

ANALYSIS

The Arab Spring and Palestinian Reconciliation

Each year Palestinians commemorate al-Nakba (or "the catastrophe") on May 15th as a reminder of how hundreds of thousands of them were expelled from their homeland in 1948. Could this year's commemoration be a happier occasion, the preamble to the creation of an internationally recognised Palestinian state?

The upheaval in the Middle East has spilled over into the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where young Palestinians, like their Arab neighbours, have also held street protests. However, they were not calling for the overthrow of despotic regimes but for an end to divisions among Palestinians and for their reconciliation. As many Palestinian youth organisations have called for further demonstrations on May 15th (dubbed by some of them as the 'Third Intifada'), it can be said that this is their own version of the Arab Spring. It may also be one of the reasons – there are many others – which have led to the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. Along with 11 other Palestinian factions, they have signed a landmark agreement which, hopefully, will inaugurate the beginning of a process leading to a universally recognised state for the Palestinians.

In this historic accord brokered by Egyptian mediators in Cairo last week (now that Mubarak and Omar Suleiman are out of the equation), there are many operational details which the two main Palestinian organisations will need to iron out in order to consolidate their reconciliation and partnership. The deal could fail if the Palestinians cannot reach agreement on a number of issues. But if we were to assume that it will stand the test of time, it could enable the Palestinians to seek United Nations recognition of a Palestinian state based on the borders of 1967, with East Jerusalem as the capital, and the return of Palestinian refugees.

To any peace-loving nation and even if it is a little premature, this is indeed cause for celebration. Unfortunately, not for Israel and the United States. For several decades, these countries have been talking about peace negotiations and a rejection of violence but have consistently blocked any peace initiatives against the backdrop of continuing Jewish



settlements on Palestinian lands. Like their American backers, the Israelis want war and they wage war (cf the asymmetrical war in Gaza). Then, backed by the US, they say to the international community that they are fighting terrorism. The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has immediately condemned the deal between Fatah and Hamas, calling it a "tremendous blow for peace and a great victory for terrorism." Netanyahu has told Mahmoud Abbas to choose either "peace with Hamas" or "peace with Israel". The Palestinian leader responded by telling Israel to choose "between settlements and peace". Mahmoud Abbas accused Netanyahu of using the reconciliation as "a pretext to avoid peace negotiations".

The Americans and the Israelis behave as if they cannot see the evolution of Hamas. According to the Oxford Research Group, the leadership of Hamas has a long time ago sought to join mainstream politics. In 2006, the party participated in free, fair and democratically held elections and won. But this was not to the liking of the Israelis who initially had backed Hamas to weaken Fatah. They then turned against Hamas consistently presenting it as a terrorist organisation. This is how Obama and the Quartet's peace envoy to the Middle East, Tony Blair, want to see Hamas – as a ter-

rorist organisation and nothing less. In 2007, outside interference led to the collapse of the unity Fatah-Hamas government. Hamas took over control of the Gaza Strip and Fatah that of the West Bank. Interestingly, it is Hamas now who first signified to Egyptian mediators their willingness to repair damage caused by previous breakdowns.

Israel does not only condemn the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation. It also punishes the Palestinians by refusing to hand over the \$100m it collects in customs and other taxes for the Palestinians each month, on imports – nearly half of the Palestinian government's income. The US has also threatened the Palestinian Authority to withdraw any aid if it does not abandon its deal with Hamas. But the Americans have done a lot more. They (first Obama, then Hilary Clinton, then lower ranking officials) have exerted a lot of pressure on Mahmoud Abbas to withdraw a UN resolution which demanded that Israel "immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory." After Abbas's refusal, Obama told him about a "list of sanctions" Palestinians would endure if the vote went ahead.

But the Palestinian people have already endured a lot in their painful history. As Avi Shlaim, Professor of International Relations at Oxford says: "As so often in the tragic history of Palestine, the victims were blamed for their own misfortunes. Israel's propaganda machine persistently purveyed the notion that the Palestinians are terrorists, that they reject coexistence with the Jewish state, that their nationalism is little more than anti-Semitism, that Hamas is just a bunch of religious fanatics and that Islam is incompatible with democracy. But the simple truth is that the Palestinian people are a normal people with normal aspirations. They are no better but they are no worse than any other national group. What they aspire to, above all, is a piece of land to call their own on which to live in freedom and dignity." (*The Guardian*, 7/1/09)

There are currently half a million Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

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Earthquake in Spain

Residents in the Spanish town of Lorca are assessing the damage from quakes that killed eight people and forced thousands to spend the night outdoors.

The mayor of the historic town, with a population of 90,000, said: "Almost no-one slept in their homes".

Some 20,000 buildings are believed to have been damaged in what was Spain's worst earthquake for 50 years.

The magnitude 5.2 tremor hit early on Wednesday evening, around two hours after a quake measuring 4.4.

Those who died - including at least one pregnant woman and a child - were killed by falling masonry in the second tremor.

Regional officials say at least 130 people have been injured, with several in

Syria protests: Students rally in Aleppo

Security forces have broken up a demonstration by thousands of students in Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, witnesses and activists say.

The dormitory protest is thought to be the city's biggest so far.

The students demanded an end to the military siege of other cities in Syria including Homs, Deraa and Baniyas, the main flashpoints of dissent against President Bashar al-Assad's government.

Eighteen people were reported killed on Wednesday amid an ongoing crackdown.

Tanks shelled Homs, the country's third city, and clashes were reported

in towns and villages around Deraa, where the protests began in March.

Thousands of people have reportedly been arrested and hundreds killed in the government crackdown.

The Syrian government insists it is pursuing "armed terrorist gangs".

On Wednesday, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called on President Assad to "heed calls for reform and freedom and to desist from excessive force and mass arrest of peaceful demonstrators".

There have been several student demonstrations at Aleppo in past weeks, but they have usually only involved a few hundred people and

been swiftly dispersed.

This seems to have been the biggest so far, with several thousand students gathering on the campus on the western side of the city, and chanting slogans in solidarity with Deraa.

As has happened in the past, fellow students loyal to the Assad regime and security agents with batons moved in and dispersed the crowds.

One report said police closed the main road leading from the centre of the city to the campus, in an attempt to keep the crowd from spilling over into the city centre.