

## Opinions from both sides of the fence

Tuesday 26 June 2007, by [AMAYREH Khaled](#), [BAHAA Sherine](#) (Date first published: 21 June 2007).

### **Palestinians across the sectarian divide and from opposing political parties give their take on the crisis facing Gaza and the West Bank**

*Professor Ali Al-Jerbawi is a leading Palestinian intellectual who has been critical of the Oslo process from its very inception. Considered a leading independent-minded member of the Palestinian intelligentsia in the West Bank, Al-Jerbawi has on many occasions called for the dismantling of the Palestinian Authority (PA).*

He argues that the continued existence of the PA makes the goal of freedom and liberation from the Israeli occupation more distant and illusive than ever.

Al-Jerbawi, analysing the current situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, said, "it is obvious we are facing a crisis of immense proportions. We seem to have lost our sense of direction. This situation didn't erupt out of the blue, it is the cumulative effect of years of faulty policies and mismanagement of the national cause. In the final analysis, this is the result of having an 'authority' without real authority, without sovereignty and without statehood. This is also the consequence of having a 'government' under a sinister foreign military occupation." Finding a way out will not be easy due to the destructive effects of the Oslo process, which enabled Israel to have a veto power over every aspect of our internal and external affairs. I think we must exercise a lot of soul-searching and re-examine our entire political reality. We must ask ourselves if there really is a political horizon, if the goal of Palestinian statehood is still feasible and attainable and if the continued existence of the PA serves the paramount interests of our people. We must face these questions very honestly, otherwise we will continue rotating in the same cycle." Al-Ahram Weekly asked Al-Jerbawi to evaluate the chances of success for the newly established Fayyad government, especially given the fact that the vast majority of its members are not affiliated with the Fatah movement which forms the backbone of the PA political and security apparatus in the West Bank. "First of all, nobody is talking about the legality and legitimacy of the government now, and this is in itself very worrying. However, the government will try to stabilise the overall situation as much as possible," he explained.

The reason why the issue of the constitutionality of the government is treated as an afterthought or a secondary issue is because the government regards the overall situation as legitimate, said Al-Jerbawi.

As to whether the Ramallah-based government would be able to re-establish the rule of law in the West Bank, given the continuing campaign of intimidation against Hamas members and their property, he explained that if Fatah, including the Fatah-dominated security agencies, refused to obey government decisions, then Fayyad would have to resign and his government would collapse.

Commenting on the American, European and Israeli decision to lift the economic embargo imposed on the PA following Hamas's election victory in January, 2006, Al-Jerbawi warned of a trap.

"We have to understand if the sanctions will be completely or only partially lifted. For example, will the sanctions on Gaza remain in place? I ask this because if sanctions are not removed completely, then there will be a tacit recognition of two Palestinian authorities, one in Gaza under Hamas, and another in the West Bank, supported and backed by the United States. Furthermore, we must also examine the ramifications and repercussions of pushing Hamas and 1.4 million Gazans into a corner," said the analyst.

Al-Jerbawi thought that there was a possibility that Abbas might organise early elections as a way out of the protracted crisis with Hamas if he thought the majority of Palestinians would go to the polls. But without the participation of Hamas the situation would be very problematic, he added.

"Holding elections would signal the end of the current crisis, but not a resolution of the problems from which it emanated," he stated.

He concluded by saying that even if the Israelis and the Americans were successful in forcing Hamas to back down through isolating Gaza and cutting off vital services, this would ultimately backfire on Abbas, and badly.

*Maher Al-Taher is the chairman of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The dissolution of the Hamas government and the establishment of an emergency government, he believes, is not the answer to the problems in Gaza and the West Bank.*

The recent catastrophic events in Gaza during the internal fighting between Fatah and Hamas and the subsequent military takeover of Hamas of the Strip has further complicated an already complex situation. He recalled when the Oslo Accords were first discussed, there was an understanding there and then that one of the prime goals of the Zionists was to see inter-factional fighting between the Palestinians.

"I further believe that the current crisis in Gaza and the West Bank, and even in the diaspora, is akin to entering a long and dark tunnel. The Palestinian factions, who opposed the Oslo agreement, declared right at the very beginning that the ulterior motive of the accord was aimed at undermining the Palestinian national agenda and thereby the Palestine Liberation Organisation." Following Hamas's landslide victory in the 2005 legislative elections, the security apparatus continued to remain under the control of Fatah who refused to implement the orders of the Ministry of Interior. This resulted in two de facto governments operating, one in Gaza and one in West Bank. There was, in reality, no 'authority'," stated Taher.

He went on to explain that there was a faction of Fatah members, who patently dissatisfied with the status quo, considered a more confrontational approach. Their strategy relied on support from the Americans and negotiations with the Israelis but they subsequently became disillusioned when it appeared that the Israelis were not interested in a fair and equitable solution towards a peace settlement.

According to the politician, underpinning this Israeli arrogance were written guarantees from US President George W Bush, known then as the big "no's". These included no to the right of return, no to withdrawal to the 1967 borders and no to East Jerusalem as the future Palestinian capital. When Yasser Arafat refused to comply with this scenario, the Israelis forced him into incarceration in his Muqataa compound in Ramallah. Later he died of what some claim was poisoning. Despite these events, there were still optimistic individuals within the Fatah movement who argued about the necessity to continue with "peace talks". This was mainly due to their own vested interests, economical or social, which they wanted to protect, he stated.

Recently Hamas has succeeded in taking over the Gaza Strip militarily and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) believes this is a serious error and are now contemplating the near future with alarm. "We think the decision by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to dismiss the former government and declare an emergency government will only complicate issues further without offering solutions to the impasse," said Taher.

In regard to the future, Taher explained his concerns. "The latest developments have badly fractured the Palestinian Territories and sharply redrawn the political and geographic divisions undermining our nation's drive towards statehood. We are risking splitting our country into two lawless entities neither of which will be accountable to Palestinian society or its legal and social institutions. This is exactly what Israel has been hoping for," he added.

Taher stated adamantly that a solution to this imbroglio should be derived from the steadfastness and determination of the Palestinian people to protect their political agenda. "To this end, we initiated contacts with our brothers in Fatah and requested an emergency meeting

which would be attended by the leaders of all the Palestinian factions," said Taher.

The main objective of such a meeting is to appoint an interim national leadership, which includes all parties, and to start implementing what we agreed upon in Cairo in March 2005. During the Cairo discussions all of the factions which attended concurred upon the necessity to reinstate the PLO, within its political framework and agenda to work for the benefit of all Palestinians both inside and outside Palestine, said Taher. "Finally, we have also called upon the Arab League to undertake a more effective role in helping the Palestinians resolve the crisis," concluded Taher.

*Yehia Moussa is a leading Hamas politician and deputy head of the movement's parliamentary bloc in the Gaza Strip. He accuses what he calls the "treacherous trend" within Fatah, an allusion to former Gaza strongman Mohamed Dahlan, of having planned to carry out a "bloody coup" against the government of Ismail Haniyeh.*

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas and other Fatah leaders recently accused Hamas of carrying out a coup against the symbols of Palestinian legitimacy. Moussa countered saying that the real coup was being hatched and planned by Dahlan, in concert with the CIA and Israel.

"They were planning to carry out a bloody coup against Hamas, involving the murder of hundreds of people, including Hamas's political and religious leaders. The coup was to take place on 13 July, three weeks from today. They were planning to dig mass graves in Gaza for Hamas and its supporters. But we managed to thwart their heinous plans before they could carry them out," said Moussa.

When asked to substantiate the claims so that they wouldn't be regarded as part of the continuing propaganda war between Hamas and Fatah, the Hamas politician explained that US General Keith Dayton had supplied Dahlan, and the security agencies affiliated with Fatah, with arms and weapons which included heavy machineguns, anti-armour missiles, sniper fitted rifles and millions of bullets.

"Now, let me ask you, why do you think America gave Dahlan and his men all these weapons? To fight Israel or fight Hamas?"

Furthermore, Moussa explained that his movement had confiscated thousands of damning documents incriminating Dahlan. He further stated that he believed Dahlan was a CIA agent whose primary objective was to destroy Hamas even if that meant an all-out civil war in Gaza. Dahlan was simply carrying out orders given by Elliot Abrams, the American Zionist official in charge of the

Hamas file, who admitted recently that the US was arming and financing Dahlan in a bid to destroy Hamas and undo the Mecca Agreement which had been the precursor of the government of national unity, he said.

When Al-Ahram Weekly questioned the Hamas official as to whether former Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniyeh had notified President Abbas of what was happening, and if so what was Abbas's response, he replied in the affirmative.

"Prime Minister Haniyeh provided President Abbas with every bit of relevant information. As early as six months ago, the prime minister informed Abbas that large consignments of weapons were being shipped by the US and Israel to the Dahlan-controlled presidential guard. Haniyeh also informed Abbas that Dahlan was building up a new security force, encamped at the Ansar Base, in preparation for a military confrontation with Hamas's Executive Force. Furthermore, the new force was being equipped with armoured cars, armoured personnel carriers and lethal weaponry. Haniyeh also informed Abbas about several highly- sensitive meetings that were held between American officers and preventive security officers in Israel," explained Moussa.

Abbas failed to respond, according to Moussa. On the contrary, Abbas actually expressed his disappointment that Israel had not permitted a larger supply of weapons into the Strip, to allow Fatah to fight Hamas more efficiently.

In response to claims by Fatah that there was no room for talks with Hamas if they refused to relinquish power in Gaza, Moussa responded by asking if the readers were aware what returning to the previous situation entailed.

"Do you know what reverting to the former situation would mean in real terms? It would mean returning to hell. It would mean returning to lawlessness, chaos, daily killings, theft, assassinations, clan feuds, arson and total insecurity. Today, we have succeeded in re- establishing the rule of law. There is almost total quiet here. Peoples and families are walking in the streets without being shot at, without being terrorised by armed thugs," he said.

However, some people have argued that despite the calm, the situation fails to serve the cause of Palestinian national unity. The Hamas politician refuted claims that his organisation was trying to oust Fatah from Gaza. He said Fatah was an integral part of Palestinian society and negating it was, therefore, unthinkable.

"We are not against Fatah. Fatah and Hamas are brothers. We are only against American and Israeli agents who are carrying out their treachery under the rubric of Fatah. In short, the problem lies not with Fatah, but with a small faction within it that is answerable to our enemies."

The solution was very simple, according to Moussa. The respect for the rule of law, including the basic law, was paramount and it was vital that the Palestinians didn't allow their enemies to undermine their common cause, he explained.

Moussa also appeared unperturbed by US and Israel claims that they would seek to isolate and starve the Gaza Strip.

"First of all, our lives are not in the hands of America and Israel, but in the hands of God. Second, starving 1.4 million people could have grave and unpredictable repercussions. I think the world community will think twice before allowing such a thing to happen," he said.

As to whether the status quo of two governments and two premiers would continue, Moussa explained unequivocally that Haniyeh was elected by the Palestinians with a large majority. On the

other hand, Salam Fayyad was appointed prime minister by Abbas in order to appease and please the United States and Israel. So which government is legitimate, the elected one or the appointed one, he asked.

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