



THE MIDDLE EAST

Palestine Papers & Palestinian Realities?

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To put it mildly, it has been quite a busy start to the new decade!

Julian Assange's whistle-blowing WikiLeaks website published reams of documents that provided a peek into the predictable double-speak of political life. The "Jasmine Revolution" overthrew President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali as ordinary Tunisians laboured to introduce democracy, transparency and accountability into their country. Al-Jazeera satellite channel produced 1600 damning documents purporting to impugn the concessions that the PLO chief officials had made in negotiations with Israel during past years. And the biggest popular but unarmed uprising against an Arab authoritarian regime increasingly gathered steam in Egypt and almost single-handedly dwarfed all the other events of January 2011.

Having just watched a heated exchange over the leaked 'Palestine Papers' with Dr Sa'eb Erekat, Palestinian chief negotiator, on the BBC World HARDtalk programme, I feel it appropriate to mull briefly and over their immediate significance. After all, I too was heavily involved as ecumenical consultant with the second-track negotiations over Jerusalem during the now defunct Oslo process.

Al-Jazeera, as much as the Guardian and New York Times broadsheets, had every right to "out" those leaks irrespective of the motivations behind their editorial decisions. This right is quintessential to the freedom of the press. Much as the documents led to acute embarrassment, deep indignation and even political sarcasm, the public had the right to learn about them and to draw their own thought-out conclusions. Moreover, the overall consensus now is that those documents are genuine - and not necessarily doctored ones.

Notwithstanding, I would also argue that Al-Jazeera should have at least ethically if not also legally disclosed those documents to PLO officials prior to their being aired so that they will have had the opportunity to scrutinise them and respond to them appropriately. Instead, they were initially ambushed on the media waves without much prior notice.

I am not too influenced by the semantics used by some Palestinian officials to define let alone justify the exact meaning of the 'concessions' that were ostensibly made by the PLO - whether they yielded a right, a privilege or a controlling authority to Israel, and therefore were legally enforceable, or whether they were merely moot points or out-of-context quotations. But I am willing to take a leap of faith and accept the premise that they only evinced a frame of mind about what might, or might not, have occurred in future if a complete package deal had eventually been cobbled together.

It is undeniable that a number of the disclosures I read on Al-Jazeera website will have deeply disturbed or offended many Palestinians - particularly those affecting the future status of Jerusalem, the plight of refugees and the alleged collaboration between the PLO and Western powers over

extra-judicial renditions or even torture. However, one redeeming card the PLO holds in its defence is that any agreement concluded with Israel could not have become a legal treaty without a public referendum. My query though is whether the mechanics of such a referendum covered only East Jerusalem (ironically subject to Israeli acquiescence), the West Bank and Gaza Strip or will have also included the Palestinian refugee camps and Diaspora populations too.

Last week, the Palestinian General Delegate in the UK, Dr Manuel Hassassian, declared that “the US and Israel have to realise that crisis management is no solution and that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needs dramatic conflict resolution in order to secure peace and stability or [else] an avalanche of protests will continue to challenge the existing political map of the entire region and thus defy the US policy and its geo-strategic interests []” Similar thoughts were articulated by the Quartet at its 47th Munich Security Conference when its leadership re-asserted that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains the pivotal hub of all instability in the region and the door toward any sustainable peace. Our foreign secretary, William Hague, also forthrightly emphasised in Jordan this week the need for Israel and the USA to see through the resolution of this conflict and the containment of Israeli illegal settlements. But as Egypt has shown recently, I would add that Arab dignity, self-respect and self-expression are also critical factors in the future resolution of this conflict.

But here is the controversial crunch! Scores of Palestinians would doubtless feel incensed by the leaks and consider that the horse-trading sessions behind the scenes are not inclusive, do not represent all Palestinian factional standpoints and therefore abort a credible formula for peace. But Palestinians are caught between a rock and a hard place, since neither direct / indirect negotiations nor all forms of resistance or wanton violence, have truly secured any viable and contiguous state for them. There exists a huge asymmetry of forces between the two main protagonists and the West should act decisively to correct its own colonial excesses and urge Israel to deliver a sovereign Palestinian state.

Whilst it is clear that Israeli expansionism is inimical with its own long-term welfare, one has to acknowledge that sooner or later Palestinians too have to re-interpret some of the sacred, personal or emotional taboos that have been part and parcel of their overall legitimate aspirations since at least 1948. They have little choice but to bite the bullet and accept that any negotiated settlement - no matter its parameters - will require a painful reduction of some of the rights that Palestinians consider inalienable. Most veteran negotiators already accept this truism, but they have for long shied away from voicing them openly. However, just in case the forlorn eventuality of any credible peace draws nearer again, it is the duty of the leadership to explain the Palestine Papers to its constituencies as a function of those Palestinian realities.

Finally, should one even assume for the sake of argument that the leaks in the ‘Palestine Papers’ were irreproachably genuine, is it not remarkable that every single Israeli prime minister since the Declaration of Principles in 1993 has rebuffed them as inadequate or insufficient? Does this not prove the unyieldingly rapacious nature of Israeli ambitions and its rejection of peace under manifold guises? Israel alas seems interested in ridding itself of Palestinian demography whilst retaining the geography it occupied in 1967 and such irredentist convictions simply render conflict resolution redundant.

It is self-evident that Palestinians today inhabit a ramshackle political house in urgent need of repair. But before we hurl calumnies at all their negotiators, or worse point to the speck of sawdust in other

peoples' eyes whilst ignoring the plank in our own eyes, might we not perhaps look upon those headline-grabbing leaks as one crisis that the world community could convert into an opportunity if only the desiderata of vision, boldness and strategy can provoke a two-state solution that would manage Palestinian grievances?

Otherwise, and as the Financial Times foreign affairs columnist Gideon Rachman wrote in his book *Zero Sum Power*, we are solely perpetuating a zero-sum logic on both the political and economic plains and therefore fanning further the angry revolutions of the whole MENA region.

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