

Peace Prospects in the Middle East?

— Hisham H. Ahmed

THE PRIMACY OF economic concerns notwithstanding, the interplay between peace and the Obama Administration's policies toward the Middle East can be considered a defining measure of the new administration's success. It was only natural and also telling that President Obama decided to cut the ribbons on his foreign policy making journey by initiating phone calls to leaders in the region.⁽¹⁾

However, given the fact that the Obama Administration took office while the fires of the latest Israeli aggression on Gaza were still burning, it becomes incumbent upon this Administration to try to understand some of the regional and global implications of this merciless assault.

Indeed, the Obama Administration has a golden opportunity to reverse trends of Middle Eastern antagonisms – but the enormity of the human and material losses in Gaza as a result of this latest campaign of destruction can neither be marginalized nor brushed aside.

In launching its aggression, the Israeli leadership was cognizant of pending potential policy changes in the United States. Israeli policy makers seemed desirous of pre-empting any serious diplomatic moves the new Administration might make toward ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It is not a far-fetched suggestion that the Israeli occupation authorities intended for any such moves to be buried in advance under the rubble of Gaza.

Understanding the impact of the widespread killing both on Palestinian and on other Arab societies will shed some light on the linkage between the physical and political destruction it caused. For one thing, the culture of peace and co-existence which had been nurtured after Oslo, in Palestinian society in particular and in Arab societies in general, seems to have fallen victim to the Israeli bombardment.

The political environment for most Arab regimes, especially in Egypt by virtue of its policies which were viewed to have favored Israel, is far from stable: it is fair to say that Egypt is a pressure-cooker today waiting to erupt any moment.⁽²⁾ There is profound frustration among Egyptians caused by perceived political and economic government corruption.

In view of the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David peace treaty in effect for 30 years, it is crucial here to restate the obvious: there can be no peace in the Middle East without Egypt, as there can be no war without Egypt, either.

Assaulting the Whole People

For Palestinians and Arabs in general, even those who are at odds with Hamas, the assault was not on Hamas in itself but rather on the Palestinian people in their entirety. Those thousands of Palestinians who were killed and injured and whose houses were destroyed cut across different political and ideological currents.⁽³⁾

For its Palestinian victims⁽⁴⁾ and the Arab world, the war on Gaza did not actually start on December 27, 2008, even if it intensified then. The very densely populated Gaza strip, a small territory of roughly 140 square miles, where over 1.5 million Palestinians live,⁽⁵⁾ has been under

total Israeli siege from air, water and land at least since 2005: every aspect of Palestinian life in Gaza has come to be at the mercy of the Israeli occupation authorities.

How many children and other sick men and women ended up dying due to shortages of medicine caused by the closures? How many Gazans had their future put on hold since they couldn't travel because of the blockade? How many Palestinians have lost their lives in Gaza due to continued Israeli air, sea and land attacks?

In the West Bank, the Occupation has intensified its policy of assassination of Palestinians, has erected more checkpoints⁵ (chokepoints) on Palestinian land to render life near impossible, has increased its land confiscation to build more illegal Israeli settlements, has systematically derailed the peace process, above all, has continued to build its annexation wall on Palestinian territory, separating Palestinians from Palestinians, and destroying Palestinian land and environment, all against international law.

Israeli Aggression and Opportunism

Hamas, for its own self-interested motives to be sure, was the most committed party to the ceasefire understandings arrived at through Egyptian mediation. Observers further recognize that the latest round of violence was instigated by Israeli assassinations of some Palestinians in Gaza in early November 2008. [\(6\)](#)

Thus, the Israelis, particularly the military, seem to have been more interested in reviving their shattered image following their 2006 defeat at the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the weakening of public confidence in their unrivaled military force. No place was a better candidate to perform this image-revival surgery than the defenseless, almost starved Gaza Strip, where the Israeli air force has the luxury to roam freely, undeterred and unharmed.

Whether the assault on Gaza was a victory or another Israeli defeat is to be determined against the backdrop of some of the outcomes of the aggression. Hamas seems to have been able to withstand the military blow, even its most devastating part on the first day of the attack. Furthermore, Hamas seems to have been successful in regaining much of its lost popularity in Gaza and in other Palestinian areas following Hamas' violent ouster of the Palestinian Authority from the Strip.

In addition, it is widely believed in many Palestinian and Arab circles that this latest Israeli aggression on Gaza was also an Israeli electioneering campaign measure. The defense minister in the outgoing Israeli government, Ehud Barak who heads the Labor Party, and foreign minister Tzipi Livni who heads the Kadima Party, each aspired to demonstrate strong will against the Palestinians, particularly when it was quite opportune to use Hamas as a scapegoat.

Barak in particular seems to have aspired to undo his image of weakness and to convince Israeli public opinion to vote for him in the February 10, 2009 Israeli election. Not surprisingly, Barak lost again to both Livni and Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu, just as he did to Ariel Sharon in 2001, as his military prowess did not seem to remedy his political miscalculations.

Crisis for U.S. Policy

Also of significance for the Obama Administration is that this Israeli aggression was not generated

on the spur of the moment. Plans for this assault were underway several months in before it actually took place.(7) It was also widely reported that the Israeli Deputy Defense Minister, Matan Vilna'i, had threatened to commit a "holocaust" in Gaza.(8)

A widely held view today is that peace is more distant from the Middle East than it has ever been in the recent past. Palestinians and Israelis are finding themselves caught in a seemingly endless dilemma. Hence the compelling need for new creative, innovative U.S. diplomacy.

For their part, Palestinians' life is anything but normal and/or ordinary. Kept under tight siege by the Israeli occupation authorities, rendering their ability to move from one location to another either life-threatening and/or untenable, the horror they have been subjected to has ruptured the fragile dream they have nurtured for a peaceful solution to the conflict.

On the other hand, Israelis may have never felt the bitter taste of insecurity as much as they have recently. Although on a vastly different level, the traumas of the conflict for Palestinians and Israelis have rarely been as crystal-clear. Vulnerability indeed has become mutual.

To avert replication of past political failures, the Obama Administration is called upon to comprehensively uproot the causal factors behind the violence. Certainly the Occupation, with all its policies and practices, is a central dynamic behind fueling tensions and deepening conflicts. The cycle of violence is vicious, indeed.

The Obama Administration has a historic opportunity to set the stage for a genuine peace. It has revived some badly needed optimism by appointing the experienced and knowledgeable George Mitchell as Presidential envoy to the Middle East.(9) As a part of its constructive diplomatic moves, however, the Obama Administration can give a number of necessary pieces of advice to both Palestinians and Israelis.

To the former, the Administration should stress: First, get your house in order and unify your ranks behind one strategy to resolve the conflict with the Israelis.

Second, do away with the rampant corruption in your ranks, which is not only morally harmful but is also used as a justification for extremism to penetrate the society. Third, although Israel as it constantly reminds you is an occupying power, there is so much in the Israeli experience that you can benefit from: an advanced state structure in terms of health care, public transportation, social welfare and technology.

To Israeli society the Administration should first stress that the Occupation regime has become the greatest detriment to Palestinian and Israeli security. The solution does not lie in increasing military preponderance and ferocity: rather, it is definitely political in nature. For as long as a people are deprived of the most basic of their rights, the chances remain high for further deterioration.

Second, although you are to be expected to have carried the fears of the Nazi holocaust into the present, please be reminded that the holocaust was not carried out in the Arab World or by Palestinians. To the contrary, what Arabs and Jews have in common (Semitic languages, cultural traditions and historic connections) exceed all the barriers that divide them. The Judeo-Arab/Muslim tradition needs to be further explored in the interest of lasting and enduring peace in the area.

Third, Israelis must be reminded, the “peace of the rulers,” even if imposed, stands no chance of ultimate success under the present recipe of conditions and circumstances. Hope for change lies primarily with the ability of Israeli public opinion to view its destiny as one linked with that of the Palestinians; Occupation can deliver neither security nor stability.

The Obama Administration needs to be emphatic in reminding Israelis that military power may achieve short-term objectives, but lasting solutions require human creativity, intuition and innovation. No form of repression and/or suppression is capable of stopping the Palestinian people’s drive for freedom and independence.

The prolongation and deepening of the Occupation idea in Israeli society can only set the clock backward. Without any doubt, the power of reason is bound to have more beneficial far-reaching effects than the power of weapons. It is only when despair dissipates that hope for the future takes over.

Notes

1. See Hines, Nico “Barack Obama Calles Mahmoud Abbas as Middle East Hits Top of Agenda” Times Online, 21 January 2009." href="#N1. See Hines, Nico “Barack Obama Calles Mahmoud Abbas as Middle East Hits Top of Agenda” Times Online, 21 January 2009.">(1. See Hines, Nico “Barack Obama Calles Mahmoud Abbas as Middle East Hits Top of Agenda” Times Online, 21 January 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/us_elections/article5562302.ece.
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2. It has been widely reported that underlying political tensions are on the rise in Egypt. See Shenker, Jack “Government Contortions, Public Anger,” 3 January 2009, Theguardian.co.uk, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jan/03/egypt-israelandthepalestinians>.
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3. For more information on the number of Palestinian casualties in Gaza during the Israeli assault, see <http://www.pchrgaza.org/index.html>.
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4. See <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/oPt.html>.
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5. See AP “UN: Number of Checkpoints Up 40% in Past Year” 12 October 2006, Haaretz.com <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/773392.html>.
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6. See <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article9937.shtml>.
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7. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7270650.stm.
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8. See Etgar Lefkovits, “‘Shoah’ Remark Sparks Uproar,” Jerusalem Post Online Edition, March 2, 2008, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1204214002068&pagename=JPost%2FJP%2FPrinter>.
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9. For more information on the role George Mitchell has played in trying to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, see Stephen Zunes, “Is Mitchell Up to the Task?,” Foreign Policy in Focus, January 23, 2009, <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5811>.
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ATC 140, May/June 2009

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