

Review - The Politics of the Palestinian Authority

Written by Alaa Tartir

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ALAA TARTIR, FEB 20 2013

The Politics of the Palestinian Authority: From Oslo to Al-Aqsa

By: Nigel Parsons

New York: Routledge, 2012

The persistence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the continuous failure of the peace process has always fascinated scholars and researchers alike. Over the last two decades, the transformations and trajectories of the conflict were analysed and documented extensively by numerous scholars from different disciplines. And indeed the last two decades were also full of 'critical junctures'. Despite this, they eventually appeared to be 'uncritical' or 'lost opportunities' towards inducing a lasting peace, ending the military Israeli occupation and settler colonialism of the Palestinian land, and exercising the right of self-determination by Palestinians.

The Oslo Accords signed in 1993 and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority to govern part of the Palestinians on parts of the Palestinian land, were seen as positive signs in achieving the Palestinian aspirations by many international actors and the dominant Palestinian leadership elite. While others were critical to this trajectory and warned that it may be the beginning of the end for the Palestinian struggle for liberation, and also warned that it is doomed to failure because it will basically institutionalize the relationship between the colonized and colonizer. The facts on the ground today and the failure of the peace process seem to prove that the second opinion was a more visionary, realistic and historically-embedded perspective.

The current impasse of the peace process, the persistence of the conflict and the continuous failure were due to

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different reasons which include, but not exclusive to, the asymmetry of power between the Israelis and Palestinians; the exclusive, problematic, biased and dishonest role of the United States in favour of Israel in the process; the violations of the agreements and the continuation of the military occupation; the expansion of the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; the different readings and interpretations of the agreements clauses; the weak Palestinian negotiation performance and the divide between the inside and outside leaderships; and the continuous creation of hard facts on the ground.

On these bases and in light of these trajectories come the interesting, compelling and historically embedded book by Dr. Nigel Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority: From Oslo to al-Aqsa*. The book aims to map the development of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from a liberation movement to a national authority, and also to analyse the internal politics and institution building of the Palestinian Authority since its establishment until the eruption of the second intifada/uprising. At the theoretical level, the author deploys a historical-structural approach to transition and the transition approach to democratization and argues that 'entry into meaningful diplomatic processes has forged a problematic inroad to institutional change in the region, an inroad strewn with obstacles but one that has nevertheless facilitated some qualified successes' (Book's back cover).

The book is divided into three parts. The first part seeks to conceptualize and explain the PLO's route to Oslo and presents the theoretical framework of the book. The theoretical framework is crucial since the structure of the book is built strictly around it and the reader will need to understand the seven criteria for transition to statehood. These criteria are: an authoritative leadership, a bureaucracy, subordinate armed forces, an accepted territory for realization of self-determination, a coherent and broadly accepted national project, international recognition of the authoritative leadership, and an orientation congruent with the international balance of power. These criteria represent an attempt to move toward an institutional solution to the issue of Palestinian self-determination, realized through diplomatic means as argued by the author. However, this institutional solution approach can be a sword with two edges since it can absorb certain dimensions of the Palestinian quest for freedom, but dismiss others.

The second part of the book mainly presents the framework of transition which examines the semi-autonomous governing arrangements constructed for Palestinians by the Oslo process. These set of arrangements start with the 1993 Declaration of Principles (DoP) until the 1999 Sharm al-Shaykh Memorandum. Other than presenting these agreements in a very compelling, readable and structured way, the most astonishing dimension is the offered understanding of the Oslo process itself. The author defines the Oslo process as 'a means of resecuring the authoritative leadership of the Diaspora-based elite, precluding the formation of a cohesive alternative leadership from the occupied territories, but only within a framework of transition that perpetuated Palestinian dependency on the Israeli economy and accelerated Zionist colonization of the West Bank' (P.xxix). This definition is a well-informed one since it addresses the roots of the problem. However I would add the Gaza Strip as well and also link it with the structures of apartheid so to be a more inclusive definition to include what Oslo had forgotten: the Palestinians living in Israel and the Palestinian refugees in the Diaspora.

The third part of the book examines the rise and fall of the Oslo process and the attempts to restore it. In this part the extensive fieldwork becomes apparent and utilized and covers various grounds ranging from the bureaucracy and security apparatus of the national project to the socio-political transformations occurring due to the changes at the civil society levels, the impact of the legislative council election and the transition of Fatah from a revolutionary party into a party of state. This part ends by presenting dimensions of the Oslo implodes and a deliberation of how the Palestinian institutions will face the future. Arguably, this part is the most important one since it further presents the originality of the analysis and covers, in an eloquent manner, the various transformations at different political and social levels due to the Oslo Accords and its failure.

The main thrust of the book manoeuvres around one central theme, 'the impossibility of realizing Palestinian statehood through armed struggle, and the immense obstacles in the way of an acceptable diplomatic solution, have underlined the appropriateness of looking for structural factors to account for the trajectory of the movement' (P.4). This in turn allowed the PLO leadership to believe that the negotiated DoP will lead to a 'diplomatically realized institutional solution to the problem of Palestinian self-determination' (P.55). The circle was squared by the author through deploying a framework that allowed the absorption of the 'critical junctures' in the institutional history of the

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Palestinian national movement that was based on the above-mentioned seven criteria for the transition to statehood. While this framework was suitable and has several merits, however as any other frameworks, sometimes it limits the scope of analysis and omits other relevant issues. Moreover, positioning it as a crucial element for understanding the argument of the book, poses some challenges to the reader since there is a very regular reference to the framework which necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the framework before moving forward in reading the book.

The book is historical in nature however it is also a timely one. With all the current debate about Oslo Accords and its supplementary agreements and annexes and their relevance, this book provides an easy access, structured and organized and indeed classified account of these agreements. This account is even contextualized in a larger analysis which makes it an encyclopaedic reference. The author manages well to create a mixture between the details and processes and between the overall framework, despite the reader sometimes feeling lost from time to time in the intensity of details.

Moreover, while the first edition of the book was published in 2005, the reader may wish that in this edition published in 2012 the author had included an additional chapter or at least an epilogue summarizing the major changes that happened after the early 2000s which can indeed fit to the overall framework of the book and provide an update and interesting analysis. However, there is no doubt that a forthcoming publication by the author will be shortly in its way.

The author makes it explicit that what Israel is committing in Palestine is not only a military occupation, but also settler colonialism which corresponds with the relevant theory in the Palestinian case and also the facts on the ground, and this was further substantiated in the dimensions of analysis. This line of argument clearly developed over the decades-inspired by the words of the author himself- from the naïve third-party enthusiasm for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation and the impressions from volunteering in 1986 in kibbutz Bet Hashitta, to acknowledge and believe that the 1993 Declaration of Principles and Oslo Accords was a Palestinian Treaty of Versailles, a framework for surrender and -far from resolving the conflict-, Oslo would restructure and deepen it' (P.xxvi) .

Overall this book adds a significant and distinctive contribution to the scholarly work on Palestine and indeed it is a must-read not only for all of those interested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but also for scholars researching conflict-affected areas, processes of transition and national movements. The book is a historical journey in modern Palestinian political history; however it is quite a depressing and unpleasant journey, despite being informative and enlightening.

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