COMMENTARY | CIVIL SOCIETY

Integrating Palestine into the Progressive Left

By: Noura Erakat · June, 2010

Overview

The World Social Forum is a global movement of progressives that has gained in strength and influence over the past decade. Regional meetings build up to the Global Forum, and progressive forces in the United States are about to convene the second U.S. Social Forum June 22 – 26, 2010. Al-Shabaka Policy Advisor Noura Erakat examines the gap between Palestinian and Arab dreams of an America committed to justice and the reality of the work it would take to achieve this dream, using the exclusion of Palestinian representation at the first U.S. Social Forum in 2007 as her entry point. She argues that in order to build on recent successes within the American progressive community — including securing a key organizing role in this year's forum — it is necessary to see the struggle for Palestinian justice as a function of policies with global implications that impact Palestinians, other nations, and marginalized American communities.

Aspirations Vs. Action

Hardly an Arab or Palestinian living in the United States does not desire their fellow Americans to carry the banner of Palestinian justice and shift U.S. policy toward the conflict. Even the revered Columbia Professor, Edward Said, who commanded respect and attention in a broad spectrum of fields echoed this

sentiment. At a 2002 Al-Awda rally in New York he called upon the impassioned throng to talk about Palestine everywhere, to everyone: at the supermarket, near the office water cooler, at the playground, with members of the Parent Teacher Association, on the bus, and at the bus stop — everywhere.

Yet despite this yearning to nurture American solidarity, there is a vast divide between the aspiration and the understanding required for its realization — that Palestinians, other nations, and millions of marginalized Americans contend with the same structural impediments standing between them and the full realization of their human dignity. The understanding of a common enemy and the affirmation of a common humanity is the linchpin of genuine solidarity.

Who then might constitute effective allies of Palestinians in the U.S.? Who contends with institutionalized discrimination similar to that which renders Palestinians second-class citizens on their own land? Which communities in the U.S. are racially profiled, systematically incarcerated, and rendered poor by a confluence of institutional factors, lack access to health care and employment and secure housing?

For progressive Arab and Palestinian Americans, these U.S. counterparts are immigrant communities, the working poor, migrant workers, indigenous peoples, racial minorities, and other U.S. communities considered expendable by a neo-liberal economic framework that touts itself as colorblind, reveres individualism, disdains social and economic rights, and places corporate profits above people's welfare. These economic policies have driven poor families out of their homes in the U.S., have led to the systematic incarceration of African-Americans in prisons for profit, have devastated labor's ability to negotiate workers' rights, have accelerated gentrification in urban centers, and have fueled the insidious attack against immigrants.

Like their counterparts, Palestinians and other nations endure the brunt of neo-

liberal prerogatives — foremost of which is the expansion of labor and consumer markets as well as resource extraction — by way of colonization and/or military domination.

Thousands of Americans opposed to neo-liberalism's manifestation in the U.S. and beyond — what I term the "progressive left" — are organizing the second U.S. Social Forum to take place in Detroit, Michigan from June 22-26, 2010. The Forum is the U.S.-based counterpart to the World Social Forum and according to its architects it "will provide space to build relationships, learn from each other's experiences, share our analysis of the problems our communities face, and bring renewed insight and inspiration. It will help develop leadership and develop consciousness, vision, and strategy needed to realize another world."

The U.S. Social Forum reflects the political principles drafted at the World Social Forum in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2001. At the heart of those principles is a commitment to a global collaborative process aimed at creating a world wherein nation-states will "rest on democratic international systems and institutions at the service of social justice, equality, and the sovereignty of peoples."

Left Out of the Progressive Left

The U.S. Social Forum is an opportune space for Palestinians to forge alliances with other progressive forces as well as integrate the cause for Palestinian self-determination more firmly into the progressive left agenda. Arab and Palestinian Americans who consider the crises in the Middle East, and U.S. support for them, a function of unfettered neo-liberalism are seeking to do just that. However, even in this space, Palestinians have had to struggle to represent themselves and to push back against a liberal tendency to provide a "balance" of narratives before they could experience genuine solidarity.

At the first Forum held in Atlanta, Georgia in July 2007, no Arabs or Palestinians

were invited to participate in the National Planning Committee which functions as the Forum organizing body and is comprised of U.S.-based social justice organizations. Palestinians and their allies urged the Committee to invite Palestinian civil society leader Jamal Juma' as the plenary speaker to address U.S. militarization in the Middle East. Juma' is a founding member of Stop the Wall and leading member of the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. Instead, the Committee invited a liberal Zionist Jewish woman instead. In her speech to nearly 12,000 people, she called for a mutual approach among Palestinians and Israelis to embrace non-violence and build peace. She thereby "balanced" Israeli and Palestinian narratives and portrayed the institutional discrimination, displacement, dispossession, and occupation endured by Palestinians as a product of civil war as opposed to U.S.-backed foreign colonization. According to Sami Kitmitto, a Palestinian activist who attended the session, "the message to us was that Arabs and Palestinians were not a valued part of the Forum and there was no need for us to represent ourselves. On a panel about U.S. imperialism, here was a speaker advocating *against* self-determination for Palestinians and speaking in support of imperialist efforts in Palestine."

News of the controversial speech quickly spread, especially at the Palestine Tent ("Nahr al-Bared") the organizing hub of educational and cultural activities coordinated by Palestinian participants and their allies at the Forum. Kittimo and the other activists decided to draft a statement to the National Planning Committee expressing their concerns regarding the ill-suited plenary speaker. The Committee responded honestly, saying that it did not know any better and in fact had confused the speaker's Hebrew name for an Arab one, thus thinking that she was Arab. As a reconciliatory gesture, the NPC invited the Palestinian activists and their supporters to read the statement before a captive audience the following night.

Since 2007, there has been consistent follow-up with the Forum organizers. Sara

Kershnar, a founding member of the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network who attended the 2007 Forum, said that the follow-up coupled with the speaker controversy strengthened NPC commitment to prioritize Palestinian participation in the organizing of the 2010 Forum. In June 2009, a Forum representative asked the U.S. Palestinian Community Network (USPCN), a loose coalition of Palestinian individuals and institutions dedicated to building a participatory and inclusive network for the U.S.-based Diaspora, to submit an application for membership in the National Planning Committee. The USPCN includes Palestinian individuals, organizations, and village/town-based clubs throughout the U.S., who share the aim of addressing and overcoming the fragmentation afflicting the Palestinian nation, affirming Palestinian national unity, and encouraging collaborative initiatives in furtherance of Palestinian self-determination.[1] After an interview process, the USPCN's application was approved and it has been a leading organizing member of the Forum since October 2009.

Building Solidarity at the U.S. Social Forum

The USPCN has managed to corral multiple efforts into an impressive force for the 2010 U.S. Social Forum, including the:

* Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions People's Movement Assembly;
* Palestine Tent featuring cultural performances, speakers, and a bazaar;
* Palestine Track of 48 workshops; and
* Students for Justice in Palestine summit;

In addition, Jamal Juma', coordinator of the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign, will be a keynote speaker on the international plenary panel. (http://ussf.palestineconference.org/) Juma' will address the Forum by videoconference due to the travel restrictions that Israel has imposed on him in the aftermath of a 25-day detention for his political activities against Israel's Apartheid Wall in the West Bank. According to Rama Kased, a leading USPCN

organizer, "Jamal's inability to physically address the Forum is not an impediment — on the contrary, this highlights the arbitrary and capricious nature of Israel's apartheid regime."

Among the planned workshops is one called, "United Against Racism & War: From New Orleans to Palestine," which, in Kershnar's words, intends to strengthen an anti-racism movement by "discussing implications for building joint struggles against racism experienced by communities in the U.S. and those impacted by U.S. policies abroad, with a specific focus on U.S. support for Israel." United Against Racism is a multi-racial, multi-national alliance that emerged in the wake of rising Arab and Muslim profiling post-9/11, the neglect of minority communities during and following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the mounting violence against Palestinians since the Second Intifada and especially since Hamas' electoral victory in 2006. The alliance formally established itself in 2008 in preparation for the USPCN Popular Conference.

According to Kali Akuno, a Malcolm X Movement national organizer and co-founder of the alliance, United Against Racism chose to centralize Palestine in its anti-racist analysis because the alliance's core activists and organizations "hold a common view that Palestine represents the barometer of the extent to which imperialism is willing to go to ensure that the capitalist system of oppression and exploitation continue unabated. There is a general understanding that the liberation of Palestine is a critical linchpin in the transformation of this system and the creation of a more humane global system."

Challenges Ahead

Establishing firm alliances with those communities and persons who, like Kali, identify a common foe and affirm a common fate, represents only half the battle in solidifying genuine solidarity. The other half depends on the Arab and Palestinian community itself and specifically in its ability to commit to other

struggles. As the USPCN has found in its outreach efforts for the U.S. Social Forum, although Arabs and Palestinians can identify the structural injustice inherent to Israeli colonization and apartheid, they are not as aware of similar injustices endured by marginalized communities in the United States.

Here is just one example from personal experience with a national Arab-American organization. During my last year of law school some years ago, I was seeking opportunities to practice law creatively in the advancement of social justice. After an initial conversation, this national organization encouraged me to submit a project proposal for a fellowship that it would sponsor. Excited by the positive response, I drafted a plan aimed at ameliorating Arab-Black tensions in Detroit by crafting joint campaigns against environmental injustice harming both communities and by nurturing dialogue between community leaders regarding the resentment bred between Arab-American liquor store owners and African-American patrons suffering from alcohol addiction. My rejection phone call was quite curt—I was told that my proposal was too "Bay Area-esque," a euphemism for "too controversial.[2]

I suppose criticizing a targeted and minority community like the Arab-American one is a bit controversial but this is precisely emblematic of our condition. While we bemoan the lack of support for the Palestinian struggle for justice, we do too little to treat the racism in which our own communities engage, whether wittingly or not. If we want to achieve and benefit from genuine solidarity, then not only must we speak about Palestine to everyone, everywhere, as Edward Said advocated, but we must also speak to our own Arab and Palestinian communities about everyone else.

1. *After a two-year grassroots outreach and base-building process, the USPCN held a national Popular Conference in Chicago, Illinois in August 2008. Since then, in addition to assuming a national leadership role in the U.S. Social Forum, the USPCN has organized several national cultural and speaking tours targeting the U.S.-based Diaspora, is planning its second national popular*

conference.

2. *Since the emergence of the American anti-war movement in the late 1960s, the San Francisco Bay Area in Northern California, with the University of Berkeley at its heart, is often stereotyped by political commentators as the home of idealistic radicals and dismissed as out of touch with "the real world" (i.e. the rest of America). That California has often led the way in social, political, economic, technological, and educational trends for the rest of the America is typically and wilfully ignored in this discourse, as is Berkeley's reputation as a world-class research and teaching university with an international student body, faculty, and alumni.*

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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