



Western Crisis Response and the Question of Palestine
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For various reasons the lessons of Afghanistan do not easily apply to one of the most risky crisis areas in the world: Israel/Palestine. Firstly because the conflict is ruled by certain parameters which make a military Western response rather predictable. Israel takes care for its own security, and will never allow any Western or other interference in this area without its consent. And in the unlikely case that Israel's security or existence is really endangered, the US will provide the required assistance, probably followed by some EU countries as well. In the West there is also widespread support for peacekeeping in this area in case a final agreement is concluded, without the usual political, military, or budgetary constraints invoked for other post-Afghanistan crisis areas.

Palestinian calm for how long ?

While tanks killed hundreds of often peaceful demonstrators in Syrian cities, and NATO aircraft helped rebel forces to destroy the power bases of Muammar Qaddafi, the situation in the Palestinian territories is relatively quiet. But one wonders for how long this will remain the case. The (so called) Middle East peace process is deadlocked since September last year, and a poisonous cocktail of Arab revolts and the bid for Palestinian statehood in the UN, might pose serious problems for the stability in this part of the MENA region. What are the implications of these developments for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ? And what are the possible Western responses ?

The impact of the Arab revolts on the peace process

The Arab revolts are essentially national rebellions against a series of corrupt and autocratic regimes, linked by a common inspiration among millions of deprived people in a more or less similar backward economic and social setting. For once, Israel is not invoked by the demonstrating masses as the main culprit of their troubles, though the beleaguered regime in Damascus in particular tries hard to divert attention to the traditional Zionist foe. Nevertheless, the upheavals may have a considerable impact on the strategic environment of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship.

In the case of Egypt this is obvious. The Camp David accords did not lead to a warm mutual relationship between the two former enemies (polls still consistently show a very large majority of the Egyptian people with hostile feelings against the Jewish state), but they have provided peace and stability in the South for more than three decades, freeing Israeli troops for deployment in the North and the Palestinian territories. The Multinational Sinai Force and Observers (MFO) has always been a showcase of peacekeeping in the Middle East. Right after the fall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, *Padam*, the Southern Command of the IDF, went on alert over Sinai, while for the first time in thirty years, an Iranian warship, probably heading for Syria, was allowed passage through the Suez Canal by the new Egyptian authorities. The Suez canal is crucial for all CENTCOM operations across the wider Middle East - from Egypt to Pakistan – , and its loss is undoubtedly a *casus belli* for the US.

At the moment, the Egyptian – Israeli peace treaty itself does not seem to be in danger. Its abrogation would not only risk renewed conflict with Israel, but will also end the relationship with the US as the main sponsor of the Egyptian military. Over the years Egypt has become heavily addicted to the steady flow of advanced weapons and technology from the US. If this flow is interrupted, there is no longer a suitable alternative, as during the Cold War, when Cairo could turn to Moscow and her allies for arms

and cash. The current American-Russian understanding about the spheres of influence in the Middle East hopefully will prevent that. Other possible partners, Iran included, cannot easily fit the bill for weaponry that matches Israeli capabilities. Without spare parts, updates in software, and continuous training in the US, the Egyptian Air Force soon becomes obsolete, and Cairo is probably not longing for a replay of the Six-Day War.

For the time being therefore, the Egyptian military establishment remains the best guardian against the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical forces who might wish to end the peace with Israel. But the fact that the new leaders in Cairo were able to deliver the Hamas-Fatah deal in May, unlike their predecessors, proves that Egypt seeks more distance from Washington and Jerusalem, while preparing for a new leadership position in the Arab world. The mob assault on the Israeli embassy in Cairo in September was also a bad omen.

The effects of the Syrian revolt for the Israeli-Palestinian theatre are still uncertain. President Bashar al-Assad will not seek a change in the status quo with Israel as long as he needs all his energy to survive the battles in his own country. The busloads of demonstrators driven to the Syrian – Israeli truce lines were no attempt to court a new military conflict with Israel, but to provoke a disproportional Israeli response for domestic and Arab media consumption (with some success, considering the shoot-outs by Israeli soldiers, where the deployment of riot police would have been more appropriate). Brutal repression without the risk of foreign military intervention is preferred over adventures in Syria's foreign policy. A trade-off which comes in handily for the outside world as well. With the outcome of the civil war in Libya still unresolved, no one in the US or Europe has any inclination for another "humanitarian" intervention, though the human rights record of Assad is worse than Qaddafi's. The problems in Syria, however, could easily spill over into Lebanon or Jordan. The Arab League is in disarray from Tunisia to Yemen, and no longer a steady vehicle for the Saudi peace proposals. Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, Turkey and Iran compete for predominance in a rapidly evolving regional setting.

The fate of Israel/Palestine still forms an essential part of their calculations.

The Palestinian quest for UN membership

Mahmoud Abbas' step to ask the UN Security Council for a positive opinion on UN membership in September 2011 further complicates the Palestinian – Israeli relationship to a considerable degree. Though the US have already announced to veto a vote in the Security Council, a large majority in the UN Assembly might have quite negative effects on a possible peace agreement between the two parties. The PA will consider such a majority as an enormous international boost for its territorial claims on the West Bank, including East-Jerusalem. Large scale demonstrations against Israeli settlers and occupation forces may follow.

The position of Hamas remains also unclear despite the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah concluded in Cairo in May 2011. So far Hamas is not prepared to renounce violence against Israeli citizens, or to recognize Israel, or to honor the previous agreements between Israel and the PLO. Jerusalem will, therefore, flatly refuse to deal with a new Palestinian government that includes Hamas representatives, hidden or not behind a technocrat façade. The peace process becomes then more moribund than it already is. And worse: security coordination between the Israeli military governor in the West Bank and the PA would be halted, and after a brief honeymoon, the two rivaling Palestinian movements will soon replay the bloody civil strife of Gaza in 2007. Hamas will prevail, followed at best by an unilateral Israeli withdrawal behind the separation barrier, and at worst by clashes between the IDF and the Palestinian armed forces, with the usual high number of civilian casualties among the Palestinian population.

How will this affect the (presumed) democratic Arab Spring ? Will Israel again become the favorite scapegoat if reforms are delayed, and the new Arab regimes are not able to fulfill the expectations of the rising masses ?

Even if they are of a secular liberal nature, it will be difficult for them to refrain from helping their Palestinian brothers. Anti-Zionist solidarity may soon be restored across the wider Middle East, in case Israel resorts again to massive violence against a Palestinian uprising. During the October War in 1973 Israel was confronted by military forces from Egypt, Syria, Jordan (fighting via Syrian territory), Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Pakistan, as well as by a small Palestinian brigade (apart from the Cuban and North Korean troop contributions). If things go wrong, a similar broad Muslim coalition could re-emerge in the near future, now with the additional support of Iran and its proxies near the borders of Israel. Today these are much better equipped and trained than the occasional Palestinian raiders of the past. Hezbollah, for instance, has thousands of short range rockets and advanced anti-tank missiles in South Lebanon, and disposes also of the necessary command and control capacity to conduct modern warfare, as became clear in 2006.

Israel is still the dominant conventional power in the region, but this could very well change if Egypt and Jordan too throw their military weight into the scales of a large anti-Israeli coalition. Turkey might also wish to join the fray. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in any case seems bound for a collision course with Israel, particularly after the publication of the Palmer Report in the UN, which conceded Israel's right to a naval blockade of the Gaza strip. Cordesman and Nerguizian have already observed that "Israel does not face any meaningful threat to its decisive conventional 'edge' of superiority as long as Egypt and Jordan adhere to their peace treaties". Many people in the region still regard a big conflict with Israel as the perfect unifier of the Shiite – Sunni divide in the Muslim world. A doomsday scenario undoubtedly, perhaps not very likely, but not completely unthinkable either.

Possible Western responses

Leaving aside this worst case thinking, the US/EU should pursue five priorities in handling the Palestinian – Israeli conflict in the near future:

1. Maintain transatlantic cohesion over the principal aspects of the conflict. These include all the final status issues, and for the short term policies towards Hamas and a (possible) vote in the United Nations about a Palestinian state. Transatlantic cooperation has served Western interests rather well, particularly since “9/11”, when a joint strategy against terror helped also to formulate common principles for the peace process. A two – state formula is now part of a broad international consensus, reflected in the Quartet, but the US and the EU differ over tactics, particularly where the EU is more prone to denounce Israel for its occupation and settlements policies than the US. The vote in February 2011 over a draft resolution of the UN Security Council, declaring the Israeli settlements on the West Bank illegal, is a case in point. This draft resolution was vetoed by the US, but supported by the EU members in the Security Council.

A complication is the present US attitude. Since the beginning of his term in office President Obama has tried very hard to produce a Palestinian – Israeli deal, which he considers a key to other US interests in the region, particularly to the formation of a large Arab bloc against Iran. After numerous clashes with the Netanyahu-Lieberman team, and the departure of George Mitchell as the special US envoy for the peace process in May 2011, it has become clear that his approach to press the Israeli government for major concessions has failed. Obama’s speech to the State Department on 18 May, in conjunction with the 26 standing ovations for Netanyahu in the US Congress two days later, may be read as a farewell address to the active US mediation efforts, at least for the time being.

If the US fails to move the Netanyahu government, Europe cannot possibly be of much help either. A group of former EU politicians has recently argued that the European Union, as one of the main trading blocs for

Israel, should apply economic sanctions and de-investments in order to change the minds in Jerusalem. In their view, the EU – Israeli Association Agreement should also be used to punish Israel, in stead of linking the country more closely to Europe's internal market. But Germany, Italy, France, the UK and other EU member states are for various reasons against such measures, even if their domestic audiences grow increasingly impatient with Netanyahu's intransigence. Without the support of the US, European sanctions will not bite, and Israeli foreign trade has already found new outlets in Asia. A separate role for the EU in the peace process, therefore, distinct from the US, has not much perspective, though European diplomacy – and money - remain an integral part of Western involvement.

2. Prevent a resumption of violence and escalation. The situation in the West Bank is relatively calm, and even the Gaza Strip has not seen open warfare during more than two years. Top priority is to maintain this "peace", and to prevent escalation in the case of minor incidents, whatever the mounting political differences between the two (or three) conflicting parties.

At the same time both the US and the EU should also try to decouple the Palestinian question from the many other problems in the area. An Israeli-Palestinian settlement is not necessarily the key to peace and stability in the wider Middle East, as President Obama unfortunately has suggested in his Cairo speech two years ago. The bloody Arab revolts have already deconstructed this myth, and so does the continuous building up of the Iranian nuclear program. Global diplomatic forums, like the Quartet, the G8 or even the G20 are also useful for the prevention of conflict, if a direct US/EU involvement is to no avail.

3. Preserve the Fayyad *acquis*. Outside the public limelight the West Bank has been doing rather well over the past few years. With the help of general Dayton and the EU police mission in the Palestinian territories (EUPOL COPPS), prime minister Salam Fayyad has turned a series of rivaling and heavily armed militias into a more or less centralized

Palestinian Security Force, the cornerstone of an orderly Palestinian state. Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories has been closely involved throughout the reforms. Hamas' military structures have been dismantled, and many of their militants put behind the bars. Palestinian police forces have managed to significantly reduce the number of fatal crimes and feuds in the area. Large scale Israeli military intrusions seem a thing of the past. Time and again president Mahmoud Abbas has strongly advised against a resumption of violence against Israel. A third intifada will be a disaster in his view. The West Bank was carefully kept outside the Gaza War. Much progress has also been made with the further building up of state structures, like the judiciary, ministries, and other governmental agencies, though corruption and the violation of human rights are still big problems. The IMF, the World Bank and the Special UN Envoy for the Peace Process, Robert Serry, have favourably reported about this progress.

In the meantime, Israel has removed a considerable number of roadblocks and checkpoints in the A en B areas, thereby facilitating the free movement of goods and persons between Palestinian cities. The EU and the US furnish a large part of the PA budget, while the World Bank and the IMF provide credits and technical-financial assistance. Hundreds of construction works are undertaken for schools, hospitals, law courts and business parks, including a complete new city between Ramallah and Nablus. Internal and external trade is on the rise. The economic growth rates on the West Bank are higher than those in Europe. So the peace process may be dead, but some degree of peace has at least been attained (which is perhaps better than the other way around, for instance during the run-up to the Roadmap).

For the first time in their battered history at least part of the Palestinian leadership seems to have traded its long standing principal of violent resistance against Israel for the priority of Palestinian state building. It is of critical importance that these achievements are being preserved and further developed, whatever the composition of the next Palestinian government, or the fate of the Palestinian state in the United Nations. The

Palestinians should also be aware that a successful state building process is not dependent on the *desirable* size of its state territory, nor on the preferred location of its capital. West Germany has created one of the most successful states in the world, while one third of German territory was still occupied by the Red Army, and with a provincial town as its proclaimed capital. The borders of "1967" are a legitimate point of reference for the Palestinians, but not attaining them can never be an excuse for the resumption of violence. A fully independent, prospering Palestinian state on 100 % of Gaza and the West Bank is not totally different from a similar state on only 93% or 95% of the same territory, though in the end of Israeli occupation is of course an essential precondition in both cases.

4. Make sure that Hamas will renounce violence as a matter of principle.

In the short run the US and EU must take a position on the question what to do with a new Palestinian interim-government if this - directly or indirectly - includes Hamas representatives. So far Hamas has not met the criteria of the Quartet. This does in itself not preclude contacts with this movement, but a regular dialogue at an official level is another matter. Here Western countries are facing an awful dilemma. If they refuse to deal with the new Palestinian government, as prime minister Netanyahu has urged them to do, they run the risk of alienating Fayyad and his people. If they proceed in the expectation that Hamas will gradually turn around, they will perhaps make the same mistake as in 2006. At that time the US and the EU supported Hamas' participation in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, in the - vain - hope that the resistance organization would moderate its principles as soon it had joined the regular Palestinian institutions. The numerous informal contacts between the Hamas leadership and the many EU, Swiss, Norwegian, Russian, and US envoys, including a former US president, apparently were not successful, so one wonders whether a further engagement along these lines makes much sense. The West should also be careful by rubberstamping the coming Palestinian elections as "democratic", if only the polls are organized in a correct way, without further questions about the peaceful intentions of the participating political parties.

It is also a matter of principle. Both the military and political wings of Hamas have been placed on the EU and US blacklists of terrorist organizations. Western anti-terrorist policies would lose any credibility if such organizations are henceforth accepted as regular interlocutors, without any prior change in their programs. One cannot blame Israel if it refuses to negotiate with representatives of a movement that is not prepared to renounce forever the deliberate targeting of Israeli citizens (apart from a tactical *hudna*). It would be silly to turn the clock backwards to the pre-Oslo era, and to renegotiate again the principles of non-violence or the recognition of Israel. Any new Palestinian government should be made aware of these points after so many years of unavailing fights. Clearly, the transatlantic understanding about Hamas should be continued.

5. Remind Jerusalem about the inevitability of a Palestinian state. Having said that, it is obvious that Israel also needs to understand the signs of the times. Jerusalem may put obstacles in the way of a decent peace process, but it cannot block the gradual development of Palestinian statehood. Under international law the Palestinian people have the full right to self-determination, though the timing and wording of Palestinian independence should in itself not violate the previous accords between Israel and the PLO. And the principles of non-violence must be an essential part of its constitution. Israel cannot prevent that a large majority of the General Assembly will give its (non-binding) blessing to a Palestinian state, thereby hugely upgrading the legitimacy of the Palestinian aspirations.