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Palestine

First Reflections On The Electoral Victory Of Hamas

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The sweeping electoral victory of Hamas is but one of the products of the intensive use made by the United States in the Muslim world, since the 1950's, of Islamic fundamentalism as an ideological weapon against both progressive nationalism and communism.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/hamas.jpg>]

This was done in close collaboration with the Saudi kingdom – a de facto U.S. protectorate almost from its foundation in 1932. The promotion of the most reactionary interpretation of the Islamic religion, exploiting deeply-rooted popular religious beliefs, led to this ideology filling the vacuum left by the exhaustion by the 1970's of the two ideological currents it served to fight.

The road was thus paved in the entire Muslim world for the transformation of Islamic fundamentalism into the dominant expression of mass national and social resentment, to the great dismay of the U.S. and its Saudi protectorate. The story of Washington's relation with Islamic fundamentalism is the most striking modern illustration of the sorcerer's apprenticeship. (I have described this at length in my Clash of Barbarisms.)

The Palestinian scene was no exception to this general regional pattern, albeit it followed suit with a time warp. Although the Palestinian guerilla movement came to the fore initially as a result of the exhaustion of more traditional Arab nationalism and as an expression of radicalization, the movement underwent a very rapid bureaucratization, fostered by an impressive influx of petrodollars and reaching levels of corruption that have no equivalent in the history of national liberation movements.

Still, as long as it remained – in the guise of the PLO – what could be described as a "stateless state apparatus seeking a territory" (see my Eastern Cauldron), the Palestinian national movement could still embody the aspirations of the vast majority of the Palestinian masses, despite the numerous twists, turns, and betrayals of commitments with which its history is littered.

However, when a new generation of Palestinians took up the struggle in the late 1980's, with the Intifada that started in December 1987, their radicalization began in turn to take increasingly the path of Islamic fundamentalism.

This was facilitated by the fact that the Palestinian left, the leading force within the Intifada in the first months, squandered this last historic opportunity by eventually aligning itself one more time behind the PLO leadership, thus completing its own bankruptcy. On a smaller scale, Israel had played its own version of the sorcerer's apprentice by favoring the Islamic fundamentalist movement as a rival to the PLO prior to the Intifada.

The 1993 Oslo agreement inaugurated the final phase of the PLO's degeneration, as its leadership – or rather the leading nucleus of this leadership, bypassing the official leading bodies – was granted guardianship over the Palestinian population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

This came in exchange for what amounted to a capitulation: the PLO leadership abandoned the minimal conditions that were demanded by the Palestinian negotiators from the 1967 occupied territories, above all an Israeli pledge to freeze and reverse the construction of settlements which were colonizing their land. The very conditions of this capitulation – which doomed the Oslo agreements to tragic failure as critics very rightly predicted from the start – made certain that the shift in the popular political mood would speed up.

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The Zionist state took advantage of the lull brought to the 1967 territories by the Palestinian Authority's fulfillment of the role of police force by proxy ascribed to it, by drastically intensifying the colonization and building an infrastructure designed to facilitate its military control over these territories.

Accordingly, the discredit of the PA increased inexorably. This loss in public support hampered more and more its ability to crack down on the Palestinian Islamic fundamentalist movement "as was required from it and as it began attempting as early as 1994" let alone its ability to marginalize the Islamic movement politically and ideologically. Moreover, the transfer of the PLO bureaucracy from exile into the 1967 territories, as a ruling apparatus entrusted with the task of surveillance over the population that waged the Intifada, quickly led to its corruption reaching abysmal levels "something that the population of the territories hadn't seen first-hand before.

At the same time, Hamas, like most sections of the Islamic fundamentalist mass movement "in contrast with "substitutionist" strictly terrorist organizations of which al-Qaeda has become the most spectacular example" was keen on paying attention to popular basic needs, organizing social services, and cultivating a reputation of austerity and incorruptibility.

The irresistible rise of Ariel Sharon to the helm of the Israeli state resulted from his September 2000 provocation that ignited the "Second Intifada" "an uprising that because of its militarization lacked the most positive features of the popular dynamics of the first Intifada.

A PA that, by its very nature, could definitely not rely on mass self-organization and chose the only way of struggle it was familiar with, fostered this militarization. Sharon's rise was also a product of the dead-end reached by the Oslo process: the clash between the Zionist interpretation of the Oslo frame "an updated version of the 1967 "Alon Plan" by which Israel would relinquish the populated areas of the 1967 occupied territories to an Arab administration, while keeping colonized and militarized strategic chunks" and the PA's minimal requirements of recovering all, or nearly all the territories occupied in 1967, without which it knew it would lose its remaining clout with the Palestinian population.

The electoral victory of war criminal Ariel Sharon in February 2001 "an event as much "shocking" as the electoral victory of Hamas, at the very least" inevitably reinforced the Islamic fundamentalist movement, his counterpart in terms of radicalization of stance against the backdrop of a still-born historic compromise. All of this was greatly propelled, of course, by the (very resistible, but unresisted) accession to power of George W. Bush, and the unleashing of his wildest imperial ambitions thanks to the attacks on September 11, 2001.

Ariel Sharon played skillfully on the dialectics between himself and his Palestinian true opposite number, Hamas. His calculation was simple: in order to be able to carry through unilaterally his own hard-line version of the Zionist interpretation of a "settlement" with the Palestinians, he needed two conditions: a) to minimize international pressure upon him "or rather U.S. pressure, the only one that really matters to Israel; and b) to demonstrate that there is no Palestinian leadership with which Israel could "do business." For this, he needed to emphasize the weakness and unreliability of the PA by fanning the expansion of the Islamic fundamentalist movement, knowing that the latter was anathema to the Western states.

Thus every time there was some kind of truce, negotiated by the PA with the Islamic organizations, Sharon's government would resort to an "extrajudicial execution" "in plain language, an assassination" in order to provoke these organizations into retaliation by the means they specialized in: suicide attacks, their "F-16s" as they say.

This had the double advantage of stressing the PA inability to control the Palestinian population, and enhancing

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Sharon's own popularity in Israel. The truth of the matter is that the electoral victory of Hamas is the outcome that Sharon's strategy was very obviously seeking, as many astute observers did not fail to point out.

As long as Yasir Arafat was alive, he could still use the remnant of his own historical prestige. Contrary to what many commentators have said, the seclusion of Arafat in his last months by Sharon did not "discredit" the Palestinian leader: as a matter of fact, Arafat's popularity was at an all-time low before his seclusion, and regained in strength after it started.

Actually, Arafat's leadership has always been directly nurtured by his demonization by Israel and his popularity rose again when he became Sharon's prisoner. This is why the U.S. and Israel's nominee for Palestinian leadership, Mahmud Abbas, was not able to really take over as long as Arafat was alive.

This is also why both the Bush administration and Sharon would not let the Palestinians organize the new elections that Arafat kept demanding as his representativeness was challenged very hypocritically in the name of "democratic reform."

The very nature of the "democrats" supported by Washington and Israel under this heading is best epitomized by Muhammad Dahlan, the most corrupt chief of one of the rival repressive "security" apparatuses that Arafat kept under his control on a pattern familiar to autocratic Arab regimes.

The electoral victory of Hamas is a resounding slap in the face of the Bush administration. As the latest illustration of the sorcerer's apprenticeship that U.S. policy in the Middle East has so spectacularly displayed, it is the final nail in the coffin of its neocon-inspired, demagogic and deceitful rhetoric about bringing "democracy" to the "Greater Middle East." It is, of course, too early to make any safe prediction at this point regarding what will happen on the ground. It is possible, however, to make a few observations and prognoses:

Hamas does not have a social incentive for collaboration with the Israeli occupation, at least not in any way resembling that of the PLO-originated PA apparatuses: it has actually been thrown into disarray by its own victory, as it would certainly have preferred the much more comfortable posture of being a major parliamentary opposition force to the PA.

Therefore, it takes a lot of self-deception and wishful thinking to believe that Hamas will adapt to the conditions laid out by the U.S. and Israel. Collaboration is all the less likely given that the Israeli government, under the leadership of the new Kadima party founded by Sharon, will continue his policy, taking full advantage of the election result that suits its plans so well, and making impossible any accommodation with Hamas. Moreover, Hamas faces an outbidding rival represented by "Islamic Jihad," which boycotted the election.

In order to try to rescue the very sensitive Palestinian component of overall U.S. Middle East policy that it managed to steer into dire straits, the Bush administration will very likely consider three possibilities. One would be a major shift in the policies of Hamas, bought by and mediated by the Saudis; this is, however, unlikely for the reason stated above and would be long and uncertain.

Another would be fomenting tension and political opposition to Hamas in order to provoke new elections in the near future, taking advantage of the vast presidential powers that Arafat had granted himself and that Mahmud Abbas inherited, or just by having the latter resign, thus forcing a presidential election.

For such a move to be successful, or meaningful at all, there is a need for a credible figure that could regain a

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majority for the traditional Palestinian leadership; but the only figure having the minimum of prestige required for this role is presently Marwan Barghouti, who "from his Israeli jail cell" made an alliance with Dahlan prior to the election. It is therefore likely that Washington will exert pressure on Israel for his release.

A third possibility would be the "Algerian scenario" referring to the interruption of the electoral process in Algeria by a military junta in January 1992 which is already envisaged, according to reports in the Arab press: the repressive apparatuses of the PA would crack down on Hamas, impose a state of siege and establish a military-police dictatorship.

Of course, a combination of the last two scenarios is also possible, postponing the crackdown until political conditions are created, that are more suitable for it.

Any attempt by the U.S. and the European Union to starve the Palestinians into submission by interrupting the economic aid that they grant them would be disastrous for both humanitarian and political reasons and should be opposed most vigorously.

The catastrophic management of U.S. policy in the Middle East by the Bush administration, on top of decades of clumsy and shortsighted U.S. imperial policies in this part of the world, has not yet born all its bitter fruit.

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