

Title: The Politics of Change in Palestine: State Building and Non-Violent Resistance.

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Review:

In the next couple of weeks Palestine will become a member state in the UN, and the process described in this book will be complete. The UN recognition of Palestine will be the culmination of a change of course taken by the Palestinian leadership, not only by Fatah but also by Hamas, that has taken place since the failure of the second intifada. Over this period the Palestinian political elite in the West Bank, with Mahmoud Abbas at the helm without a shred of charisma, but persistently moved to a strategy of state-building, non-violent resistance and diplomacy. The next two weeks are this strategy's biggest test; if it fails, this review may well be its obituary.

The book under review was written by the Director of Friedrich Ebert Foundation in the Palestinian Territories, who is clearly well-connected in the Palestinian political elite but also attuned to European public opinion. As such it offers a detailed account of this strategy developed within the political context of the West Bank and Gaza, its promises and its risks. Written and published before the Arab Spring and the Egyptian Revolution, its insights are still relevant, foretelling the inextricable link between non-violent Palestinian resistance and the tactics of non-violent protest movements in the Arab world, notably in Tunisia and Egypt.

Bröning is well-known for his support for Western dialogue with Hamas. The first chapter, dealing with Hamas, makes the case for an increasing pragmatism on the part of Hamas, as well as exposing the duplicity and hypocrisy of the West in avoiding Hamas while embracing Fatah. In both cases, Bröning is obviously correct. The wrangling over the phrasing of Khaled Mishal's statements regarding the future of Palestine / Israel seems no different from the tedious and sterile western obsession about the precise wording any statement by Arafat in the 1980s. Neither Hamas nor Fatah want Israel to exist; both accept it as a matter of fact.

As Bröning shows, the differences in position vis-à-vis Israel are primarily tactical. Hamas is not interested in offering a peace plan. I would argue that in doing so it follows a strategy adopted very successfully by the Likud Party in Israel for over 40 years: it gets votes by presenting itself as the party of 'no concessions', without speculating too much about the future settlement of the conflict. In practice, Hamas is not practising violent resistance, and, at the moment, the Hamas administration is more amenable to Israel than Fatah, as it mostly

prevents rocket attacks while posing no diplomatic challenge. In spite of the evident authoritarian regime in Gaza, it seems likely that Hamas still garners significant support: Bröning shows it instigated a series of interesting social and legal reforms, which appeal to the conservative majority in Gaza (here, again, Hamas and Likud are surprisingly similar). These reforms may well be a blue print for the policies the Islamist political parties in Tunisia and Egypt, likely to win a substantial majority in the coming elections.

In the following chapter, Bröning assesses developments within the Fatah movement, focusing on reforms passed at the Sixth General Conference that took place in Bethlehem in August 2009. As pointed out by Bröning, Fatah has a structural problem of transforming itself from a national movement, which developed in exile in the 1970s, to being a political representative of the population in the West Bank and Gaza. The convening of General Conference of the party - a very rare occasion – allowed Abbas to force through resolutions intended to help the movement become more like a political party and less like an old revolutionaries' club. It also made substantial changes to the political program of Fatah, that better reflect the non-violent strategy of its current political leadership.

Bröning's account of the reform within Fatah is upbeat, and will be a good source for academic dissertations, but, ultimately, it is doubtful that these reforms will save Fatah. As the author himself notes, the recurring postponement of local elections, recently postponed again, indicates that Fatah is a spent force. The identification of Fatah with the state – i.e., the PA does not bode it well. Comparable secular and statist political parties in the region, such as the Labour in Israel and the People's Party in Turkey, not only lost power to more conservative movements, but appear to have lost any chance to regain it. Fatah still acts as an umbrella organization for the anti-Hamas vote, but it is hard to see what it can offer beyond that: state-building and non-violent resistance, the two key planks of the PA's policy, originated in the liberal, western-educated elites represented by Salam Fayyad and Mustafa Barghouti.

No one is more personally invested in the bid for UN recognition of Palestine than Fayyad; it was his appointment as Prime Minister in 2007 that started the countdown to September 2011. Unlike most politicians, Fayyad had a plan and stuck to it. The logic of the plan, the sober logic of an IMF economist, is that the realistic Palestinian objective is a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders, and that the best way to achieve this is to actually build the institutions of the state. The criticisms against this plan, as discussed by Bröning, are well-known: limiting of the Palestinian struggle to the West Bank and Gaza seems to some like a betrayal in the first place; while others believe that the strategy played into the hands of the current Israeli government, which views economic development as a substitute for political rights.

But these criticisms of Fayyad matter little for ordinary Palestinians; the question is whether Fayyad delivered a tangible improvement in the West Bank. The aims were high, as listed in the government's program of August 2009 (issuing such a program was in itself a novelty, and the author does well to provide a full translation in the Appendix). International recognition of the achievements of the Fayyad government followed, with the World Bank reporting that the state

institutions in the West Bank are at least on par with other countries in the region (p. 116). That was of course always a false test, however; it was only Israeli propaganda which purported the colonial argument that the Palestinians are not ready for self-rule; when this excuse had been exposed, others were found.

But Bröning also shows that the changes on the ground are not as dramatic as the rosy picture often depicted in the western press. Security improved dramatically, which must have improved the lives of many Palestinians regardless of the occupation, but the price was close co-operation with the occupation's own security apparatus. But, as for the economy, in spite of the growth, the GDP in 2010 has not yet managed to reach the pre-Intifada level of 1999 (p. 111). With the approval of the Israelis, the PA does manage to provide services and institutions in category C areas, that is those areas of the West Bank under complete Israeli control, but the freedom of movement is still more limited than it was in 2005 (p. 116). Bröning admits that the West Bank remains a donor-fed society; and that even if the Palestinian government was 100% efficient and corrupt-free, it is obvious that there is no real prospect for further growth in a cantonized, occupied, brutalized society.

That is why the other plank of the PA's strategy was aimed at getting international support through diplomacy and non-violent resistance (NVR). Bröning's chapter on NVR is the most fascinating in the book. He points out that there is nothing new about Palestinians attempting to protest peacefully, and that there is nothing new about the Western media failure to report on such peaceful protests. He then looks at the current trends in NVR protests, which include the local, often village-initiated protests against the Separation Wall built on and through their lands; the BDS campaign, which seeks to boycott all Israeli products and official institutions, primarily in Europe; the PA's rather successful campaign against buying products from West Bank settlements; and its far less successful campaign to prevent Palestinians from working in these settlements.

Bröning believes, and I tend to agree, that the success of the international BDS is limited, and the harm it does to the Israeli economy is marginal at best. This is most probably because it is not aligned with the PA's own strategy of specifically boycotting the West Bank settlements in order to establish a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders. The most interesting forms of NVR are of course those of the local villages. This is non-violent resistance emerging at grass roots, of local committees which responded to the confiscation of their lands by using the ingrained solidarity of the community and the legal and political vehicles provided by the occupation regime itself: appeals to the Israeli High Court, media coverage, and enlisting, where possible, participation by the international and Jewish radical left.

As with the Fayyad government, the success of the NVR campaign has been mixed; Bil'in, the village that has become the symbol of the campaign, got a High Court ruling that ordered half of its lands to be returned. They will, eventually, even if the IDF procrastinates, but it is only half of the lands and it does render legitimacy to the confiscation of the other half. The village of Walaja, just south of Jerusalem, recently got nothing back from the High Court. Beyond the local struggles, the NVR has failed to change the association of the Palestinians with

terrorism in the western mind, and so far has had no effect on the Israeli public opinion.

Still, non-violent resistance is the only logical conclusion from the failure of the second, al-Aqsa Intifada. The militarization of the conflict gave Israel legitimacy to kill Palestinians and international activists with impunity, and has led to the massive confiscation of Palestinian lands by the erection of the Separation Wall. It had lowered the living standards of Palestinians dramatically, while never having the same effect on the Israelis. It killed, at least for the foreseeable future, any meaningful dialogue between Palestinians and the Jewish majority in Israel. Bröning has little to say about the Israeli Jewish Left in this book; once an important factor in the PA's strategy, it seems no longer of any interest or value.

We know that the UN resolution will lead to a wave of non-violent demonstrations and protests; it is as inevitable as the resolution itself. Yet, as with non-violent protests in the Arab world around it, the future of the Palestinian non-violent strategy would depend on the response of the authoritarian regime, that is Israel, and the international community. In Egypt and Tunisia, the US and European governments held back the regimes from a full onslaught against the protesters. But in Syria, Libya and Bahrain the protests have had to become armed resurrections or to die away. The unrealistic hope is that the Israeli Army would retreat to behind the 1967 borders, like a Mubarak retreating to a Sharm al-Sheikh; the fear is that the West Bank will become another Syria.

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