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Report

Egypt and Syria's effect on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict





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The affects of the Arab Spring on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are very significant and have cast a cloud of uncertainty over the Middle East. The question of Palestine has been deeply influenced by regional and political trends over which the Palestinians had negligible influence for the last six decades. Palestinians have been exposed to the vicissitudes of external and internal Arab politics, suffering from the Lebanese civil war of 1976-1989, the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, and the Arab Spring since 2010. All these examples remind one of the fragility of the Palestinian issue and deep dependence of the Palestinian cause on stability in the Arab world and for any attempt to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict leading to real results.

Egypt and the Question of Palestine before the Arab Spring

Egyptian foreign policy towards the Palestinians has been shifting gradually from considering the Palestinians as part and parcel of Egyptian national security and strategic depth under Nasser, to a country that left them exposed and powerless after Sadat signed the Camp David Peace Accord. (1) During Mubarak's Regime, Egypt continued to follow Sadat's shortsighted and narrow strategic policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Mubarak worked hard to disparage, belittle, and manipulate the Palestinian cause and convinced the United States and other players in the International Community of Egypt's full control over Palestinian decision-making and political mobility and to ensure Egypt's indispensable role regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the region. (2)

The shallow vision of these two leaders constrained the behavior of Egypt and transformed it from a regional power to a second-tier state with very little control over its strategic interests and agendas. Such reckless policies towards the Israeli Palestinians conflict triggered a domino effect of political misfortune that resulted in Egypt losing Sudan and much more. Egypt became an observer, rather than orchestrator, of policies in the region. (3)

Egypt during the Arab Spring

Toppling Mubarak had very serious implications for the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) leadership, especially its president Mahmud Abbas and his dominant Fatah movement. Abbas and Fatah have been championing Mubarak's diplomatic strategies with Israel and invested heavily in that path. But, the Islamic Resistance Movement, better known by its acronym, HAMAS, was more comfortable with the removal of Mubarak for it championed the Syrian-Iranian strategy of resistance rather than engaging in an endless peace process with Israel.

Fatah and the Ousting of Mubarak

After Mubarak was toppled, the mood among the Palestinian Authority (PA) officials was somber, and both Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad were talking about dissolving the government and calling for new elections. (4) The early outcome of the Arab Spring took the Palestinian leaders by surprise, for it removed two of their staunchest allies; Mubarak of Egypt and Ben Ali of Tunisia. By losing Mubarak, Abbas lost a strategic ally and he was resigned to the fact that he could no longer continue to pursue Mubarak's vision of eternal negotiations with Israel and must reach out to Hamas to sooth the street.

For Fatah in general and president Abbas in particular, losing Mubarak had limited the maneuvering options and diminished the ability of the movement to keep its negotiating tactics intact vis-a-vis the reconciliation efforts with Hamas and keep waiting for Israel to deliver something. (5) Thus, Abbas moved to register a public relations victory by going the United Nations (UN) to seek a non-member observer state in 2012. The Palestinian move was supported by 138 countries and was welcomed by many members at the UN.

By going to the UN, the Palestinian leadership wanted to regain the initiative and demonstrate its ability to maneuver in the absence of its allies. Moreover, president Abbas wanted to consolidate his negotiation position with Hamas and send a clear message that he can project changes on the ground. (6)

But the UN bid changed very little for the PLO on the ground and Abbas had to find a way to work with Hamas. Reconciliation with Hamas became a priority over talking to Israel and the chanted slogans on Palestinian streets were, "Alsha'ab Yureed Al Musalha" ("People Want Reconciliation"). Hence for Abbas, the move toward reconciliation was driven by two considerations:

First, after the Egyptian revolution, losing both Mubarak and Omar Suleiman shook the equilibrium of power for president Abbas and gave Hamas great advantage over him. Consequently, the idea of Palestinian unity had gained increasing appeal among Palestinians inside and outside of Palestine and Abbas couldn't afford to be seen by Palestinians as the obstacle to reconciliation. (7)

Second, the removal of Mubarak forced the PA to consider unthought-of solutions to survive. The PA began floating the idea of removing its internationally renowned prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, as a first step to appease Hamas against the will of Israel and the United States. Removing Fayyad, a Western favorite, reflected Abbas' priorities; peace among Palestinians is more important than the delusional Western sponsored peace process with Israel.

Hamas and the Ousting of Mubarak

Hamas considered the deposing of Mubarak a game changer for the movement locally, regionally, and internationally.

Locally, Hamas felt less vulnerable to pressures from Fatah and the PA. Thus, it capitalized on Mubarak's removal to bolster its legitimacy and reframe the debate to boost its image and to rebuild its domestic base. Hamas seemed more at ease than at any time before, and the PA lost its hegemony on initiating and negotiating with the same comfort and strength. (8)

Regionally, during the Mubarak era, Hamas was constrained economically and politically. In fact, Egypt began constructing an iron wall around the strip to diminish Hamas' ability to survive. Egypt's goal was to decapitate and force the movement to surrender its independence and political decision-making. In addition, Israel had less leeway with Hamas after Mubarak. For instance, Israel could no longer count on an administration that shared its vision of delegitimizing and weakening Hamas as in the days of the old regime. (9)

Internationally, the Morsi administration accepted the narrative of Hamas vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and showed sympathy to the movement's vision of solving it

and seemed willing to advocate for it using its political clout and global prestige. For instance, during the Israeli aggression against Gaza in 2012, Egypt played a central role in aborting the Israeli goals of the war, enhancing the negotiating positions of Hamas, solidifying Hamas politically--by sending Egypt's prime minister to Gaza-- ending the war on Hamas' terms rather than Israel's, and warning Israel of grave consequences if it did not back down. Morsi said, "Egypt is different from yesterday." (10) Morsi warned Israel on the first day of the war: "We assure them that the price will be high for continued aggression." (11)

Hamas, through the new Egypt, was able to achieve concrete gains: an end to targeted assassinations; the easing of restrictions on the movement of people and the transfer of goods at the crossings; the expansion of fishing zones; and the allowance for previously forbidden raw materials to enter Gaza with fewer restrictions. In addition, Cairo negotiated the ceasefire without mentioning the Quartet Principles requiring Hamas to renounce violence, recognise Israel and respect or adhere to past agreements between Israel and the PA. (12)

Israel and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring has created a rift between the US and Israel on how to deal with its implications. Whereas the US began considering a Marshall plan like response to support the Arab street against its authoritarian leaders, and expected Israel to continue negotiating with the Palestinians, Israel mounted its public opinion war to define the move as an Islamist takeover. For instance, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "The Arab Spring is an Islamic, anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-Israeli, undemocratic wave." (13) This gloomy assessment of the Israeli leader was not the exception; his judgment of the Arab Spring was shared by many of his lieutenants. Israel's Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon defined the Arab Spring as the "Islamic Winter." (14) In contrast, the American president, in a speech on May 19, 2011, assured the Arab street of America's desire to shoulder responsibility with those who seek freedom. (15)

Israel's take on the Arab spring has a short- and long-range goal. In the short run, Israel aims to pressure the international community to freeze any attempt to re-launch the peace process with the Palestinians before they deal with the perceived danger of the Arab Spring. Israel wants all major powers to adopt its "wait and see," (16) attitude especially in the absence of its stalwart ally Mubarak from the region. In the long run, Israel's ultimate objective is to abrogate the Arab spring, discredit the Arab street, and advances the clash of civilizations argument about the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. Only by exaggerating this danger can Israel pursue its goals of preventing any transformation in the Arab world and maintaining the status-quo: no peace, no war.

Syria and the Arab Spring

Syria is a classic case of a transition to democracy in which the army plays the role of a spoiler rather than an agent of change. The decision of the Syrian army to support the regime rather than the people, as in the Tunisian and Egyptian cases when the mass protest started, came at a heavy price for the country and the region at large. The army's decision resulted in more than 100,000 killed, six million refugees and displaced persons, and an infrastructure that needs more than 50 years, and more than \$100 billion to rebuild and rehabilitate. (17)

The Syrian scene has had grave consequences for the Israel-Palestinian conflict and on balance of power in the region. Henry Kissinger once said that "no war is possible without Egypt, and no peace possible without Syria." (18)

Over the last two years, the Syrian regime removed itself from the Israeli- Palestinian conflict and made Kissinger's anecdote irrelevant. Had the regime responded more peacefully to freedom seekers in its country, it would have saved the country from destruction. The violent response of the regime marginalised Syria, regionally and internationally.

Regionally, Syria lost its clout vis-a-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after Hamas left Damascus in February 2012, and after many of the Palestine refugees were forced out of their refugee camps or became vulnerable because of the violence. In the past, Syria would always count on the presence Palestinian factions that defected from the PLO, Hamas, and the more than 450,000 refugees on its soil as a bargaining chip with many global interlocutors.

The Syrian regime used these factors in the past to send a message to all concerned parties that the PLO alone does not represent the Palestinian people and is incapable to sign a peace agreement to end the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, any serious attempt to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict must pass through Damascus. But now the regime lost all of these influential factors and a great deal of its army and military equipment and thus lost its traditional role as deal maker in any future Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Internationally; the harsh and brutal response of the regime against its own people delegitimised it with many key players in the international community. For example, the USA and many European powers have been calling for the removal of the regime and its symbols from any future government in Syria. (19) In addition, many voices have suggested sending Assad and his men to stand trial at the International Criminal Court

(ICC). (20) Furthermore, the majority of countries have pulled their ambassadors from Damascus, and have asked Syrian ambassadors to leave. (21) Moreover, several United Nations General Assembly Resolutions (UNGAR) have been passed to condemn the regime, and have recognised the human suffering of the Syrian people and demanded that the regime open the country for Human Rights Groups and International Organisations to have unfettered access to the country to protect and document abuses. (22)

Conclusion

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been influenced over the years by regional trends over which the Palestinians have had very little impact. The Palestinians have been very weak and become more fragile over the years due to Arab-Arab conflict and regional tensions. The Palestinians have been victimised so many times; every regional conflict affected their cause negatively and derailed the attention they deserved. The Arab Spring could be a two-edged sword vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: on the one hand, it could focus the attention of the Arab masses on their cause and create a sense of belonging and a shared experience among the people themselves by ignoring the elites and creating collective experiences among the masses to invent a better future.

On the other hand, the Arab Spring could drift the region into the unknown by bringing the colonial powers to the region and allowing them to redraw the old lines of the past and fracture the region along ethnic and religious lines. The Arab Spring is taking place in a region that has not yet recovered from the miseries of Sykes-Picot; and if not brought back to its original messages of dignity, honor, liberty, democracy, civility, and peacefulness, counterrevolutions will replace the original ones and colonialism will come back in the form of United Nations Resolutions; occupation will come back in the form of peacekeeping operations and brutal, criminal, but stable regimes will be favored over nascent democratic but untested ones.

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