

Palestine in Egypt: From Solidarity to Fear to Common Struggle

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The argument goes that the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is the source of most social, economic, political and religious conflict in the Middle East and that a solution to the conflict would therefore bring peace to the war-torn region.

Today, any connection is being pushed to the margins: the official Saudi Arabian newspaper even claims “there is no more Israeli-Arab conflict.”¹ The Egyptian government started constructing a buffer zone on the Gaza border without facing uproar. Egypt in general seems to have become fiercely anti-Palestinian and during the latest round of Israeli aggression against Gaza Arab governments merely showed superficial support for Gaza;² worse, also the populations in the surrounding Arab states demonstrated weak support. The question is why it seems that any solidarity with the Palestinians has disappeared in Arab states.

Instead of accepting that there is no connection between the struggles of the Palestinians and their Arab neighbours, I argue that these struggles are closely connected and that obscuring the link between them is a deliberate attempt to hide the common interests of those actors who deny Palestinians’ their rights as well as those who suppress their neighbouring populations – and of course their international allies. These connections, common interests and the resulting convergence of the different emancipatory struggles are what I address in this paper. I specifically focus on Egypt, Israel, Gaza and the international as well as regional players. The interplay of these actors is exemplary of a wider regional development.

I first explain the role Palestine has played in Egypt both during and before the Egyptian uprising. I delineate how the Egyptian regime used Palestine both as tool to delegitimize dissent and criticism as well as to externalize blame for

economic, social and security problems. Secondly, I argue that the role Palestine has played in Egyptian politics in the last years is indicative of a convergence of interests of the current Egyptian regime, its supporters in the Gulf, the West and Israel. Thus, the old argument that fulfilling the Palestinian struggle for justice will solve many of the region’s problems holds more weight today than ever: the struggle for justice in Palestine cannot be achieved without a simultaneous fight for economic, social, political and religious rights in the surrounding countries which tacitly condone or openly support Israel’s policies and atrocities.

Contextualizing Palestine in Egypt

The position of the Egyptian state towards Palestine has varied greatly – from vocal support to anti-Palestinian propaganda. But regardless of how the different Egyptian regimes have portrayed Palestinians, Egyptians remained surprisingly supportive of Palestine and deeply antagonistic towards Israel.³ This indicates an instinctive feeling about connectedness of their common fight.

Anti-Palestinian propaganda in Egypt was started under President Anwar al-Sadat after signing the Camp David peace accord with Israel in 1978. Egypt became an ally of the US and Israel and replaced its pan-Arab ideology with a fiercely chauvinist and anti-Palestinian Egypt-First nationalism.⁴ This trend only intensified under Hosni Mubarak. Propaganda focused on Gaza and Hamas – painting them as dangerous enemy connected to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The accusation was spread that the Brotherhood was planning a violent takeover of Egypt just like Hamas had taken over Gaza following their 2006 electoral victory. This fear-mongering also provided Egypt with an excuse to intensify the cooperation with Israel and to intensify the blockade of Gaza.⁵ Step-by-step

the Egyptian regime’s interests became ever closer aligned with those of the Israeli state and with every accusation the regime positioned itself more firmly against the Palestinian people.

Also events surrounding the Egyptian revolution were closely informed by these geopolitical realities. The Palestinian struggle was for many activists the one issue which politicized them and solidarity protests during the Second Intifada taught many protestors strategies and tools of mobilization.⁶ But criticizing Egypt’s policies towards Israel had also been an enabling factor for the opposition as a whole.⁷ Furthermore, one core demand of the uprising was dignity – personal but also collective dignity: meaning, the Egyptian government was regarded as caring more about the needs of the United States and Israel than for its own citizens. Liberating Egypt from these foreign pressures was also a motivator for demonstrators. The Egyptian regime during and before the uprising continued to use Palestine to externalize threats: in January 2011 the Alexandria Church bombing was blamed on Hamas and later demonstrators on Tahrir Square were denounced as Hamas agents and Palestinians.⁸

After Mohammed Morsi from the MB was elected President, the anti-Palestinian propaganda grew more baseless and harmful: rumours were spread that the stifling power cuts in Egypt were caused by Morsi transferring too much electricity to Gaza. The allegation that Morsi cared more for Gaza than his own people was used to question his patriotism and at the same time to put blame on Gaza for causing electricity shortages. Furthermore, when in 2012 sixteen Egyptian border guards were killed in an attack, many TV pundits – loyal to the ancien régime – instantly blamed Palestinian groups and Morsi for opening the Rafah border into Gaza.⁹ The attack was most likely committed by another militant group in Sinai but blamed were

Palestinians who were subsequently prevented from leaving Gaza.

Since Morsi was deposed by popular protests – where signs saying “death to Gaza” could be seen –¹⁰ and the military, the demonization of Palestinians has reached sickening levels.

Convergence

After having put the relation between Egypt and Palestine into context, I argue that Egypt has become part of an alliance which is moving heaven and earth to take back every single right and every shred of dignity wrestled from them during the Arab uprisings. This alliance consists mainly of Saudi-Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, Egypt and Israel – all united by their common interest to stamp out the uprisings, which terrified them to the core, and the threat they posed to their hold over power and their privileges. The alignment of these actors’ interests proves how closely connected popular struggles in the region have become. Thus, challenging the Egyptian government today means challenging Israel, their regional counter-revolutionary partners and their American and European allies. I shall explain why.

Shocked at how fast the US dropped Mubarak when faced with a popular uprising, Saudi-Arabia and the Gulf states have since done everything in their power to support the Egyptian regime:¹¹ from large support for the weak economy,¹² vocal support for the regime’s fight against terrorism, to lobbying the West to accept the coup in Egypt. Even Israel put its weight behind al-Sisi with AIPAC lobbying Congress not to stop aid to Egypt.¹³

The latter is doing all he can to frame the current crackdown on any challenge to the state as fight against terrorism: this age-old strategy subsumes all politics under the logic of the fight against terrorism and enables the ever-present yet elusive “national interest” to eliminate all space for criticism and dissent. Concretely, the regime continues to portray Morsi and the MB as Palestinian and the media revived rumours of the MB planning to violently take over Egypt with the help of Hamas. To support this claim, reports of the infiltration of Hamas militants and rockets have been spread.¹⁴ This connection

between Hamas and terrorism in Egypt complicates the actual challenge by Jihadist and extremist groups in the Sinai.¹⁵ Sinai’s impoverished population is excluded from the tourist industry and has thus been forced to resort to trafficking drugs or smuggling through the tunnels.¹⁶ The state does not tackle these problems but blames Hamas for the insecurity and does nothing to alleviate the very real grievances of the locals. Instead the state is further marginalizing them:¹⁷ recently, more than 1,156 families on the Gaza border have been forced out of their homes in order to make space for a 1 km wide buffer zone which is supposed to further isolate Gaza.¹⁸

The narrative of the fight against terrorism has also enabled the recent atrocities in Gaza and Egypt’s official position during this operation has made obvious how decrepit the Egyptian state has become: while the Israeli military was killing at least 2,189 Palestinians,¹⁹ the media was encouraging Israel to finish off Hamas.²⁰ At the same time Egypt’s allies were giving Israel the green light to go after Hamas.²¹ Egypt though assumed its role as mediator between the Palestinians and Israel, which was increasingly difficult due to Egypt’s bias against Hamas. The best example hereof is the ceasefire proposal Egypt put forward after consultation with Israel but without contacting Hamas.²² Egypt fulfilled its designated role as mediator in the end, but not without pushing Hamas as far away from the negotiations table as possible by ensuring that the Palestinian Authority (PA) was the official representative during negotiations.²³ Egypt of course supports Abbas’ strategy for achieving Palestinian statehood characterized by negotiations, security cooperation, state building with international aid. All those measures though reinforce Palestinian external dependency and seem to remove Palestinians further away from their independent state. While it could of course be argued that the PA would naturally act in the interest of its own people, this completely disregards the extent to which the PA has become dependent on the US and Europe: Nathan Thrall succinctly explains that “US funding to the Palestinians is an obstacle to, or excuse for refraining from, just about every means of leverage against Israel that Palestinians might employ.”²⁴ This unhealthy dependence has even sparked protests against PA police forces during the recent Israeli operation.

Especially, the PA’s close security cooperation with the Israeli occupation forces is seen as humiliating and infuriating, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas though called it a „sacred duty.“²⁵ This shows how even the PA has become engulfed in the alliance of status-quo forces and how choosing the PA as representative during negotiations served more American, European, Israeli and Egyptian interests than anything else. Thus, the aim during ceasefire negotiations was to alleviate Gaza’s plight while without making neither Israel look like the defeated nor Hamas a victor.²⁶ Granting Hamas a victory could be interpreted as a victory for the Muslim Brotherhood – at least in the eyes of Egypt and Israel where every measure has been taken to confound the two.²⁷

The forces seeking to maintain the status-quo have thus come together to stifle every challenge to their privileges and to suppress any popular challenge to their absolute hold on power. And it is especially the excuse of fighting radical Islam or terrorism, which unifies Egypt, Israel, the PA, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan and their European and American allies.²⁸ In the past the Arab states would have named Israel as *the* existential threat to peace and security in the Middle East, but the country moved from being seen as threat to being regarded as essential part of the regional outlook of the pro-Western Arab elites.²⁹ So why are the MB and political Islam being singled out as this existential threat? The key to understanding this is *legitimacy*, more precisely the lack of grassroots legitimacy.³⁰ Most Arab regimes cling to power with brute force, by spreading fear, promising stability, or paying off their citizens. But none of them are accountable to their population. This is precisely why the Muslim Brotherhood with its grassroots support is deemed so threatening.³¹ Arguably, the more radical alternative – leftist, secular and religious revolutionary activists – is also very threatening, since they sparked the uprisings. But it would be infinitely harder to devise a narrative which could directly target those secular activists in a comprehensive way and at the same time be accepted and supported by the alliance European and American allies.

Conclusion

I started this paper with the argument that the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is the source of war, conflict, and human suffering in the Middle East and that its solution would also bring peace to this war-torn region. While this familiar argument does not quite explain how and why the Palestinian struggle is connected to war and suffering, it already hints at how they are linked. In this paper I have highlighted this link showing how intricately and inseparably the Palestinian fight for self-determination is connected to the emancipatory struggle of their Arab neighbours. Palestinians have to challenge not just Israel and its allies in the West, but also the regimes led by pro-Western Arab elites who support Israel. These are precisely the actors who are doing all they can to counter the fight for self-determination, dignity and a say in politics in the Arab states.

In some way I do not provide fundamentally groundbreaking insights, especially when it comes to the argument that Palestinians stand not only against Israel but also its international allies, the US and Europe. But at the first time popular uprisings in the entire region have challenged and questioned the decrepit, corrupt, stagnant and reactionary rule of the old regimes. This fight for popular sovereignty, dignity and social justice has coalesced into one struggle with the Palestinian aspirations for self-determination. There is a growing awareness about the "sameness" of this fight. Activists and people have learned that they cannot count on support from the "cradle of democracy." Instead they have formed networks among each other. Thus, the current quiet in the neighbouring Arab states in the face of the atrocities committed during Operation Protective Edge did not signify the absence of solidarity but rather testify to the intensity of the crackdown by the status-quo powers.

There is one lesson we should learn from the Arab uprisings: we cannot and must not rely on the old assumptions that nothing will change in Arab societies. Things have changed – fast and radically. Right now, the status-quo powers have come down on the forces of change with all their might and it appears they have won a decisive victory. But it is a temporary one. It is

therefore not a smart choice for Europe to be regarded as a supporter of the status-quo powers who, at the same time, only pays lip service to its own democratic values.

I end this essay with a quote by Iyad El-Bagdadi who is one of the few intellectuals still optimistic about change. He argues the real challenge to the status-quo is not constituted by the Islamic state or religious extremism, but instead, by those people who are on hunger strikes, who vanish in prisons, those who are forced into exile, silenced, or suffer from torture:

They are afraid of us.
They are not afraid of those with guns. After all they have bigger guns.
But they are afraid of those with ideas.

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Notes

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- 21) Falk, "Gaza: Neighbourly Crimes of Complicity - Opinion - Al Jazeera English."
- 22) Rabbani, "Why the Gaza Truce Failed."
- 23) After 30 Egyptian soldiers were killed in an attack in Sinai, Egypt even prevented the Hamas delegation from travelling to Cairo for the continuation of the negotiations which were scheduled days later. Nevertheless, the Middle East Monitor Middle East Monitor, "Hamas: Egypt Delays Gaza Talks." reported that, "a number of Palestinian negotiators arrived in Cairo from the West Bank to join the talks."
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- 29) Kirkpatrick, "Arab Leaders, Viewing Hamas as Worse Than Israel, Stay Silent - NYTimes.com."
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- 31) This is not to argue that the representatives of political Islam such as the MB, the political wing of Hamas or the Tunisian En-Nahda party are any "better" at realising more inclusive and progressive politics. On the contrary, after they were voted into power through popular elections (MB and En-Nahda after the uprisings, Hamas in 2006) the populations under their rule were disappointed by the same old corruption, nepotism, harsh security measures and conservative economic as well as social policies. Both in Egypt and in Tunisia Islamist parties faced widespread popular protests against their policies – a sign that the uprisings were about actual change and not just about a different face in power.

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