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Debating Palestine: Representation, Resistance, and Liberation

By: Rabab Abdulhadi · April, 2012

Palestinians are debating multiple inter-connected questions, including the question of representation, what strategy or strategies to adopt for liberation, the nature of the future state, and our relationship with the Arab revolutions, among others. Some of these questions are being debated in Al-Shabaka policy briefs such as those by Noura Erakat, Jamil Hilal, Haidar Eid, and others. I would like to discuss them through a critical review of our own recent history.

To begin with, no group has ever represented the entirety of the Palestinian people. However, the groups that constitute the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) along with Hamas and Islamic Jihad come very close to representing the majority of Palestinians. While it is true that the number of Palestinians who are not card-carrying members of the original PLO groups increased after the collapse of the USSR (for the Palestinian left) and after the Oslo Accords (for Fatah and its allies), we can still detect their affinity for certain schools of thought in Palestinian society.

Who speaks for the Palestinians then? And should we give up on the PLO? The short answer is: No. This is because the PLO and the Palestinian Authority (PA) are not one and the same despite the PA's efforts to blur the lines between the two—an understandable quest given the credibility of the PLO continues even at

its weakest point to far outweigh that of the PA.

We should insist, as Omar Barghouti puts it that "the political leadership of the Palestinian people must remain within the structure of the PLO." This does not mean that we accept the status quo of a shrunken PLO, a toothless rubber stamp that legitimizes colonial structures as the architects of Oslo would have it. Rather, we should struggle to restore the original spirit of anti-colonial resistance that this liberation movement has led for so many decades and that made it, the "sole and legitimate representative" of our people through the sacrifices of Palestinians especially those living under Israeli colonial rule and in refugee camps in Arab countries. This was a momentous achievement that we should not surrender so easily.

Nor should we dismiss the efforts to forge a national unity government following a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. More importantly, we should support efforts to bring together all Palestinian factions on two bases: (1) respect for the multiplicity of ideological and political thought (i.e. following the dictum that no one monopolizes the truth); and (2) the principle of proportional representation in both the Palestinian Legislative Council and the Palestine National Council (PNC).

I am not suggesting that this is an easy or a straight forward task. However, it seems to me that registering Palestinians and holding elections of the PNC, itself a PLO institution, might not guarantee the representation of marginalized Palestinians in the refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, let alone Palestinians in the West Bank, and Gaza, or the 1948 Palestinian, i.e. those who remained in what became Israel. When we think of the totality of the Palestinian people we can no longer afford to imagine solutions or craft strategies for one segment but ignore the others. I don't expect the current Palestinian leadership to accept such a proposition as it would heavily reduce the scope of its influence and would severely undermine the Oslo framework from which it draws its current power. However, if we are serious about a liberation strategy, we need to think of

creative possibilities. We need a formula that further distinguishes the PLO as a liberation movement from the PA, a government in a tiny area that is shackled by the colonial framework of Oslo.

A Palestinian strategy for resistance was devised following the take-over of the PLO by Palestinian guerrilla groups in the late 1960s. This strategy has never been fully implemented largely because of the negative impact of petrodollars on the Palestinian movement that led some groups, especially the largest, Fatah, to present itself as the "Switzerland" of the Arab world by adopting a stand of neutrality towards Arab liberation movements as well as the regimes that crushed them. As our own experience teaches us, a stand of neutrality only reproduces the status quo and amounts to complicity with oppressive regimes.

I am not saying that the old strategy is perfect. Far from it: armed struggle is by no means the only way to liberate Palestine or any other country/people. Resistance to settler colonialism is legitimate (including by UN standards) and is at times the only recourse for the powerless on whom the terms of battle are often imposed. However, today, there are multiple other strategies of anti-colonial resistance ranging from the most basic, such as simply staying put and refusing to leave one's land, home or tent in order to transform each Israeli step aimed at erasing the Palestinian presence in Palestine to a costly venture for Israel in material and immaterial terms, including the rising cost of public relations' defeat. The 2005 Civil Society call to the international community to adopt boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) as a non-violent strategy of resistance is often misunderstood as a condemnation of Palestinian armed resistance or a disowning of those who sacrificed their lives in the struggle. What we need is a comprehensive vision that does not fall into the Zionist trap by ranking methods of resistance or modes of disengagement from the colonizers of our land and people.

Combining multiple strategies of resistance instead of posing them in either/or dichotomous terms was a major contributing factor to the victory the anti-

Apartheid movement scored in South Africa. This is a major lesson we can draw from South African and other liberation struggles.

I should also note that a strategy of resistance is related but is not identical to a strategy of liberation. Here again, I return to our history and the ways in which the Palestinian movement in the 1960s was imagined at the time by Palestinians and their allies as a revolution against all forms of oppression that does not prioritize the liberation of land over that of the people; and that does not present itself as exceptional, more oppressed, or more deserving of freedom and justice than other movements/people. I recognize that there are different memories of the movement. Nonetheless the imagined community (to borrow Anderson's concept) at the time was an inclusionary movement based on an indivisible sense of justice for all. We need to restore this sense of the indivisibility of justice and combat tendencies that present Palestine as an exceptional case of suffering and liberation. This would imply engaging in serious debates over how to broaden the space for a multiplicity of views and ideologies, which will not be so easy to achieve because of the interests and relations in which people are either embedded or implicated (on the axis of structural inequalities based on class, race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, etc.). This is obviously not an exhaustive or inclusive list of issues to discuss and debate.

We will need to revise the Palestinian charter not in order to deplete its historical revolutionary content and anti-colonial posture (as happened to the post-Oslo Charter) but in order to alter the definition of who will live in these lands and what sort of a state Palestine will be. The original charter called for a "secular democratic state in Palestine" and defined the Palestinian as one whose father (or mother) is a Palestinian. This raises two issues, the content of Palestinian-ness and the nature of the future Palestine.

What does it mean to be Palestinian today? Does being Palestinian include Arab Palestinian Jews or exclude them? This applies to anti-Zionist Jews who see

themselves as Palestinians and do not identify with Israel or its racist settler colonialism –people like Uri Davis who is now a member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council and who raised that question to me back in the mid-1980s saying, "I was born in 1943 but my sister was born after 1948. Would this means that I get to stay but she has to leave? " Going again back to the South African model, the 100-year-old Charter of the African National Congress based citizenship on "one person, one vote" and not "one Black person, one vote." In other words, identity politics is not the guiding rule to citizenship but commitment to the principle of the indivisibility of justice.

The insistence that the future Palestine would be a "secular democratic state" did not imply support for secular fundamentalism that can be traced back to the European Enlightenment. Rather, a liberated Palestine was envisioned as an inclusionary alternative to the exclusionary strategy of Zionism. Today we need to invest the intellectual labor necessary to figure out how to not reproduce the Zionist state in our own vision but to make it hospitable to all religious and spiritual diversities including those with materialist non-religious belief systems.

Finally, one issue that was much debated at the time has great resonance today: The relationship between the liberation of Palestine and Arab liberation. The Palestinian left used to argue that the path to the liberation of Palestine must go through (liberated) Arab capitals. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which had originally coined this concept, greatly underplayed it later on, especially during the 1987 Intifada. Today and in view of the Arab revolutions and the central place Palestine occupies in the platforms of the groups with the most radical vision for social transformation, the question is not only timely, it is relevant and necessary. What relations should the Palestine liberation strategy have with the leadership and grassroots of Arab revolutions? Do we see the revolutions as affinity groups whose victories are ours and who must be supported on the basis of the indivisibility of justice and not solely on the basis of what they can do for us?

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