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“THE ARABS AND THE GAZA CRISIS – BETWEEN “OFFICIAL” INERTIA AND POPULAR TUMULT”

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On December 31st of 2008, Arab foreign ministers held an emergency meeting at the Arab League’s headquarters in Cairo in an attempt to define a common position on the Gaza situation. Once again, the Arab camp showed early signs of division. The public opinion in Arab countries is rather unanimous when it comes to the fate of the Palestinian people: they are viewed as landless martyrs of Israeli oppression and occupation. The first feelings of revolt have rapidly turned into fulminating protests throughout the Arab world (and throughout the world as whole). Ever since the beginning of the Israeli offensive, the (Arab) press is constantly reminding us that when the US and its EU and Arab allies opt for aloofness in such humanitarian catastrophe, the old internationally known maxim “silence gives consent” applies. As a result of President Hosni Mubarak’s decision to keep the Rafah border crossings with Gaza closed, the most virulent attacks targeted Egypt and its representatives throughout the world.

While this is an unprecedented Israeli offensive in the occupied territories, the oppression of Palestinians is not new. Nor is the infuriating division between Arab governments. When Arab governments met in Cairo to discuss the crisis in Gaza early this month, accusations, division and drama have once again monopolized the agenda. The condemnation of the Israeli offensive by Egypt’s president Hosni Mubarak was seen as hypocritical by Iran and Hezbollah, the latter accusing Egypt of being an accomplice of Israel. Furthermore, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah encouraged Egyptians to take over the streets and force open the Rafah border. To Qatar’s call for an Arab extraordinary summit, the Gulf regimes as well as Egypt replied by calling it a premature initiative and affirmed that Palestinians must first reestablish national unity (between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority partisans).

In an attempt to temper the inter-Arab hostilities, Arab League secretary-general Amr Moussa urged his Arab counterparts to unite their ranks and stop pouring oil on the fire 1 (CNSNews.com). However on January 14th Moroccan King Mohammed VI announced his decision to neither personally participate in an Arab extraordinary summit in Doha nor in the Arab economic summit of Kuwait explaining in a royal cabinet communiqué that “The mere fact of proposing the convening of an Arab summit now gives rise to squabbling and outbidding tactics, even disputes between Arab countries [...] this atmosphere of disunity gives the Arab public opinion the impression that there are attempts to secure exclusive leadership of the Arab world or create specific axes or zones of influence” 2.

Due to its strategic location between Egypt and occupied Gaza, the 14 km long frontier of Rafah (the only non occupied border in the Palestinian territories) is at the heart of the matter. Refusing to open the Rafah border crossing claiming that Gaza is an occupied territory under Israeli responsibility, Egypt is “contributing to a war crime” explains Ahmed Mekki, deputy chief of the Court of Cassation³. Despite growing internal and external critics of its role throughout Israel’s occupation and late offensive in Gaza, Egypt has dug in its heels and stubbornly denied its complicity in the onslaught against Gaza. In an endeavor to put an end to the crisis, Egypt resorted to its diplomatic leadership, proposing a peace initiative (backed by French President Nicholas Sarkozy) calling for an immediate cease-fire, an urgent meeting between Israeli and Palestinian factions to prevent a recurrence of the present situation and finally, urging all Palestinians to engage in a reconciliation effort.

Meanwhile, the disillusion and frustration of the people in Egypt and in the rest of the Arab world make the risk of a new wave of radicalization very likely with groups such as Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas gaining in leverage and popular support. From the Arabs’ perspective, there is no doubt about the legitimacy of Hamas. Indeed, politically speaking, Hamas democratically won a large majority in the Palestinian parliament. Hamas’ genuine victory is often ascribed to the rigor and integrity of its program toppled with Palestinians’ lasting feeling of discontent and frustration vis-à-vis Fatah leaders. Yet, Israel, with the tacit support of power-greedy Arab authoritarian regimes, refuses to negotiate with a Hamas-led government, a “terrorist” government. It goes without saying that the US and its European allies all joined in unison. And from then on, Hamas was to be considered a terrorist organization. In that sense, it is worth remembering that not so long ago late Yasser Arafat Fatah’s movement was also labeled a “terrorist” organization.

It is true that many Arabs qualify Hamas actions as unacceptable and detrimental to the Palestinian people. Many also criticize the fact that Hamas refuses to negotiate with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, arguing that discrepancies within the Palestinian camp can only exacerbate the gravity of the situation. And they might be right. On the other hand, the faith of the Palestinian people is only relevant when their massacre gains wide media coverage. For the last decades the Israelis have, in all impunity, subdued the Palestinian people to abject treatments and the international community, once more, turned a blind eye to it. As legendary Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once wrote: “The siege will last in order to convince us we must choose an enslavement that does no harm, in fullest liberty!”

The experience of foreign domination has left a bitter taste in the Arab world and the reinforcement and spread of Israeli settlements is just another form of colonialism that Arab masses are just not willing to accept. Neither Israeli military campaigns nor international accusations of “terrorism” will diminish or restrain Palestinian nationalism. A military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is simply not the answer. Regardless of the outcome of the conflict, Hamas will have bolstered its popularity among Arabs and provoked a series of externalities, prompting new political dynamics with a widening gap between Arab political elites and the people, hence setting further hurdles for future peace prospects in the Middle East.

Notes

1 CNSNews.com, “Arabs Divided, Egypt Under Fire Over Gaza”, January 2nd 2009, <http://www.cnsnews.com/Public/content/article.aspx?RsrcID=41388> (consulted on January 8th of 2009)

2 Maghreb Arab Presse, “King Mohammed VI not to participate personally in Doha, Kuwait Arab summits”, January 15th 2009, http://www.map.ma/eng/sections/royal_activities/king_mohammed_vi_not/view (consulted on January 15th 2009)

3 Al Ahram Weekly Online, “All eyes on Rafah”, 8 - 14 January 2009, Issue No. 929, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/929/eg12.htm> (consulted on January 10th of 2009)