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Nakba and the Question of ‘Palestinian Strategy’ Why It's Important

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“What is the Palestinian strategy?” is a question that I have been asked all too often, including on 15 May, the day that millions of Palestinians around the world commemorated the 67th anniversary of the Nakba, the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians by Zionist militias in 1947-48.

The question itself doesn’t require much elaboration, as in, “What is the Palestinian strategy to combat Israeli military occupation, siege violence, apartheid and racial discrimination?” The painful reality is well known to many, although few take on the moral responsibility to confront it.

And the posing of the question is telling in itself. It wouldn’t be asked if there was a strategy in place, being implemented, and regularly revisited and modified. The question is a testament to all the failures of past strategies, and the political disintegration of any credible Palestinian leadership, currently represented by Mahmoud Abbas and his circle of wealthy businessmen and “politicians”.

But the very idea of formulating a strategy would require urgent prerequisites that are currently lacking. These prerequisites are not only essential, but most critical if Palestinians wish to

overcome the current stalemate and surpass the dead-end process that is the so-called “peace process”.

First, the centrality of the Nakba for the Palestinian historical narrative must be transformed to be central to the political agenda of any Palestinian leadership that is truly representative of the political aspirations of the Palestinian people.

But why is the Nakba important if it is an event that is supposedly located in the past?

What makes the Nakba a particularly poignant and painful experience is the fact that it has never truly concluded. The original 750,000 who were removed or forced to flee their historical homeland have morphed to over five million, and those who became internally displaced in their own Palestinian homeland, later renamed the State of Israel, continue to fight for basic rights. This makes the Nakba a present political event, granted its historical origins.

The Nakba, or Catastrophe, was an earth-shattering experience for the entirety of the Palestinian collective. Rarely before was a society almost entirely displaced in a relatively short period of time with such brutality and violence, followed by every possible attempt at erasing every piece of evidence, every link, every claim, every memory that the refugees affiliated with their homeland.

That ruthlessness, however, is further accentuated by two major events. One is that for 67 years Israel has both refused to recognize the original sin upon which it was created, and two, it has done its utmost to deny the disaffected Palestinian people any political aspirations that would finally allay the pain of dispossession, handed from one generation to another.

Palestinians in exile subsist in a nomadic political landscape, as they only belong to a place that has been stolen at gunpoint, yet are forced to exist in places that they cannot see as home for a whole set of reasons.

Palestinians in the occupied territories – from the occupied West Bank, annexed East Jerusalem or besieged Gaza – experience the Nakba in its most raw and painful forms. It is not just an event that delineates memory, but the very event that ushered in a process of dispossession, dislocation and deprivation, not just of land and freedom, but even of the right to form a national identity within the safety of a place that Palestinians can call home.

This year in particular, the 15 May events commemorating the Nakba within Israel’s Palestine ’48 community – made up of Palestinian citizens of Israel – was massive and involved all aspects of society, including the political leadership. These events highlighted the centrality of the Nakba question to 20 percent of Israel’s own population, who were disaffected directly by the dire consequences of the Catastrophe and all of its negative impacts until this day.

If the Nakba is Israel’s original sin, discounting the Nakba and the right of return for refugees by the Palestinian Authority (PA) is the Palestinian leadership’s own sin against its people. This takes us to the second prerequisite for the formulation of any sound Palestinian strategy: the current PA leadership structure is simply contrary to the aspiration of the Palestinian people.

The PA is one of the most corrupt political structures in the Middle East. The current government in Ramallah is not an elected one and its “president” continues to serve with a mandate that expired years ago. Naturally, fair and democratic elections are unwelcome by both the PA and Israel – for it would probably lead to other unpleasant outcomes such as those that brought Hamas to power in 2006.

The PA and its Israeli benefactors are keenly invested in perpetuating the status quo, for it is allowing the latter to cement its military occupation at a minimal cost of policing occupied Palestinians, while the former benefits in terms of enjoying access to international funds, investments and the chance to move freely in and outside occupied Palestine. The vast majority of Palestinians, however, are confined behind walls, checkpoints and barbed wire. Their imprisonment is guarded as carefully by Palestinian security forces as by the Israeli army.

Sure, there is always the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), an old political structure that is more politically representative of Palestinians and reasonably democratic – especially if compared to the corrupt elites of Ramallah. But sadly, the key to the resurrection of the PLO lies exclusively in the hands of Fatah, the PLO’s largest party, and the one currently controlling the PA. Without a revolt within Fatah itself, there can be no restructuring of the PLO, for a democratic PLO would most likely challenge the PA head on and dismantle its entire wretched apparatus of political peddlers and businessmen.

Thus, the third prerequisite would have to wrangle with the question of leadership, one that doesn’t serve necessarily as an alternative to the PLO, but rather as a platform that unifies Palestinian energies in the occupied territories, in Israel and throughout the shatat (diaspora). This platform must be essentially political with grassroots links, so it communicates clear political messages, but representative and difficult to crush. Also, it would have to remove the obstacles that hindered Palestinian national unity, throughout Palestine, Israel and the world.

That alternative body must also be based in Palestine itself for that’s the only way to secure a degree of authentic representation and remain directly connected to the land. But, it should give an equal and fair representation of all Palestinian communities especially those in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. Doing so would eliminate the danger of elitism and ensure that the refugees are not a question or a problem to be contended with, but the center of the Palestinian political initiative.

This body must not be factional either, and cannot be seen as a competitor to Fatah, Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and all the rest, for it’s a platform that is essentially meant to overcome factionalism, and open the door for factions to break away from the tribal confines of politics to something entirely different.

This is not a strategy per se, as only the Palestinian people – once they have a platform and a democratic representation centered on the question of the Nakba and the right of return – should have access to the very idea of formulating a strategy in the first place.