COMMENTARY | POLITICS

A Palestinian Response to Global and Regional Trends

By: Tareq Baconi · June, 2022

This commentary is based on a lecture delivered by Al-Shabaka policy analyst, Tareq Baconi, during Birzeit University's Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies' annual conference. Held in May 2022, the three-day conference, titled "The Palestinian Cause in a Troubled Region," brought scholars and experts from Palestine and beyond to examine recent global and regional trends and their implications for the Palestinian cause. Baconi's intervention analyzes some of these developments, situating the Palestinian struggle for justice and liberation within the contexts of changing US foreign policy toward the Middle East, the popular revolutions of the region, and normalization deals between the Israeli regime and authoritarian Arab states.

Introduction

Over the course of the past decade, a new regional architecture has come into focus in the Middle East and North Africa. The US has shown greater signs of withdrawal and retrenchment from the region. Tensions have arisen and subsided between regional powers, proxy wars continue to proliferate, and alliances shift consistently between players. The revolutions that erupted throughout the region starting in 2011 sputter along in the shadow of a new order, which is still being created, but the contours of which have been elucidated with the normalization agreements signed between Gulf states, Morocco, Sudan, and Israel. These accords build on more than a decade of clandestine relations

between these countries, perhaps with the exception of Sudan, and surface at a time when popular uprisings have been dealt near-fatal blows throughout much of the region. The growing relations between Israel, a settler-colonial apartheid regime, and Arab autocrats herald an important pillar of the future regional landscape in which Palestinians must wage their struggle for liberation.

Bonds of Anti-Democratic Rule

The alliances, which are expanding between Israel and Arab states, are based on a shared regional vision of (as described by its proponents) economic development and growth, stability, and religious tolerance. In reality, this vision is one rooted in a commitment to anti-democratic hegemony, where the prevailing regimes maintain their grip on the populations over which they rule through a heavily securitized approach. By necessity, at the very core of these agreements are exchanges of invasive information technology and surveillance tactics that can quash dissent and any challenge to the status quo.

Central to the normalization agreements is a commitment by regional powers to fill the perceived vacuum of US withdrawal, and to take matters into their own hands to sustain the prevailing regional order. This is done through, among other tactics, the export of Israeli security systems — tested on the Palestinians under its apartheid regime — globally, and regionally to Arab states that employ them against activists, journalists, and others seeking democratic reform. The Israeli model of sustaining an apartheid regime while successfully fashioning itself as a democratic state that is welcome on the global stage — a state which is economically developed and diplomatically powerful — is a model for which many autocrats in the region and beyond yearn. The alliances are based on Israel extending — through its military, economic, and diplomatic influence — the knowhow for its allies to deflect from their authoritarianism and racialized capitalism, and to present themselves as modernizing, increasingly liberal and

tolerant states — all this, while they oppress dissent and pursue policies that create vast economic inequality and anti-democratic rule at home. In the case of Morocco, its relations with Israel have the further benefit of normalizing its occupation of the Saharawi people.

These expanding alliances must be placed within the context of the revolutions that swept through the region beginning in 2011 and that continue in fits and starts. For the vast majority of the peoples of the region, the emerging order of so-called "securitized stability" has not addressed the principal demands that animated mass protests. Quite the contrary: authoritarian rule persists, and has taken on a degree of bloodletting and systematic murder not previously envisioned; states have collapsed or assumed more draconian authoritarian tactics; unemployment and inequality remain widespread; corruption is rife; political plurality is non-existent; and demographic challenges coupled with climate change promise to take these pressures beyond their breaking point. Yet, rather than address these issues, regional powers are committed to sustaining power and expanding their capacity to oppress popular opposition.

The horrors that followed the regional revolutions have, in the short to medium term, given more credence to the oft-repeated remark in the region that stability under strongmen is more precious than democratic openness and social justice — given what the price for freedom and dignity has been. There are hardly, if any, examples of a positive end to the revolutionary fervor that swept the region, and myriad cautionary tales in Syria, Egypt, and beyond. Within this prevailing sense of hopelessness, the point now, under the emerging powers, is to entrench the counter-revolution. Despair is widespread, and the disconnect between the regimes and the street is as vast as ever. The newfound alliance between Arab authoritarianism and Zionist settler-colonialism — which itself is merely a reconfiguration of the alliance between US imperialism and Arab authoritarianism

— is merely a means of utilizing oppressive tactics to manage this divide.

Palestine's Regional Relevance

In many ways, the Palestinian struggle sits on this fault line between the street and the regime — a fault line that exists most acutely in Palestine itself, between an authoritarian regime embodied in the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Palestinian people struggling for liberation. But more so, Palestine exists on this fault line in a regional sense. The normalization accords were based on the assumption that the Palestinian struggle has been effectively marginalized. Yet this assumption was patently false, and has been disproven by the Unity Intifada, which erupted in May 2021. More than anything in the past decade, the Unity Intifada has totally reconfigured basic assumptions many have come to hold as truths about Palestine, including that the Palestinians have been pacified and defeated, and that they lack the capability or interest to protest. Another assumption that was negated is that Palestinians have acquiesced to their fragmentation. Indeed, the Unity Intifada has shown not only that Palestinians are a single people facing a single regime intent on their elimination, but that the people are able to rise in a sustained manner across the land, from the river to the sea, to protest their oppression. The principal takeaway is that, once Palestinians rise as a single people, they have the capacity to overwhelm a regime that had, until then, been perceived as invincible. For Palestinians, the Unity Intifada revealed, perhaps for the first time, the cracks in Israel's apartheid regime.

Precisely because of this, and expectedly, the response of the Israeli regime was to carry out widespread arrests of Palestinians — directly in 1948 territories and through its partner, the PA, across the West Bank — while it used overwhelming firepower in yet another failed attempt to pacify Gaza. The concerted effort to detain vast numbers of people across both sides of the Green Line was an indication of an attempt to incapacitate the ability of Palestinians to organize and

mobilize, and to reverse the eruption of the uprising by forcing Palestinians back into the status quo. Israel also leveraged its surveillance tactics and initiated measures against Palestinian civil society, namely, by designating six leading Palestinian organizations at the forefront of efforts to hold Israel to account — including through legal challenges being pursued at the International Criminal Court — as terrorist organizations. In the absence of a Palestinian leadership committed to liberation, the strategic mobilization of the Palestinian struggle has shifted to civil society organizations and grassroots collectives, and hence, the Israeli effort to dismantle them, with American and European acquiescence. In some ways, this is the final hurdle that Israel must remove to ensure there remains no effective resistance to its rule.

In this way, the Israeli (and official Palestinian) response to the Unity Intifada elucidated exactly the model that the Israelis and their Arab partners are employing to deal with dissent and with a civil society actively seeking to safeguard its human rights. The intifada also showed that the question of Palestine is not marginal for the masses, regionally or globally. That is, the other lie at the core of the normalization agreements is that Palestine is a non-issue for the populations of the region. However, over the course of the intifada, popular protests erupted in major cities throughout the region, as well as the world. The attempt by ruling elites to sideline the question of Palestine does not reflect popular sentiment, but rather, autocratic rule.

The Paradox of Palestinian Movement Building

We are living in a moment where the globe is becoming more multipolar, even as economic integration is unprecedented. Authoritarian regimes and right-wing ethnonationalist parties are rising to power and entrenching their rule. Challenges, such as COVID-19 and climate change, demonstrate the need for globally coordinated responses at exactly the same time that great power rivalry is once

again erupting into military confrontation in Europe. Furthermore, the Western reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine laid bare the hypocrisies of the so-called liberal Western order, whereby the US and the EU were swift to speak of the rules-based order and the rights of refugees in a manner never before seen when it comes to Palestine.

The implications of these global shifts for Palestine, and for allies committed to social justice and progressive values, are staggering. The struggle for Palestinian liberation is a matter that is intimately connected to regional and global politics, and as such, cannot be viewed as a standalone issue that can be addressed separately from the major geopolitical and socioeconomic forces shaping our world. In this light, there are three interrelated points to be made that may raise more questions than answers.

The first is that the Palestinian struggle for liberation is well into its post-Oslo phase, where peacemaking and diplomacy on the state-level were seen as a means through which liberation can be achieved. The struggle today is an asymmetric, popular-led struggle for liberation. This is not only because the official Palestinian leadership is compromised, or because regional players have officially forfeited the Palestinian question, but also because there is very little appetite among states globally to push forward policies that advance Palestinian rights. The current power of the Palestinian people is on the popular level, and here, there is vast potential. Palestinians must focus on building alliances with movements, organizations, and political parties, regionally and globally, that are like-minded and committed to principles of decolonization and emancipation. This is particularly relevant now, as the global order is experiencing major shifts and reconfigurations, and the post-Cold War order of US hegemony and entrenchment in the region is coming under pressure. How should we as Palestinians recalibrate our engagement? In the Global South, in Western progressive parties, and

throughout the region, there are alliances that can support Palestinian mobilization and organization, and causes to which Palestinians can also lend support. In some ways, this is a natural progression for the Palestinian movement, which historically took the form of an anti-colonial struggle, and that now must answer the question of what decolonization means in the 21st century.

The second is that Palestinians must, paradoxically, build a movement that is broad, and that encompasses the breadth of the Palestinian people in their different ideologies and lived experiences as a largely diasporic people, while maintaining a singular focus and vision for what decolonization in Palestine means. This is a major challenge. Palestinian civil society is showing huge advances, whether in countries such as the US, where the narrative is shifting gradually but consistently, or in Palestine itself, where the Unity Intifada continues to showcase the work that is being done on the ground. The next phase is to leverage this popular work and to converge its disparate successes into a singular vision of liberation. To do so, Palestinians must live the values we preach around freedom, justice, and equality within our movement. How can we establish new, democratic, free, and representative structures to lead the next phase of our struggle and transform our popular mobilization into a political vision? And how might those structures build on the legacy of the Palestinian struggle to date while adapting to the global realities we are now facing?

Thirdly, in our effort to secure our internationally recognized rights, we as Palestinians have often turned to international law and Western countries as arbiters of justice. But Western powers, like Arab states, have historically failed to uphold their commitment to the Palestinian struggle, and have enabled and supported Israel's oppression of Palestinians and the expansion of its colonization of Palestinian lands. Western states and regional regimes are driven by self-interest and realpolitik, not by morality or justice. Similarly, Palestinians are hoping to build on the resounding success of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS)

movement to expand popular pressure in support of Palestinian rights. Yet international law and boycott movements, while important tools in the struggle for liberation, will never be the site of our liberation. In thinking about the state of the movement today, how can we shift our focus beyond the tactics of liberation — for example, international law and boycott — to developing a political strategy of liberation?

If the regional revolutions and Unity Intifada have taught us anything, it is that the power of the masses is immense, and can succeed in bringing down regimes and creating major revolutionary change. At the same time, that power has been lacking in its ability to create lasting political change and systems of governance that are pluralistic and forward-looking. The forces invested in the status quo are powerful, and there will always be regional and international meddling in the battlefields of the region, particularly in Palestine. Palestinians must hold onto these lessons. And as the counter-revolution fortifies, Palestinians and their allies in the region must think about the new world order we inhabit, and expand the infrastructure of the movement we are currently building so that it can be adaptable, well-connected, and just.

Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, is an independent, non-profit organization. Al-Shabaka convenes a multidisciplinary, global network of Palestinian analysts to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide.

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