it, Israel's prime minister rejected his state's own long-standing demands as insufficient and insisted, instead, on "complete control over the territories...forever."⁵ But if Palestinians narrowly escaped decisive defeat because of Netanyahu's recalcitrance, they nonetheless suffered a blow that might prove difficult to reverse: the Palestinian leadership, its internal weakness exacerbated by regional fragmentation, disinterest and hostility, signed on to Kerry's terms. It will require a significant exertion of popular will to erase that signature, which will otherwise form the new baseline in future talks.

Operation Protective Edge

On July 8, 2014, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge, a 51-day air and ground assault on the Gaza Strip. This was Israel's third major attack on Gaza in six years, and by far the most destructive; by the time a cease-



fire went into effect on August 26, approximately 2,200 Palestinians had been killed, and more than 19,000 Palestinian homes had been severely damaged or destroyed.⁶

The operation did not turn out quite as Netanyahu had anticipated. In some respects it fared worse. To Israel's surprise, Hamas had dug a sophisticated, ramified network of tunnels inside Gaza. Adopting and adapting Hezbollah's strategy during the 2006 Lebanon war, the Palestinian resistance used projectiles to lure Israel into a ground invasion, and then emerged from the tunnels, which withstood Israeli aerial bombing and artillery shells, to inflict an unprecedented number of combatant casualties.⁷ Only ten Israeli soldiers were killed in Cast Lead, four by friendly fire; many Israeli soldiers testified not having even seen a Hamas fighter.⁸

This time around, however, at least 66 Israeli soldiers were killed.

Other changes, however, worked in Israel's favor. In the preceding years, regional rivalries had sharpened while forces associated with the regional *ancien regime* were in many places able to re-assert themselves. During Protective Edge, Netanyahu was able to benefit hugely from these political realignments. Thus regional powers, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, openly longed for Hamas's removal from power,⁹ and Egypt in particular played a critical role in enabling Netanyahu to expand the initial air assault into a full-scale ground invasion. Once hostilities broke out, Israel faced a dilemma familiar to it from the 2006 Lebanon war and Cast Lead. Short-range projectiles of the kind Hamas¹⁰ possessed couldn't be disabled from the air; they had

Jewish protestors, who oppose Israel's existence, hold placards during an anti-Zionist demonstration outside the US consulate in Jerusalem against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on March 3, 2015.

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to be taken out at ground level. But a ground invasion would have cost Netanyahu either too much domestically, if many Israeli soldiers were killed fighting street-by-street with Hamas, or too much internationally, if Israeli soldiers immunized themselves from attack by laying waste to Gaza's civilian infrastructure and killing many civilians as they advanced. Netanyahu consequently held back from launching a ground invasion, until a gift dropped into his lap. Tony Blair helped coordinate a ceasefire deal, formally presented by Egyptian strongman Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on July 14, in which Hamas would agree to stop firing projectiles in exchange for an easing of the blockade when "the security situation stabilizes."¹¹ No such security caveat was stipulated in the two prior ceasefire agreements between Israel and Hamas in 2008 and 2012.¹² Inasmuch as Israel designates Hamas a terrorist organization, by definition the security situation in Gaza could stabilize only when Hamas was either defeated or disarmed itself, in the absence of which the illegal and inhumane siege would continue. It was surely known in advance that Hamas had to reject these ceasefire terms, which would then hand Israel a credible rationale for a brutal ground invasion.¹³ The Arab League –in its sole meeting on Gaza– supported the cynical Egyptian cease-fire ultimatum.¹⁴ Only Iran, Turkey, and Qatar among Middle Eastern powers opposed the Israeli attack.

A critical factor limiting the damage Israel wreaked during Operation Pil-



Palestinians walk along part of Israel's controversial separation barrier while they cross from the West Bank to Jerusalem for Friday prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, as Israel has limited access to the mosque.

AFP PHOTO / ABBAS MOMANI

lar of Defense (2012) had been the strong backing Egypt and Turkey lent Hamas.¹⁵ But after the July 2013 coup Egypt became Hamas's sworn nemesis, while Turkey was preoccupied with other regional developments, notably in Syria. Convulsed by its own internal conflicts and humanitarian crises, and confronted with increasing levels of domestic repression, public opinion across large swathes of the Arab world fell mute during the Israeli assault. As a result, Arab autocracies and their Washington patron paid no price for egging Israel on. The EU also gave Israel a free pass because it dreaded the "militant Islam" now spreading like wildfire under the ISIL banner, and to which Hamas was wrongly assimilated. The only notable exceptions

outside the Middle East were Latin American states (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, El Salvador, Chile, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela), which, in a rare display of selfless solidarity with be-

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leaguered Gaza, diplomatically registered their disgust at Israel's actions.¹⁶ Still, amidst the slaughter, Gaza basically stood alone and abandoned.

Prospects

The Arab world is today uninterested in or hostile to the cause of Palestine. Domestic struggles over reform and reaction have displaced the Palestinian struggle from people's concerns, while the unfathomable scale of the bloodletting in Syria has raised the threshold required to attract media attention and popular outrage. Several regional powers are now openly aligned with Israel, and the rest are otherwise engaged. Successful national liberation struggles have relied upon the support of regional powers to sustain their prominence on the international political agenda; thus, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa received cru-

cial backing from the African states, which saw the apartheid system as a personal affront to all Africans, and from the Arab states and the broader nonaligned movement. Whether a national liberation movement can prevail in the absence of determined regional support must remain, for now, an open question.

But if present regional dynamics offer scant hope for the Palestinian struggle, before succumbing to depression and defeatism, it is worth recalling that we have been here before. In 1986-1987, Palestinians in the occupied territories seemed, to many observers, "too intimidated, divided, and politically suppressed to ever develop a coherent alternative leadership,"¹⁷ while the international resonance of the Palestinian cause was at a historic low. "For most Arab governments," the *New York Times* reported in October 1986, "the Palestinian issue has been supplanted by more immediate problems," including rivalry with Iran, "mounting Islamic fundamentalism," an "economic crisis with severe social fallout," and "the frustrations of a vast, newly educated generation."¹⁸ *Plus ça change*. "The Palestinian-Jewish conflict seems to be slowly receding to its original nucleus and size," the *Times* observed in late 1987, "confined to the two communities inside Israel and the occupied territories, while the eastern Arab world is now fully engaged with the threat from radical Shiite Iran."¹⁹

The November 1987 summit of the Arab League, the first to be held

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in Jordan, saw the Palestine issue “dropped... to second-class status”: “For the first time since the Arab League was founded in 1944, the primary focus of such a meeting is not Palestine and Zionism, but rather Iran and Islamic revolution.”²⁰ Egypt, previously shunned for concluding a separate peace with Israel, was welcomed back into the fold as the Arab states “placed Iran ahead of Israel as a threat to Arab order.”²¹ This reordering of priorities did not go unnoticed. In December 1987, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations, gloated before the General Assembly that “things are changing”: “Three weeks ago at the Arab summit in Amman, the Arab leaders appeared to have discovered a new ‘core’ to the Middle East conflict. In an unusual display of rhetorical unity, they put the old ‘core,’ the Palestinian one, on the back burner.”²²

A week later, Palestinians responded to their isolation and marginalization with the *intifada*, a mass popular uprising which catapulted Palestinians and Palestine to the top of the inter-

national agenda, forced Israel and the US onto the defensive and put an end to international efforts to resolve the conflict by circumventing Palestinian agency.²³ At the Arab summit a month before the uprising, the host, Jordan’s King Hussein, his star riding high in the Arab world, had gone out of his way to humiliate Arafat, not bothering to receive him at the Amman airport despite personally welcoming every other Arab leader who attended the summit.²⁴ Less than a year into the *intifada*, Hussein formally renounced Jordan’s claim to the West Bank.

Palestinians find themselves in a very similar situation today, though it is in many respects also significantly worse. Most prominently, the Palestinian national movement in practice no longer exists, and what remains of the Palestinian political system is deeply divided politically and also territorially. At the popular level the Palestinian people are fragmented in ways that would have been difficult to imagine even in the late 1980s prior to the 1987 uprising.

All of the above notwithstanding, there is reason to believe things are beginning to change. Most importantly, Palestinians are increasingly vocal about their dissatisfaction with their sclerotic leadership. Indeed, Abbas’s most recent attempt to further consolidate power and deal what is perceived to be the death blow to the PLO appears to have backfired, perhaps spectacularly so. Over time, this opposition, encompassing not only popular opinion but also significant

sectors of the political elite, is likely to produce new and more legitimate forms of leadership whether within or outside the current institutional frameworks. Secondly, the current upheaval in the Arab world is an ongoing, non-linear process. There will be further reversals of fortune that in some cases may benefit the Palestinians no less than others have damaged their interests. More importantly the rights of citizenship are increasingly on the agenda. While often difficult to perceive, this impetus will become more visible and more pertinent once a modicum of stability is restored. The push for citizens' rights is particularly significant because in regional terms nothing will benefit the Palestinians more than governments that are more responsive to the agendas of their people. Thirdly, as the Kerry initiative so clearly demonstrates, Israel has become so extreme it is no longer capable of accepting a Palestinian capitulation. Fourthly, and perhaps most significantly, the past decade has witnessed a sea change in public opinion in the West. To judge by public opinion polls, Israel is now among the most disliked and even despised states on the planet.²⁵ Although its claims of success have, in our opinion, been exaggerated, there's no doubt that the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement has exploited and harnessed this growing disaffection in creative ways, and, along with European elite opinion, which has grown weary of the Israel-Palestine conflict in general, and Israeli obduracy in particular, helps keep Palestine on the international agenda.

Change often comes in sudden and unexpected ways. It's anyone's guess how regional developments will unfold in the coming months and years. The task at hand is, as always, to prepare the ground so that, if and when a popular, unified movement reemerges in the occupied Palestinian territories, it will be in the best possible position to achieve victory. ■

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