

Afterthoughts

Imperial decline and prospects for a just peace in Palestine

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As Southeast Asians, we deeply feel the pain and suffering that has gripped the ancient holy land. Our region has been at the crossroads of different cultures and religions. Islam, and its rich cultural heritage, has been part-and-parcel of many Southeast Asian societies for centuries. The region is home to the biggest Islamic country, Indonesia, with hundreds of millions Muslims being citizens of the other countries in the region.

Our own country, the Philippines, is home to a large Muslim community mainly concentrated in Mindanao and Sulu. But it is not only people from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei – Muslim-majority countries in the region – that have been concerned with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Indeed, the conflict now has direct relevance to the thousands of Indonesian and Filipino families who have relatives working as domestics or construction workers in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

Palestine and the global conscience

The plight of the Palestinians is embedded in our consciousness, and their torment and agony are etched in our conscience. Perhaps, one of the few benefits of globalization is that people from all corners of the world can be continuously reminded of the imperial atrocities of Israel and the U.S. in the Middle East and other places. To us, and hundreds of millions of people around the world, the situation in Palestine represents the pinnacle of injustice in a world that has been dominated by imperial calculations and a cold-blooded realist outlook.

For more than half-a-century, the gushing wound of Palestine has assaulted the global conscience. However, we are yet to see a just resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. At this moment of reflection and gathering, the question we must raise is to whom should we ascertain the responsibility for such a protracted humanitarian tragedy, if not to the “Empire”? History, as our dearest witness to the greatest atrocities and crimes, tells us that justice and peace have been the eternal victims of an imperial design that has dominated West Asia for centuries. In the last 200 years, the French and the British colonizers subdivided the region into separate spheres of influence – indeed, Western imperialism is an old phenomenon in the Middle East. In the early 20th century,

the British laid down the foundation for the rise of a “Zionist” exclusionary state, a process that enjoyed active French military assistance and partnership. The birth of the colonial settler state of Israel in 1948, though it was at the auspices of the United Nations, was masterminded by the United States. Israel’s blatant territorial seizures during the Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973 could not have been carried out without the unconditional support of the United States.

Unconditional US support

Israel’s bloody role in the Lebanese Civil War, culminating in the Sabra and Chatila as well as the Qana Massacres, and recent attacks on a besieged, densely populated Gaza stand as a testament to the naked force of the Israeli military machinery backed by US support. It is not unrealistic to assume that military aggression has actually become the continuation of Israeli foreign policy by other means. Insincere, if not meaningless, peace talks and negotiations have become a comfortable political veneer for an uncompromising Israeli regime that has in actuality relied on superior military hardware, much of it provided by Washington, to perpetually bludgeon Palestinians. US pressure on Israel is the key to the resolution of the conflict. Israel knows very well that its “survival” and stability is contingent on a full-spectrum, sustained, and expansive US support.

What we condemn the most is the impunity by which Israel conducts its vicious military operations in Palestine – thanks to immutable, blind, and unconditional American support. It is precisely such a culture of impunity that results in the reckless pounding of Palestinian homes and the massacre of innocent individuals in Lebanon, West Bank, and Gaza. Moreover, what we should denounce is imperial hypocrisy. How can the ‘mighty’ and ‘benevolent’ America speak of ‘democratizing’ the Middle East – through its invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq – when it turns a blind-eye on crimes against humanity perpetrated by its regional ideological ally, Israel. We know how frustrating the situation in the Middle East can get, but let us remember that beyond war and violence, the true path towards bringing lasting peace to the region is a just, peaceful, and lasting resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In his famous “Cairo Speech”, President Barack Obama promised a new era in the US’ relations with the Islamic world. It was a speech that rekindled the hopes of a billion Muslim around the world for a ‘just peace’ in the Middle East. In fairness to him, President Obama is among the few recent American presidents that have focused on the ‘peace process’ right-off-the-bat – signaling a more constructive vision for the region. However, Obama’s eloquence is yet to translate into a substantive end to decades of mindless support for Israel. We are yet to see the White House exerting ‘effective’ and ‘sustained’ diplomatic pressure on the hardliners – Netanyahu, Lieberman and his acolytes – who have captured the Israeli state apparatus.

Imperial Decline and Zionist Panic

Nonetheless, our hopes for a more just and free world should be anchored on a propitious development: an ‘imperial decline’, which has enfeebled arrogant America. The global financial crisis has exposed the weak foundations of America’s ‘real economy’. For decades, ‘Friedmanite Economics’ dominated a post-Keynesian America, wherein unfettered financial markets served as the engine of growth. While drowned in an ecstatic mood of post-industrialist hyper-consumerism, America boosted its military prowess by surpassing the combined military expenditures of all other countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union inaugurated an era of unipolar global politics. In the post-Cold War period, guided by imperial hubris and realist strategic calculations, the US expanded its military reach across the globe. Today, however, caught in what is turning out to be permanent

stagnation, militarily overstretched, and domestically polarized across fierce ideological lines, the U.S. has to come to terms with an emerging multi-polar world, where America is no longer “the one”. The end of the ‘unipolar’ moment for America is drawing near, if not already here.

In the context of the Middle East, “An America in decline means a Zionist Israel in panic”. What we are witnessing today is not only the gradual decline of American power, but also the increasing isolation of Israel. The rise of anti-Israeli hardliners in Iran, growing discontent within the so-called ‘Arab Street’ against their subservient governments, and the emergence of a more ‘assertive’ Turkey are fundamentally altering the balance-of-power in the Middle East. America’s decline is creating a huge regional political vacuum, which is being increasingly filled-up by regional powers – mainly Iran, Turkey, and even Qatar – though some, like India, have used their more important role to shore up US influence in the region. The deepening crisis in occupied-Palestine, instability in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the proliferation of piracy and terrorism across the region have encouraged local powers to step in and resolve conflicts on their own more nuanced, long-term oriented, and hopefully more constructive terms. What these regional powers understand is that while America can leave whenever the going gets tough – as demonstrated in the Vietnam War – they in turn have no choice but to face the perils of instability brought about by imperial interventions in the region. In short, they are forced to manage the mess created by America. It is such sobering realization that is pushing the local powers to consider the creation of a more constructive security and conflict-resolution framework designed to bring about stability and ‘just peace’ in the region.

New developments

In the opinion of many, the rise of a diplomatically pro-active and politically constructive Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and with the guidance of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, represents the most positive development in recent years. Turkey is not only a bridge between the East and the West in geo-strategic terms, but also a trustworthy and influential broker that could contribute greatly to an effective and just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Being a major NATO-member, a long-term Israeli partner until recently, the region’s biggest economy, a regional techno-industrial hub, a fledgling democracy, a candidate for European Union membership, the emerging regional great power Turkey occupies a privilege position in the affairs of the region – especially in the peace process. Its critical stance towards Israel following the Gaza Flotilla Massacre sent a strong message to Israel that it could no longer act with impunity without exacting grave regional costs. It is time that the international community recognizes Turkey as an important actor in the Palestinian peace process. Israel’s current actions, such as the expansion of illegal settlement or ‘colonies’ and continuous military aggression against the civilian population in Gaza and the West Bank, will further anger a Turkish public that is deeply sympathetic to the plight of fellow-Muslim Palestinians.

Unfortunately, what we see so far is more of American kowtowing in the face of Israeli lobby. It is highly regrettable to see few powerful, well-organized and well-funded lobby groups, such as AIPAC, effectively determining America’s Middle East foreign policy, supporting everything the Zionists do, with only a tap on the wrist when it involves human rights violations. For instance, in recent days, to salvage the most recent round of peace talks, President Obama and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton have been reduced to pleading to Israel to continue its suspension of illegal construction activities on the West Bank instead of commanding Tel Aviv to do so.

Washington’s support encourages Israel’s expansion of its illegal settlements on the West Bank, its bludgeoning and strangling of Gaza, and piratical ventures like the infamous attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla.

The Acquiescent Arab states

The neighboring Arab countries are also essential and central to the just and peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Let us remember that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict drew-in the neighboring Arab countries – culminating in three Arab-Israeli wars in 1948, 1967, and 1973. The broader Arab-Israeli conflict is rooted in the birth of the state of Israel in 1948, which coincided with the forcible expulsion of hundreds of thousands Palestinians, who were harassed and murdered by Israeli militia gangs. The support of the Arab states for the Palestinians was not consistent, but it was the 1979 peace agreement between Egypt and Israel that radically shifted the balance of power in favor of an ascendant NATO-backed Israel. Since then, most Arab countries, under the U.S. pressure, have normalized their relationship with Israel. In the 2002 Arab Peace initiative, many Arab countries came very close to total acquiescence, manifesting an urge to recognize the state of Israel in exchange for certain concessions from Israel. Meanwhile, Israel came nowhere close to committing itself to any compromise on issues such as the ‘right of return’ for millions of Palestinian refugees around the world, the division of East Jerusalem, and the creation of an independent Palestinian state based on the provisions of the Oslo Agreement or the original United Nations Partition Plan. This explains why in the last decade countries such as Iran and Turkey emerged as the ‘vanguards’ of Palestinian rights, while the main Arab powers such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia increasingly lost influence in the greater Islamic community.

Ironically, while America preaches “democracy” and human rights in Iraq and Afghanistan, or in Iran, it says little about gross human rights violations in allied Arab autocracies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It is precisely such hypocrisy that has frustrated growing numbers of young Arabs, even the educated middle class, and radicalized them against the U.S. For many Arabs, the U.S. is not the harbinger of democracy, but a patron of brutal autocracies in the Middle East. Although the Arab autocrats seem to be reluctant to confront Israel on the issue of Palestine, the so-called Arab Street is neither pacified nor indifferent. Millions of Arabs across the region harbor strong feelings vis-à-vis Palestine, and they are highly critical of their own governments’ normalized, if not ‘cordial’, relations with the U.S. and more especially with Israel. Although the fate of democratization in the Arab world is far from certain, the empire’s continuing support for autocratic but acquiescent Arab regimes will lead to nothing, but greater state-sponsored repression and increasingly violent popular backlash.

New Actors and the future

But even as the Arab states remained submissive toward Israel, the emergence of a new player, the Hezbollah in Lebanon, gave hope. The Hezbollah’s inflicting two military defeats on Israel, in 1992, when It forced Israel to withdraw from Lebanon, and in the summer of 2006, when it defeated the invading Israeli Defense Force, did a lot to revive Arab pride. I was in Beirut on a peace mission in the summer of 2006, and I witnessed the overflowing testimonial of support for Omar Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, throughout Lebanon. More important, the Hezbollah’s triumphs underlined to Israel that the military equation is changing, and that the only hope for Israel’s survival in the end lies in a just, negotiated solution to the Palestine issue.

At the end of the day, the twilight of the empire, the growing isolation of Israel, the rise of Iran and Turkey, the growing radicalization of the Arab peoples, and the rise of new actors like Hezbollah and Hamas will contribute to moving the region toward just and viable solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict in the long-term. Nonetheless, unless President Obama begins to discipline the hardliners in Israel, a just and peaceful solution is highly improbable in the short-run. This is Obama’s chance to prove that his eloquence is built not on hot air, but on a genuine commitment to bring about just and

lasting peace to the region.

We stand by the Palestinian people in their continuing resistance to Israel's genocidal drive to obliterate them as a people and we call upon the international community to demand that enough is enough.

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P.S.

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