There is no doubt that to witness the Hamas-Fatah confrontations is a discomforting experience for those working for justice for the Palestinians. On the most basic level, it is distressing to see a colonized people expend energies not resisting occupation but in kidnapping and killing each other. There is also the knowledge that all of this plays right into Israeli hands, serving as both a justification for occupation (‘look what happens when we give them territory’), as well as a distraction for a media that does not exactly need an incentive to avoid discussing the conflict’s roots. However, there are other, more profound reasons why Palestinian domestic politics of the last year should produce discomfort, as the PLC elections and subsequent events have thrown into sharper relief some questions that are unpleasant – yet necessary – to face.

Because the political establishment and corporate media unwittingly or otherwise buys into the line that Israeli violence is intrinsically more ‘legitimate’ than Palestinian violence, it can be tempting to merely defend Palestinian resistance from demonization and decontextualization. Moreover, the fact remains that violent resistance to occupation and conquest is enshrined in international law, provided it does not target civilians. It can sometimes seem that the Palestinians are the only people to be denied the right to self-defense that is woven into international law.

But even when all that is acknowledged, we are still left with
the question of the space that violence occupies in Palestinian political discourse and practice. Violence is contagious and the eternal myth is that ‘our’ violence will be limited, contained, and used for a specifically defined purpose that justifies its usage. The fact is that violence spreads, and once unleashed is hard to put back in the bottle. In the Palestinian context, therefore, this means that the guns once used against the Israelis are now used brother against brother, faction against faction. This means that a well-developed habitual recourse to violence as political language no longer serves to liberate Palestine but to fragment and weaken the national struggle.

This is not to be confused with the propagandist anti-Islamic rhetoric of a ‘culture of violence’, that seeks to delegitimise Palestinian resistance to the Israeli violence of land seizure and occupation. As already indicated, looked at through the lens of international law and historical precedent, Palestinian violence does indeed differ from Israeli violence in that it is a resistance as opposed to an aggression. Important caveats, however, should not distract from the issue, for otherwise, reflexive defensiveness as a response to Zionist propaganda itself becomes a victory for the enemies of the Palestinians, in denying a space for critical self-reflection.

A second issue is that of Oslo’s legacy, a question that was even raised at the very genesis of the process and that became louder and more pressing as the passing years gave evidence to the bitter fruit of the seeds sown at the enforced end of the First Intifada. In the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, in the return of the men from Tunis, and in the facade of independent government that was spawned in the 1990s, a system was set up that was going to fail – only the timing and manner of its collapse were in doubt. The success of Palestinian elections at a municipal, presidential and parliamentary level proved to be the beginning of the end (or
should) of the Oslo system. Ironically appropriate then that
democratic expression should be the undoing of an essentially
antidemocratic arrangement.

Once Hamas became the parliamentary majority, Israel, the EU
and the US made a calculation that in starving the
Palestinians and draining the coffers of public services, the
people would have no choice but to turn against the government
they had democratically chosen. This collective punishment was
to act in tandem with the interruption of PLC and cabinet
business by arresting dozens of Hamas-affiliated
representatives. However, the essence of this cruel bet, which
in its crudest form is that the average Palestinian will
ultimately value bread over freedom and national political
dignity, proved to be at least partially correct. Not, of
course, if one listens to the statements of Hamas officials,
or the rally slogans. But for the Palestinian denied his
meagre wage, whose children are not being taught, and who is
being reduced to a hand-to-mouth existence, more basic
material needs are now the priority.

This is the feeling one gets talking to Palestinians; of
course they know the injustice of the West’s arrogant refusal
to recognise their elections, and they are not blind to how
Israel and the US ceaselessly work to undermine Palestinian
resolve and self-determination. For a father providing for his
family, or a mother seeking to educate her children, however,
there is a more essential basic common denominator; survival.
It is the same logic at work when a jobless Palestinian
accepts construction work at an Israeli settlement, or decides
that it’s better to collaborate with the Shin Bet than have
his sister go without the operation she so desperately needs.
It’s ugly, and it is the occupation that is the grotesque
sickness behind these symptoms. But it can not be denied or
glossed over.

This brings us to the final discomfort, a question that must
be posed sensitively but can not remain unvoiced. To some extent, the occupier and the occupied, the colonizer and the colonized, are in a mutually dependent relationship, caught in patterns of behavior that require the cooperation, disquietingly, of the oppressed – just as it requires the agency of the oppressor. ‘Pure’ Zionism, that is Zionism at its theoretical roots that expressed itself at various moments in pre- and post-state history, differs from standard definitions of colonialism in that it seeks not the exploitation of the indigenous population but their removal or extermination. However, the post-1967 occupation introduced a shift towards a more orthodox coloniser-colonised dynamic.

This occupation has its 40th anniversary this year – is it any surprise that the occupation finds its way into the Palestinians, just as it also externally controls and manipulates their lives as individuals and a society. Checkpoints, passes, settlements, roadblocks, curfews, industrial zones; all depend to some extent on the cooperation of the Palestinians to function correctly. As John Holloway writes in Change the World Without Taking Power, “in any system of power-over, there is a relation of mutual dependence between the ‘powerful’ and the ‘powerless’. It appears to be a one-way relation in which the dominated depend on the dominator, but in fact the dominator’s very existence as dominator depends on the dominated”.

All the ideas discussed in this article require and deserve expansion and discussion; what is presented here is an overview, and a provocation. A provocation in the sense that without acknowledgement of that which is uncomfortable in the Palestinian national struggle, there will be no opportunity to mould and channel these contradictions into a programme of resistance. Violence must be removed from its pedestal and challenged as both the best means to resolve internal dispute and resist the occupation. Slogans and inappropriate ideological straitjackets must not conceal the tension that
the average Palestinian faces on a daily basis, between dignity and survival. Those seeking to keep deservingly-dead Oslo institutions hooked up to live support, like the comatose Sharon, must have the plug torn from their hands. And above all, Palestinians can tap into the rich vein of civil disobedience, creative resistance, insubordination and refusal that is part of their people’s past and present, returning the occupation’s You-Must with a resounding No. Questions may sometimes be uncomfortable, but in the asking and the answering there are rewards sufficient to head off the crises facing the Palestinian people.

References:


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