

**OPINION**

# To Break the Deadlock, Palestine Needs Democratic Elections

After the failure of the Oslo Accords, the “agreement of the century” definitively buried the idea of a Palestinian state. The recent wave of violence from which Hamas and Israel have benefited is the consequence. The organization of democratic elections must allow the mobilization that began in East Jerusalem to be extended to Palestine.

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THE TRAUMATIC VIOLENCE THAT SHOOK PALESTINE AND ISRAEL THIS MONTH marked the terminal collapse of nearly three decades of flawed peacemaking. It began with the Oslo peace accords. Those did not create a viable framework for long-term coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians, so much as rally tentative confidence for a two-state solution. One consequence was that the international community granted powers of governance to the Palestinian Authority, whose formal role became one of policing Palestine in the context of inexorable occupation.

Translated from

Repeated failures to resuscitate negotiations for the two-state solution culminated in the deal of the century. This hegemonic project by the Trump

administration showed the US surrendering any pretense of moral stature and respect for international law. It granted Israel open license to formalize its annexation through land grabs and colonial settlement. Those Arab states involved in the Abraham Accords supported the deal for strategic reasons. Israel represented a convenient ally against Iran in the context of America's geopolitical retreat from the region.

The deal of the century liquidated Oslo's shaky edifice for peace. It turned the retail concession of Palestinian rights into the wholesale abnegation of Palestinian statehood. The recent violence is the inevitable result of this, accentuating the failure of normalization. It emits echoes of the past 2008 and 2014 conflicts centered on Gaza, and waged between Hamas and Israel.

## **THE PERVERSE GAME OF HAMAS AND ISRAEL**

Yet upon closer glance, this new crisis does not simply repeat recent history. It exposes a new development in this arena—the convergence of interest between Hamas and Israel in suppressing popular mobilization. Both Hamas and the Netanyahu government feared what Sheikh Jarrah represented, namely the genesis of a new civic movement for Palestinian rights. Like many other social movements, it emphasized peaceful disobedience rather than armed struggle. It emerged independently of both Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, providing a new frame of political reference for many Palestinians.

This produces a paradox of history. Until recently, the region waited for the Palestinian problem to infuse the Arab Spring. Yet, it has been the spirit of civic resistance from the Arab Spring that has transformed the Palestinian equation. The defiance of Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem against Israeli displacement centered upon networks of horizontal solidarity that incorporated new repertoires of dissent. They were bolstered as well by transnational activism and global support, with solidarity protests in much of the Arab world as well as the West.

It was the nonviolence of this movement that engendered Israeli violence, which in turn begot Hamas' entry into conflict with Israel. Until the events of Sheikh Jarrah, Hamas was the only Palestinian political force determined to resist Israeli intransigence. The situation in the West Bank is most telling. There, 25 Palestinians have been killed—the highest death toll in a single episode since the Second Intifada two decades ago. Yet protests across Palestine and Israel continue. We have not witnessed this scale of popular mobilization since 1936. Conversely, we have also not seen this degree of Israeli incarceration since the Al-Aqsa Intifada, with security forces detaining thousands of Palestinian demonstrators since April.

It is fear of this popular mobilization that gives Hamas and the Israeli government

an overlapping interest, despite each desiring to annihilate the other. They align by accident, not mutual pleasure. Israel is more accustomed to waging violent conflict, and is completely disoriented by the moral vocabulary of civil rights. Likewise, the ideological vision of Hamas is built upon armed struggle, not democratic people power rooted in the historic cradle of Palestine, Jerusalem.

The Oslo accords turned the Palestine Liberation Organization into a governing body, first by removing its previous status as a “terrorist actor.” The irony of the historic peace process is that Hamas, too, may well see its terrorist label be diluted by Israel, which needs Hamas as an interlocutor.

Both Hamas and Israel have gained from the violence. The Israeli government has entrenched its strategy of militarizing the Palestinian issue by referencing its right to self-defense. Even the political alternatives to Netanyahu, like Benny Gantz, supported the bombardment of Gaza. Hamas, meanwhile, risks turning into a Palestinian version of Hizbullah. It has used the conflict to further evolve from a national resistance organization to a military power, one whose armed capabilities give it a millennial temporality with a supranational self-conception, with little regard to the interests of its people. Neither actor cares much for any peaceful solution. The two perversely feed off one another in a ritualized enactment of continuous representation, within well-defined red lines.

## **WHO BENEFITS FROM THE CRIME?**

Several regional voices also now stand on stronger ground. Qatar and Turkey, who constitute a geopolitical axis that postures against the UAE-Saudi-Israeli axis, emerged early on as defenders of Palestine. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in particular, garnered acclaim across the Muslim world for his combative rhetoric against Israel, and his religious call to protect the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem from further assaults. The Emir of Qatar has also reprised the role as protector of the Palestinian people.

Egypt and Jordan as well gained more visibility from the crisis, due to their efforts to broker a ceasefire. Jordan’s actions were inevitable given the difficult position of the Hashemite Kingdom. Its monarchy retains custodianship over the holy sites of Jerusalem, but it also fears that it will pay the ultimate price by serving as the substitute state for Palestinians. Egypt’s intervention unfolded in a different way. Sisi alternated between pro-Palestinian militancy and the non-partisan mediation reminiscent of the Mubarak regime.

Outside the conflict zone, other actors have fared worse. The US has marginalized itself from reclaiming the mantle of arbiter for peace. The Biden administration’s repeated interventions to halt UN Security Council discussions calling for a ceasefire made clear that its diplomatic leverage has hard limits, and above all still abides by the Israeli exception.

The European Union did not fare better. It coordinated collective action among its member states only after a week of violence, and even so could do no better than issue a meek call for peace. It continues to stand in the shadow of the US.

In the Arab world, the United Arab Emirates has also been unnerved, for it had assumed the disappearance of any possibility for Palestinian mobilization. By leading efforts to sign the Abraham Accords last year, the UAE garnered praise for inaugurating a new era of multilateral peace. However, the recent crisis has shown that the UAE's agreement with Israel was a strategic tool for bilateral cooperation, not a fulcrum for advancing the Palestinian issue. While semi-official voices on social media adopted the Israeli narrative of self-defense, the Emirati government also offered to mediate between Hamas and Israel, although these efforts were overtaken by Egyptian and Jordanian actions.

The UAE does have one important card to play, namely Mohammed Dahlan. Dahlan retains a fierce rivalry against Mahmoud Abbas, making him a target of the Fatah. Hamas similarly remains wary of Dahlan, who has criticized the Islamist organization in the past but also maintains a popular base in Gaza. He could well have a role to play with Emirati support.

Saudi Arabia and Iran remained on the sidelines of the crisis, which reflected their insecurities in distinctive ways. Saudi Arabia will become more prudent in balancing its domestic and regional interests. The outpouring of pro-Palestinian sentiment was enough to halt, at least temporarily, its discreet impulse towards normalization with Israel.

Iran faces a different dilemma. In effect, it has become too successful for its own good, and now must pivot against its overexposure. The Iranian regime transferred missile technologies to Hamas, which has absorbed its weaponry to create indigenized rockets to attack Israel. Yet Hamas did not join Iran's Shi'a coalition and has chosen to remain in the Arab Sunni camp, for after all it began as a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Iran therefore did not exploit the conflict for geopolitical purposes. There was no military reaction from Hizbullah to the bombardment of Gaza, which would have been the surest sign of Iranian escalation. Instead, Tehran remains focused more upon regrouping its forces in Iraq and entertaining a renewed nuclear framework with the West.

## **LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS AS THE ONLY SOLUTION**

This shifting regional landscape as well as the Hamas-Israeli convergence leaves most Palestinians in dire straits. The best pathway out of the crisis is to hold elections, which have been indefinitely delayed through mutual complicity. Neither Hamas nor Fatah wishes to hold elections for fear of losing their territorial domains: Hamas fears losing Gaza to Fatah, and Fatah fears losing the West Bank to Hamas.

However, elections would give the Palestinian people a crucial advantage. It would allow them to connect with other major human rights struggles around the world, from Mandela to Black Lives Matter. It would provide a legitimate government, which could serve as its representative to the world and reactivate the possibility of a two-state solution or any other credible alternative. It would also allow new voices on the Palestinian street, such as the youth activists and social movements that mobilized around Sheikh Jarrah, to replace the aging elites that have ruled them since Oslo. It would provide an indigenous alternative to future governance under a Hamas organization that is turning into a Palestinian Hezbollah, or under a Fatah that remains a prisoner of its rent-seeking behavior derived from its role as a proxy policeman for Palestine.

This is where the international community can do the most good. No degree of diplomatic condemnation of Israel will halt its occupation and annexation, and no amount of sanctions and threats will deter Hamas from its military posture. Rather, the international community must promote democratic elections to give voice to the silent Palestinian majority that can break the political impasse and offer a new pathway to ensuring the rights of the Palestinian people.

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