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Annual Palestine Forum, Second Session

Public Lecture

Azmi Bishara

Saturday, 10 February 2024

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Since I will be following our gathering today and in the coming days, as it is an academic forum for Palestine studies, I find it appropriate to begin with an observation.

Palestine studies is not a stand-alone discipline. It intersects with international relations, area studies, global and regional history, and various disciplines in the social sciences. As I said in my speech here last year, the field has made great strides, being accepted at prestigious academic institutions, including universities and academic journals in numerous countries.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the danger to the field posed at this moment by Israeli lobby groups, their associated capital and right-wing allies, and some non-politicized academics who fear being branded anti-Semites. Together, these forces are attempting to impose a kind of neo-McCarthyism in Western universities, exploiting the attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 by the Islamic resistance and Israel's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip to stifle free expression in the name of combating terrorism or anti-Semitism, or both. In times of war, the concepts and terms used to roll back freedom of expression and academic freedom are rarely scrutinized. Indeed, the populist right has long sought to curtail academic freedom. Confronting this campaign requires unwavering will, determination, prudence, and coordination with the forces working for justice in our world, and all those who champion to civil and academic freedoms in democratic countries.

In this inaugural talk, I will not address at length the way that accusations of anti-Semitism are kept ever at the ready to be levelled against critics of Israel. Time does not permit the kind of in-depth discussion the topic deserves, but I cannot resist pointing to one odd detail: the campaign to defend the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip is forced to stand up to forces that actually represent an extension of anti-Semitism in Western civilization. For this version, or continuation, of anti-Semitism, the enemy within who "pollutes" European civilization is today Arabs and Muslims, and the favoured model of a strong military state is Israel. It is deeply ironic that former Jew-haters are now Israel-lovers, who have the audacity to accuse human rights defenders in Palestine of anti-Semitism.

I now turn to our subject.

While it is true that the question of Palestine is especially complex because it is bound up with the Jewish question in the West and what I have previously called the Arab question in the East, as the Palestinian question has endured for so long without a resolution, it has also become intertwined

with innumerable regional and international issues. The aggression against Gaza has posed new challenges at all levels of the Palestinian cause and in international and regional relations, as well as for related and overlapping political, cultural, and legal issues.

This war has revealed more clearly than ever the settler-colonial nature not only of the relationship between the Zionist movement and the Palestinian people, but of the state of Israel itself.

Israeli society has behaved like a unified tribe, as it does during all major crises, in the throes of a chauvinistic solidarity that rejects any dissenting opinion. It is possessed by an overwhelming desire for vengeance, obsessed with the notion that the indigenous people must collectively pay for the events of 7 October to learn their lesson, for they only understand the language of force. By all rights the indigenous inhabitants should have disappeared or left, according to this settler mentality, which has never recognized the presence of those who remained. The interloper's tolerance for the indigenous presence on the land is conditional on the natives behaving acceptably. The occupier accepts no expression of strength or self-confidence by the natives, and any violation of this code of behaviour is met with collective punishment, from demolishing the family homes of those who carry out armed operations against the occupation and punishing the village or city from which an armed group originates to suspending permits to work in Israel or sealing off occupied areas in their entirety, to destroying the Gaza Strip and making it uninhabitable by the means which we all know. The destruction and genocide in the Gaza Strip are of a piece with this same approach, taken to the point of barbarity.

Occupation ultimately relies on violence. Any hesitation to use it endangers the security of the settler community, forcing the state to redouble its violence. All energies are mobilized for battle, perceived as a response to an existential threat, which requires all-out military, political, cultural, academic, and media mobilization to counter. This mobilization extends to the private sphere as well, producing a totalitarian system that turns individuals into mere soldiers. You may have seen how even private observances are harnessed for the battle: a soldier dedicating the detonation of a building in Gaza to his partner in a filmed marriage proposal, or offering a bombing to his daughter as a birthday gift. In such cases, love is expressed through hatred, the most intimate occasions are militarized, and fascism mingles with Kitschy ugly exhibitionism. These examples may pose a challenge for comparative researchers, as they are unlikely to find a counterpart elsewhere.

Acts of vengeance and retribution flatter the vanity of the occupiers and their sense of superiority, both of which were injured by the Qassam Brigades' October operation. Images from that day – a Palestinian arresting an Israeli soldier or forcing him out of a tank – are etched in the memory of the occupiers, turning their world topsy-turvy. Such acts are also performed with premeditation, part of a strategy to teach Palestinians and their neighbours an unforgettable lesson. In this respect, harm to Palestinian civilians is not accidental or collateral, but is one of the most important objectives of the war, which inevitably leads to genocide as it is understood internationally.

In service of this campaign against the indigenous community, all methods become permissible, including lying, demonization of the other, and the cynical exploitation of the Holocaust, which took place in another place, era, and civilization. Israeli soldiers interviewed in the media on their way to Gaza said that they felt they were entering Auschwitz to fight the Nazis. Such tendentious comparisons are an offense to the victims of the Nazis and minimize Nazism itself, and this as Israeli soldiers themselves are waging a genocidal war on a large concentration camp where there is no shelter or escape from bombardment by the latest in military technology. The prevailing general atmosphere encourages the commission of crimes against Palestinians, not accountability. *Pace* Judge Aharon Barak's comment on the decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), there is no law and no judiciary prevails in Israel amid such wartime hysteria.

The racist disdain for the indigenous people, masked as tolerance in times of prosperity and calm, is laid utterly bare, and the view of the other as a threat and a security problem again comes to the forefront. This problem requires not only deterrent force and complete control to address; the colonized people who have not been displaced must also be taught and trained to accept the reality of apartheid, even if it necessitates harsh collective punishment. This must be followed by alterations to academic curricula, such that the interloper becomes native and any notion of resisting injustice is erased from hearts and minds.

On every occasion, the rulers of Israel and their allies are shocked by the failure of these policies, confounded that every Palestinian generation produces its own anti-occupation culture and methods of resistance. Yet, they do not conclude from this the need for radical policy changes in order to coexist with the Palestinian people on the basis of justice and equality; rather, it spurs them to further develop methods of repression and fortify their deterrent power. "Democracy" allows for a free and pluralistic discussion of the means of control and their effectiveness.

Turning to the relationship between Arab countries and the question of Palestine, the war on Gaza has once again confirmed what was revealed by the siege of Beirut in 1982, the siege of the presidential compound in Ramallah in 2004, the 2006 war on Lebanon, and the successive wars on Gaza.

Palestine is not a discrete issue for each individual Arab country. Some countries are more affected by it than others, but the cause of Palestine is the central issue of the Arabs, meaning as Arabs with an Arab project, not as separate states. We may disagree on the definition of the Arab project, on the fact that it ever existed, or, if it did, when exactly it collapsed. Was it the day the Egypt and Israel signed the Camp David agreement? The day Iraq invaded Kuwait? Or before either of these events, in the era of what was called the Arab Cold War before the 1967 war? What is clear is that the persistence of expectations and disappointments, blame and derision, has nothing to do with the reality of Arab states. In fact, the Arab order, as an actor, exists only in name. What actually exists is Arab regimes, which have domestic and foreign agendas but no concept or even vision of Arab national security. If there were such a thing, Palestine would not be in the shape it is today, nor would Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and perhaps other states as well.

Israel had repeatedly claimed that the Palestinian issue is not at the crux of its dispute with Arab countries, and its adjuncts within US administrations have asserted that the Palestinian cause is not important to Arab states and that they could normalize relations with Israel by ignoring the issue. Arab regimes proved the veracity of these claims with every wave of normalization.

We have unfortunately begun to hear and read the term “Palestinian-Israeli conflict”, and there are attempts to sneak it into official Arab documents. If Arab states have abandoned the term “Arab-Israeli conflict”, that is their concern. As for supplanting the Palestinian cause with the “Palestinian-Israeli conflict”, that is something else. The conflict in Palestine is not a dispute between two parties, but an issue of national liberation, which is the Palestinian cause.

So why do we continue to expect and anticipate when it is invariably followed by frustration and anger? We were angry during the 1982 siege of Beirut, when many Arab states did nothing to lift the siege on the PLO, and we were angry when they took no action after the Muqata’a was besieged in Ramallah, which turned out to be a prelude to the assassination of Palestinian and Arab leader Yasser Arafat by an occupying colonial power. We were frustrated with the behaviour of the majority of Arab states in 2006 when they explicitly blamed the Lebanese resistance and held it responsible for the war. Why, then, do we insist on holding out for things when it only brings disappointment? Is it some kind of masochism? These emotions are natural in my opinion, demonstrating the tenacity of the Arab identity, its insistence on still breathing, as we see in football stadiums, despite international and regional transformations.

There may be some among us who are angry because they believe that Arab states act contrary to their real interests when they normalize relations with Israel. They are saddened that Arab states seem not to know their own interests and must be pointed to it. These people are not good at distinguishing states from regimes. Regimes tend to understand their interests better than their critics, and it is not their habit to fulfil their critics’ expectations.

The reason for this incurable hope may be that the Arab public generally stands in solidarity with Palestine, and not only Palestine, but also with the act of resistance. The Arab public, regardless of how informed it is of current events, rejects any normalization with Israel. Not everyone is an analyst. This solidarity between peoples may be a leaven for the future, as it was after the 2009 war on Gaza, but it does not in itself immediately change governments’ behaviour, which is the result of each regime being embedded in a web of regional and international relations, though they are forced to go along with popular movements rhetorically.

In this regard, it is useful to consider the difference between enduring movements in solidarity with the Gaza Strip in some Western countries, which are gaining steam rather than declining, and the revolutions of anger that erupt in our countries and then fade. I am not talking about a cultural problem. Perhaps the main factor is fear of the consequences of participating in any popular movement. In some of our countries, even expressing solidarity with Palestine has become taboo. There is no time today to talk about the nature of the Arab protest movements and their spontaneity,

so I only mention this in passing: Arab protest movements in solidarity with Palestine can have an impact if they are sustained, persistent, and organized, and they can influence the positions of Western states that are concerned with the stability of allied regimes in the region. Currently, the strength of the popular movement is inversely proportional to the chatter on social media, which tends towards performative displays of emotion through posting a deluge of visuals depicting people's pain and suffering, as opposed to effective political action in the public sphere, which is waning. This is something that we must address critically yet amicably.

In any case, what I want to say now is that the bitter Arab reality – the unwillingness of normalizing Arab states to even make a pretence of anger by, for example, recalling their ambassadors, a measure that would mask the truth of their relations with Israel, and the unwillingness of some states that have not yet been normalized relations to abandon the idea of a unilateral peace with Israel absent a just solution to the question of Palestine – is a fact that must be taken into account when considering the struggle and strategies of resistance. Nationalist and patriotic sentiments and critical expectations, even when followed by disappointment, are one thing; rational strategic calculations based on data and probabilities are another thing entirely.

In both cases, there is absolutely no justification for not challenging the siege on Gaza by offering humanitarian relief and implementing the resolution adopted by the Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh that provides for such support.

As for the symbiotic and quasi-symbiotic relationship between Israel and its allies in the West, first and foremost the United States, the aggression against Gaza has revealed that this relationship is based on interests, and it is not limited to this relationship. We have seen major mainstream media adopting double standards not only in their treatment of political issues, but even with humanitarian matters like the suffering of Palestinians and Israelis. Not doing more to claim a journalistic presence on the ground in Gaza to cover events and the massive crime underway there is a shame that will haunt these institutions forever, even after the genocidal war has recently compelled these outlets to publish more balanced news.

For the first time, Israel is labouring mightily to impose its vision of the region and its own schema of friends and enemies, including its demonization of UN agencies such as UNRWA, on entire countries, societies, and their universities and media institutions, punishing those who dare contradict it or declaring them heretics like some medieval inquisitor. The US administration bears the brunt of responsibility for Israel's behaviour, and people will likely tire of its hubris and the tide will turn against it at some point in the future. No such wilful arrogance that defies reason and logic can persist indefinitely.

In its relationship with Western states, especially the United States, Israel has cultivated common interests that go beyond mere support. It has developed a network of relationships in which it maintains some autonomous decision-making, so that Western states have to continue supporting it as an irreplaceable ally despite their different visions.

It goes without saying that the major powers have diverse interests and concerns in the region, and that Israel is a stable ally and a deterrent military force. But this is self-explanatory, meaning that alone it explains nothing else. For example, when governments in key Arab countries express the will of the people, even for domestic reasons unrelated to Palestine, they will necessarily clash with Israel's vision for the region. Israel may thus become a burden on the major powers. Had Arab states agreed on a common Arab agenda in their dealings with the United States on Palestine and other regional issues, rather than jockeying to draw closer to the US, they would have been able to create interests and curb Israeli regional and international influence. There is no if in history, but I am speaking of the future, not about history, and the future holds more than one if.

The October 7 operation and the Israeli genocidal war on Gaza put the Palestinian cause front and centre on the regional and international agenda, no doubt. But Israel is racing against time in an attempt to check this important development, and so it will continue its aggression until it completes what it considers its mission in this war, which is to eliminate the organized, armed Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip. This is both a goal in and of itself and a way to convince Arab states to proceed with normalization absent a just solution to the question of Palestine. Obviously, an Arab-Israeli axis can only be created by side-lining the Palestinian cause.

Its plan is being impeded, however, by the prolonged duration of the war, which has exceeded even pessimistic Israeli expectations, and its failure to achieve the strategic goal of eliminating the armed resistance. In fact, the resistance has rebounded and expanded on top of and under the rubble, including most recently in the northern and central Gaza Strip, as the Israeli leadership rubs its eyes in disbelief. Moreover, Israel has been unable to free the Israeli detainees. The only objective that has been achieved is to destroy the Gaza Strip and make it uninhabitable, in the hope of forcing Palestinians out, particularly in the crucial period between a ceasefire and reconstruction, when people will find no shelter, school, hospital, or work. At the very least, the Palestinian people will be busy for many years recovering from their ordeal and rebuilding.

So Israel continues its war despite the widespread conviction in the US government and in the occupying state itself that it is futile to continue the destruction since there is nothing left to destroy, and that it may consume the reservoirs of sympathy on which Israel draws. The occupation state cannot wage a long war without US support. The United States is therefore increasingly able to pressure Israel, but it does not. Instead, it continues to counsel the Israeli prime minister, who boasts to his government that he knows how to deal with America. Only two days ago [8 February 2024], the US president said for the first time that he was pushing hard for a sustainable ceasefire, and we read of American scepticism about Israel's claim to have destroyed two-thirds of Hamas's capacities.

In the meantime, the occupying state continues the war waiting for the day-after arrangements to gel, which it will claim as a war victory insofar as they entail a new administration of the Gaza Strip under Israeli oversight, which requires regional and American cooperation. By "the day after", Netanyahu means the day after the elimination of the Palestinian resistance, but Arabs and

Palestinians should not accept his interpretation. They should proceed as if the day after refers to the day after any delusions of maintaining the occupation have dissipated. And this is possible.

So, I think we are at a crossroads. On one hand, Israel and its allies will try to impose “new political arrangements” that place Palestinian national rights farther out of reach than the Oslo Accords did. Seeking to capitalize on the achievements of the first intifada, the PLO leadership joined the accords three decades ago in order to overcome marginalization after the 1982 war in Lebanon, the Gulf War, and the collapse of the socialist camp, but the agreement has only served to undermine Palestinian rights more with every passing year. If the “new arrangement” is imposed, more time will pass in the same way, bringing new, never-ending transitional stages, new colonies that preclude any possibility of a Palestinian state, Israeli elections followed by American elections, and struggles for power without sovereignty.

On the other hand, the international and regional order cannot ignore the steep price paid by the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and the hell they have lived through – the killing of children and killing and humiliation of men and women, the destruction of homes, schools, hospitals, universities, and cultural institutions, and the starvation. The courage, patience, and perseverance of the resistance cannot be ignored; beyond that, it represents an achievement in organization and institution building for the Palestinian people. The sacrifices of the Palestinian people and the achievements of the resistance will bolster the position of a unified Palestinian leadership that encompasses resistance factions and independent patriots within the framework of the PLO, if the organization insists on a just resolution and if it is supported by Arab states. There is substantial moral capital which cannot be overlooked regionally and internationally.

We stand at a crossroads because the cause of Palestine is again at the forefront. We may grow nearer to a just solution or we could move further away from it. It is precisely at such critical junctures that human actors can surmount the structures that govern them.

If the Palestinian Authority wants to thwart Netanyahu’s plan and ensure that a single authority governs the West Bank and Gaza, it must realize that this is achievable in only one of two ways: conclude an understanding with resistance factions as a route to sovereignty and independence, or ride in on the back of an Israeli tank as a route to the consolidation of power without sovereignty. If resistance factions wish to help determine the future of the Palestinian people and the occupied lands and translate their struggle and sacrifices into political gains, they must join the PLO, the official legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and all parties must reach a consensus on the conditions for this. We stand at a crossroads and the decision must be made with all due speed. There is no room here for rounds of lengthy reconciliation talks of the kind that have exhausted and frustrated the Palestinian people.

An observation on ongoing debates

You will no doubt remember the shock and awe that followed al-Aqsa Deluge: resistance supporters' admiration for the planning and combat capabilities shown after seventeen years of siege, nearly airtight control of the Gaza Strip, and four wars; Israelis' shock at a quasi-war offensive within the 1948 borders, the magnitude of Israeli casualties in a single day, and the anger, sense of insecurity, and even existential anxiety, not just driven by the offensive itself but also because it suggested that Israel's deterrent power could be eroded in the future if the event passed without a response that radically differed from the past. The operation set off lengthy debates, still underway today, about the responsibility of both the resistance and the Israeli army for certain civilian deaths, and the chaos that accompanied the influx of civilians after the border fence was breached. We are still receiving conflicting information about abuses which, if true, warrant criticism and even condemnation in some cases, without prejudice to the right to resist the occupation.

In any case, the Israeli propaganda machine used all the means and capacities at its disposal to ensure that the subject continued to dominate media coverage, with the result that what Israel experienced in a single resistance operation, albeit one exceptional in its scope, has overshadowed its own atrocities and the hundreds of operations and massacres it is committing in the Gaza Strip, which were accurately summarized on behalf of us all by the claim that South Africa filed against Israel with the ICJ.

Hamas has done well recently, publishing a document on 21 January 2024 containing its account of the events of that day, in which it insisted that its operation was a military offensive that targeted IDF bases with the aim of capturing soldiers. It stressed that it did not target civilians and that chaos ensued, the outcomes of which it bore no responsibility for. More importantly, it once again denied any connection between the operation and the targeting of Jews as Jews, underscoring its resistance to Israel as an occupying power.

Between this and that, there have been sharp criticisms from the opponents of the resistance and whispers from supporters of the armed resistance questioning the wisdom of such an operation and whether the consequences were fully considered. We know these arguments, having encountered them many times, not only in the history of the Palestinian issue, but in the history of resistance to injustice in general. Does a resistance that rebels against injustice, spontaneously or in an organized but uncalculated manner, bear responsibility for a brutal regime's suppression of a people under occupation? Do the forces, even well-organized forces, that initiate an operation whose outcomes are beyond their control bear responsibility for collective punishment, the shelling of civilians, and in some cases the destruction of their cities and villages? We must distinguish between various levels of the discussion, especially when it is among intellectuals and researchers (forget about the pointless wrangling on social media).

If a resistance movement consults you before it carries out an operation, you may have the opportunity to express a judicious opinion about the type and timing of the operation in the given circumstances.

After the fact, there is always room to criticize this or that aspect of resistance operations, whether from a moral or strategic perspective. This kind of debate can and should be conducted within the anti-occupation camp, which in principle supports the right of resistance.

If you find yourself faced with a people who lost their homeland seventy-five years ago, among them refugees who live in an area that has been under siege for nearly two decades, which has been subjected to four wars, and in these circumstances resistance operations were mounted and Israel responded with a genocidal war, what is your position? No one asked your opinion of the timing or type of operation, for you are not an armed resistance fighter. So what do you do? I am not talking here about a legitimate, perhaps necessary, and always possible strategic debate about the best way to resist at this particular time, but about staking out a moral position on an existing reality: an armed elite apparently composed of tens of thousands of fighters out of a people of millions. This resistance bears the years-long burden of organization, commitment, and perseverance and undertakes an armed operation. Are you still able to keep sight of the main issue despite your moral and strategic caveats and despite the outcomes of the operation? The key issue in my opinion remains the occupation and its practices, which led to this operation, and the campaign of collective punishment, retribution, reprisals, and the crimes of genocide that followed it. We ought to always remember that not all people debating the effectiveness and consequences of a particular resistance operation defend the principal right to resist occupation, some of them are opposed to all resistance operations and support peace with Israel absent a just resolution to the question of Palestine. That is, they advocate surrender to the occupation as a *fait accompli*. A line must be drawn between these two positions.

We must also have another discussion, unrelated to the one above, with those who skip over arguments defending the right to resist occupation and defend the people against genocide in an attempt to tie the hands of the occupation state. Such people consider human suffering as mere details and rush to declare victory from the first moment. For them, victory does not mean the steadfastness of the resistance in thwarting aggression, they rather see it as a resounding victory over an occupying state because it is on its way to certain defeat and inevitable collapse. Some of them even divine the specific year of Israel's demise by various metaphysical calculations. Anything can be said at any time based on the science of the unseen or an exultation that seeks refuge from the misery of reality in fiction. These are all assertions and emotions that are impervious to refutation and proof.

None of this, however, has anything to do with the reality of the war on Gaza, in which a people are facing genocide while the ostensibly victorious resistance presses for a ceasefire and the purportedly defeated state wants to continue the war. Where is the logic in this?

I believe that this confusion between the moral and the analytical levels, and between supporting steadfastness and spinning fantasies that are inevitably frustrated, are fallacies that harm the cause of justice and keep people from taking positions and acting in a way that will help the Palestinian

people withstand their ordeal, mitigate harm, and achieve political gains for the cause of justice so that all these sacrifices are not in vain.

Minimizing the significance of the suffering of the Palestinian people amid a genocide does not boost morale. On the contrary, it is an affront to the sacrifices made by this people and offers cover for the crimes of the occupation. The same is true of holding the resistance responsible for the crimes of the occupation, and also spreading fantasies about an imminent victory over Israel and its collapse due to the war.

The resistance remains steadfast thanks to will, determination, faith, good training, and years-long preparation for the battle to defend Gaza, not because of some metaphysical calculations. It is clear that the resistance in Gaza is chiefly equipped to be a defence force. The Palestinian people are enduring unimaginable suffering and stoically struggling not to lose their humanity or dignity in these circumstances due to a fascist, racist occupation that has no qualms about committing genocide.

Aside from what they are already doing, the most effective thing that Palestinian intellectuals can do today, each in line with his or her position and values, is to engage in solidarity to alleviate the suffering of the people in Gaza, take action to counter the propaganda and slander of the Israeli genocidal war machine, and pressure the main Palestinian political forces to come together under a unified leadership within the framework of the PLO. The goal is to ensure that these sacrifices are not in vain by leveraging them to challenge the so called the Israeli “day-after” arrangements that prevent a just resolution to the Palestinian issue, and to ensure such Israeli crimes are not repeated.