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The "Palestine Papers": An Alternative Analysis for Action

By: Nadia Hijab · February, 2011

The Egyptian people's massive demonstrations against the Mubarak regime, following on from the Tunisian people's successful despatch of their own dictator, took the limelight away from the Palestine Papers, Al-Jazeera's 23-26 January 2011 release of over 1,600 confidential records of the "peace process" over the past decade. But for Palestinians the burning questions remain: how to assess the content of the documents and the meaning of their release — and how to deal with the revelations.

Much of the analysis of the documents has focused on the concessions the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority (PA) and the remnants of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) have been willing to make to secure a deal in the face of Israel's intransigence.

Yet it is important to recall that the broad lines for the concessions were drawn when the late Yasser Arafat was leading the negotiations process, in particular as regards the refugees' right of return. Today's negotiators have been willing to go further on Jerusalem — Arafat refused to do so at Camp David. However, the proposals for land swaps to accommodate Israeli settlements have been there for years, an incentive to the Israelis to keep creating facts on the ground. By the time Taba came around, Arafat was signaling willingness for more concessions.

In other words, if the Palestinians find reason to rise up against their leadership in

the papers released by Al-Jazeera, there was cause aplenty to do so during the 1990s when over a dozen Oslo accords effectively put Palestinian territory, economy, and security under Israeli control.

The difference between Al-Jazeera's "Palestine Papers" and the Oslo accords is that the Papers are more accessible to a general audience whereas the accords ran into thousands of pages, many very technical. In effect, the Palestine Papers make it impossible for Palestinians to claim they do not know what is being negotiated on their behalf.

Beyond the content of the Palestine Papers, there is the meaning of their release. Arafat made tremendous concessions throughout the 1990s but in the end refused to sign a final peace agreement below what he defined as the bare minimum of Palestinian rights. Today's negotiators have set a much lower bar — reflecting the much weaker Palestinian position — and yet they have, in the final analysis, refused to continue a process that does not even recognize the 1967 lines, despite tremendous pressure by the Americans to do so. (See the excellent analysis of the Palestine Papers by Ali Abunimah, co-founder of the Electronic Intifada and an Al-Shabaka policy advisor, for a discussion of the Obama administration's regression from its predecessor's position.)

The problem for the PA/PLO is that the Americans need them to sign. The urgent American desire to stamp a "case closed" on the whole Palestine question comes through loud and clear from the records of the past two years. At one point, for example, the Palestinian negotiating team is invited to the Pentagon to meet with Admiral Michael Mullen who reportedly tells Abbas, "Arabs and Muslims have only one thing on their mind: Palestine. So, we want to help you establish a Palestinian state.

I have 230,000 troops in Iraq & Afghanistan and I am bringing back 10 each week draped in American flags or in wheelchairs.

This is painful for America. Because I want to bring them back home, a Palestinian state is a cardinal interest of the USA."

It is not unthinkable that the U.S. administration stands to benefit from the release of the Palestine Papers. If outraged Palestinians manage to boot Abbas, Erekat et al out of office, there could be an opportunity to replace them by an even more docile leadership willing to sign on America's dotted line.

Faced with the revelation of these latest assaults on their universally recognized human rights, how can the Palestinian people respond? Five things come to mind.

1. It is important to read at least the key documents among the Palestine Papers to see exactly how the negotiation process was conducted. Not enough Palestinians have read the Oslo Accords, or at least the more easily accessible parts, to understand the implications for their rights. It is not possible to plan effective strategies without this knowledge.
2. It is vital to understand and relate to the very different perspectives of Palestinian communities in Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank, Jerusalem, Gaza, Europe, the U.S. and beyond. Statements of denunciation by Palestinians "outside" will ring hollow in the occupied territories and among refugees unless they are backed by some tangible capacity to contribute to and influence the situation on the ground, including people's need to survive and live as normal a life as possible. The reality is that Palestinian refugees and exiles cannot even go to Palestine if Israel and/or the PA do not want them to. A great deal of creativity will be needed to reinforce meaningful avenues of engagement between those "outside" and those "inside."
3. Statements of response by Palestinian communities should focus on a very few key points that are unassailable (rather than on lengthy denunciations), and that can be picked up and hammered home by

Palestinians everywhere, for example:

* The current PA and PLO leaders lack any mandate to represent the Palestinian people in negotiations.
* The Oslo-initiated process of negotiations under occupation has proven a disastrous failure and must be stopped until the occupation is ended.
* The PLO must be reconstituted as a fully representative body.

4. Action is needed with regard to the two resolutions that the PA/PLO are introducing at the United Nations. The one that is currently tabled at the Security Council condemns Israeli settlements and is in fact a smart way of putting America on the spot. If the U.S. abstains, it only barely sustains the fiction that it is an acceptable mediator. If it vetoes it is completely exposed.

However, the PA/PLO push to increase the number of states that recognize a Palestinian state and take that case to the U.N. is a potentially dangerous initiative, especially given the limits on territory and sovereignty that will be imposed in the Palestinians' present weak circumstances, and given the police state that is being built on the ground (see the devastating report by Aisling Byrne here). Ways must be found to resist this push to statehood at any cost.

5. Palestinians in exile can (and do) turn the weakness of physical separation from the land of Palestine into strength in many ways:
* Financially and politically supporting the popular struggle and boycott movements launched and led by Palestinians on the "inside" and getting their story out through the media and public speaking;
* Engaging with the diverse grassroots groups that support justice throughout the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere, by focusing on the responsibility of their governments to uphold international law.
* Continuing to build and strengthen community organizations that will push the levers of the political and media systems in the countries where they live in favor of Palestinian rights;

* Using the Palestine Papers in outreach to the governments of the countries where they live, as well as missions to the U.N. in New York and Geneva, among others, to demonstrate that the Palestinian people are not being represented in the current diplomatic process and that their rights and interests must be taken into account.

In short, Palestinian voices must be raised — loudly and strategically, with empathy and passion — so that other Palestinians hear and take heart, bringing the world away from empty protestations of statehood to meaningful support of the rights to self-determination, freedom, equality, and return.

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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