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The War in Gaza: Dismantling the Palestinian Issue

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The Israel-Hamas war in Gaza marked a significant milestone in the history of Arab liberal-critical writing. The Palestinian issue was no longer sacrosanct, as analysts expressed sharp criticism of the Palestinians in general, and Hamas in particular. Although such views had been voiced in the past, it seems that the war and its outcomes have encouraged many Arab liberal intellectuals to hang their dirty laundry in public, and say what they had not dared to say previously.

The history of Arab liberal-critical writing is a lengthy one. Its roots date back to the late 19th century, and reached its heyday in monarchical Egypt during the first decades of the 20th century. By the mid-1950's, however, the advent of Arab military regimes and revolutionary ideologies rendered the public sphere off-limits to contrary voices, and forced intellectuals and critics underground.

The Arab liberal voice returned to the public sphere at the beginning of the 1990's, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the triumph of Western liberal-democracies over communism, and in conjunction with the Gulf War. But it was not until the beginning of the 21st century that this trend became significant, in response to the 9-11-01 attacks and subsequent al-Qa`ida terrorism in the West, and even more importantly, in Arab and Islamic countries. The profound regional upheaval caused by the 2003 American war in Iraq and toppling of Saddam Husayns regime further reinforced the incentive to engage in critical analysis of Arab society.

One of the main subjects treated by Arab liberal writers was the threat posed to Arab societies by Islamist radical philosophy and fundamentalist movements. In this respect, liberals and ruling regimes were like-minded regarding their fears of theocratic ascendancy. It is of no surprise, therefore, that movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, which were deemed as embodying the Islamist threat, were the first to be targeted by the liberal critique. Another issue addressed by Arab liberal critics was the Iranian-Shiite-Persian threat from the east, a threat deeply rooted in the historical and cultural consciousness of the Sunni Arab world. Iran's infiltration and involvement in war-torn post-Saddam Iraq, as well as its support for Hezbollah activities in Lebanon, raised the old Arab fear of Iran's 'export of the revolution' to new heights.

One issue had remained virtually untouched by critical liberals, namely the Palestinian question. The Palestinian cause had traditionally been presented by radical Arab authoritarian regimes as the reason for maintaining a constant state of war with Israel, thus requiring Arab society to be permanently mobilized behind the ruling elites. Consequently, little or no criticism of the Palestinians was voiced in the Arab world, particularly once the PLO attained Arab international legitimacy as their sole legitimate

representative.

The January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections brought an end to this quietude. The rise to power of a democratically elected Islamist movement, the first such occasion in the history of the Arab world, seems to have changed Arab attitudes towards the Palestinian issue as a whole. Hamas now became 'the sum of all fears' for Arab regimes and liberal intellectuals, combining the immediate threats of an Islamist fundamental regime and Iranian penetration into the heart of the Arab world with its most sacred cause, Palestine.

The 2006 war in Lebanon marked an important step in the redrawing of the new power balance in the Middle East. Arab and Islamic forces have aligned according to two distinct axes: the 'Radical Axis', supported by Iran, and the 'Moderate Axis', led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and in opposition to Iran's efforts to extend its influence. For Arab liberals living in the Moderate Axis countries and abroad, this situation offered an opportunity to critically address the dangerous developments and threats facing the region without incurring the opprobrium of their own governments.

But it was not until the June 2007 Hamas military coup in Gaza that the lines were truly drawn. Moderate Arab regimes and liberal intellectuals faced a new reality in Palestine in which Hamas, directly backed up by the Islamic Republic of Iran, appropriated the Palestinian cause. From that moment on, the formerly sacred and untouchable issue was sacred no longer. In an article entitled "Dismantling the Armed Resistance Culture", Qatari scholar Abd Al-Hamid Al-Ansari wrote the following:

"Hamas has planned from the very beginning to separate Gaza and to expel the Fatah movement away. Some writers' enthusiasm in supporting Hamas

and its mythic resistance makes them turn a blind eye on the crimes Hamas has committed against their adversaries and the death of 145 people [...] What is the reason for the fierce advocacy for Hamas, even it has committed mistakes and shed the sacred Palestinian blood in vain?"[1]

Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza during December 2008-January 2009 took the Arab treatment of the Palestinian issue to new levels. On the one hand, ending the war and bringing the Palestinian tragedy to an end through a diplomatic solution was deemed crucial, not only for Palestinian welfare but also regarding many of the region's other major problems. On the other hand, Hamas, now the preeminent player in the Palestinian arena, provided a worrying example of how an Islamist regime might conduct itself, and was serving as a proxy for Iranian penetration into the Arab heartland. Ending the war with an agreement might have given Hamas, its patrons and its protagonists a sense of triumph, a divine victory which in turn would have caused a chain reaction of rising Islamist movements in the Moderate Axis states.

Hence, a wave of liberal criticism burst into the open during and after the war. In other words, the Israeli attack, brought upon Gaza by Hamas's rejection of an extension of the six-month calming (*tahdi'a*), encouraged Arab liberals for the first time to publicly vocalize their harsh criticism towards Hamas and to settle accounts regarding Hamas's failure to advance the Palestinian cause. In an article entitled "The Proof of Victory", Lebanese intellectual Hazem Saghiya wrote the following:

"Hezbollah and Hamas [...] put their societies, their lives, deaths, economic situation and education in second priority, and so they manage to triumph over piling mounds of dead bodies [...] They are anti-movements and counter-movements that succeed, by definition, in ruining what currently

exists but do not succeed in building what is to replace it." [2]

In an article published during the third week of the Gaza war, Palestinian scholar Dr. Ahmad Abu Matar said the following:

"The conflict between Hamas and Fatah does not have any relation to a national liberation of any kind or to the establishment of a Palestinian State on all the 1967 territories, as long as Hamas activists enjoy their rule over the Gaza Strip and full control of it, amid a dictatorial and oppressive seclusion of everyone disagreeing with their policies [...] The Israeli occupation has turned for a moment more merciful than the Hamas' *Al-Tanfidhiyya* executive arm..." [3]

In conclusion, the increasing alienation from the Palestinian cause, the outcome of many years of marking time in the peace process, endless and costly violence and incompetent leadership, all seemed to have emerged emphatically during the war in Gaza. Arab liberals no longer bore their criticism in silence and displayed considerable equanimity in treating critically this once-sacred issue. Though not representing the mainstream 'Arab street' opinion but an intellectual, elitist point of view, the Arab liberals' big challenge now is to find a way to harness their criticism in a manner that can contribute to a constructive and rational discourse that may eventually rescue the Palestinians from their political and military predicament.

[1] Abd Al-Hamid Al-Ansari, "Dismantling the Armed Resistance Culture" (Tafkik Thaqafat Al-Muqawama Al-Musallaha), *Al-Bayan* [U.A.E], July 7, 2007.

<http://www.albayan.ae/servlet/Satellite?c=Article&cid=1182860370090&pagename=Albayan%2FArticle%2FFullDetail>.

[2] Hazim Saghia, "The Proof of Victory" (Hujjat al-Intisar), *Al-Hayat*, January 27, 2009.

<http://www.daralhayat.com/opinion/01-2009/Item-20090126-13edf821-c0a8-10ed-00be-610805fa5eb1/story.html> .

[3] Ahmad Abu Matar, "Will the Gazan Vinograd Report Be Published?" (Hal Sa-Yasdur Taqirir 'Vinograd' Al-Ghazawi?), *Elaph*, January 18, 2009.

<http://www.elaph.com/Web/ElaphWriter/2009/1/401123.htm>.

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