



TAKING SIDES: PALESTINIANS AND THE GULF CRISIS

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Ever since the Gulf crisis erupted, Iraq has been portrayed as a pariah state dangerously mixing the allegedly loose political morals of the third world with the murderous military capabilities of the first world. Its leader, Saddam Hussein, has been demonized as a latter-day Hitler, the mad murderer of his own people; the constantly-repeated refrain has been “the world against Iraq.” These images not only served an uncompromising stance against Iraq, they also prepared public opinion docily to accept potentially horrendous news from the war front.

It follows that the parties that failed to respond to the call of the crusade against Iraq would be stigmatized as partisans of the forces of darkness.

Foremost among such parties are the Palestinians. Their unwillingness to condemn Iraq and failure to cheer the “coalition” against Iraq have been interpreted as approval of the occupation of Kuwait, as tolerance of aggression, and as deviation from the united will of civilized nations. The Palestinian position on the Gulf crisis has been judged *morally wrong* because it was perceived as “siding with aggression,” as *suicidal* because it antagonized benefactors real and imagined, and as *politically unwise* since the Palestinians themselves plead for support against a military occupation they seek to overthrow. In short, the Palestinian position is seen to be in contradiction to the

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Palestinians' own self-interests as well as to the lofty principles governing relations between nations.

This is the judgment of much of the West. Seen from a different vantage point, the Palestinian position on the Gulf crisis is neither as morally reprehensible nor as politically unwise as it is described.

But before considering the Palestinian position on the Gulf crisis and the rationale behind it, the following two caveats are in order:

There is no peculiarly "Palestinian position" on the Gulf crisis. There is an Arab view that is widely shared by the Palestinians. For example, the Western notion that attributes Jordanian government policy on the Gulf crisis to Palestinian opinion in Jordan ignores the fact that the prevailing opinion in Jordan is shared by Palestinians and Jordanians alike, religious and secular, conservative and liberal. And it is part of a larger Arab opinion found across North Africa, in the Levant, and even in the Arabian Peninsula itself.

To depict Arab public opinion on the Gulf crisis as Palestinian support for Saddam Hussein is in fact a trivialized version of the reality of broad popular Arab support for Iraq.

Palestinian sympathy for an Iraq besieged by the West does not mean Palestinian support for Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait. From the very beginning, the Palestinians favored a peaceful resolution to the conflict between Iraq and Kuwait that would bring about the restoration of Kuwait within the framework of an Arab solution and that would prevent a future recurrence of the conflict. The PLO went to the Arab League on 10 August 1990 with a proposal, supported by other Arab parties, to pull Iraqi troops out of Kuwait and temporarily replace them with an Arab or international peacekeeping force that would enable the Kuwaiti people to determine their future government through a plebiscite. It also provided for the negotiation of outstanding disputes—such as boundaries, oil production, war debts—which had caused the conflict in the first place and which had poisoned Iraqi-Kuwaiti relations for decades.

But the general managers of the "new world order" headquartered in Washington were not interested. To them, the Gulf crisis was an opportunity to address a larger pending agenda which included disciplining Iraq and making of it an example for any would-be third world challenger of the brave new world. Working through its allies in the Arab world, the United States was interested only in an Arab cover for its unfolding strategy, and the Palestinian peace proposal was not even permitted to appear on the Arab League's agenda.

U.S. policy delegitimized the middle ground. The options were reduced to either supporting Iraq or supporting a NATO war against Iraq. Given this simplified choice, the Palestinians and many others in the Arab world opted to stand with an Arab country in its moment of peril. The occupation of Kuwait disturbed them, but the destruction of Iraq outraged them, and they chose the lesser evil. To describe the Palestinian position as "embracing Saddam" is thus to distort it by gross oversimplification.

The Palestinian View

A number of issues feed into Palestinian opinion on the Gulf. These can be broken down into five major components. It should be noted that these do not apply solely to the Palestinians, but are shared widely across many parts of the Arab world, where popular support for Iraq has run high.

The factor of the West. The Gulf crisis, like all political conflicts, has dynamics of its own that carry it beyond its original form. It quickly changed from an Iraqi-Kuwaiti to an Arab-Western conflict, from a local problem to a military confrontation, and from a local to an international issue.

These changes in the nature of the conflict, brought about by Washington's policy of rapid and massive military deployment in the Arabian Peninsula, gave the preservation of Iraq a much greater urgency than the liberation of Kuwait in the eyes of the Palestinians. In fact, after the military deployment began, the issue became Arab nationalism versus Western hegemony rather than Iraqi occupation and Kuwaiti independence, particularly after the Bush administration's 8 November announcement that U.S. military presence was being enlarged to constitute an offensive force.

Palestinian opinion, in light of this transformation of the conflict, becomes support of Arab nationalism against a domineering West rather than support of Iraq against Kuwait.

The pan-Arab dimension. Like many Arabs, Palestinians view the Arab state system within the framework of a deeply felt sense of Arab nationhood. In the West, the term "Arab world" is a geographic expression, but to most Arabs it calls forth the "Arab homeland" with all the connotations that a "homeland" implies, including a shared heritage, common historic memories, and perceived shared destiny. "When we rose to greatness," said President Gamal Abdul Nasser in *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, "we rose together, and when we fell under the hooves of invaders, we fell together." The Palestinians overwhelmingly share this view.

For this reason, Palestinians tend to see interstate Arab crises, no matter how severe, as domestic Arab disputes rather than international conflicts. This is true even if they themselves are the victim of such disputes. Thus, in 1948, the Arab remnants of Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza) were occupied, following the creation of the State of Israel in the overwhelming majority of the country, by two Arab states—Jordan and Egypt. Yet the Palestinians never considered the possibility of seeking global assistance in confronting these states. They never considered it legitimate for an Arab people to mobilize foreign powers against another Arab people. They make no exception in the present instance.

Thus it is that Palestinians see Western military involvement in the Gulf as illegitimate foreign intrusion in Arab affairs, not as a legitimate application of the international principle of "collective security."

The Arab status quo. The Palestinians, homeless and stateless, do not have much of a stake in, and therefore allegiance to, the prevailing political, mili-

tary, and economic status quo in the Middle East. Indeed, they blame the Arab status quo for their continuing national dispossession, attributing to the political fragmentation of the Arab world Israel's emergence as a mini superpower in the region. In their eyes, the unparalleled maldistribution of Arab wealth and its misuse by those in whose hands it is concentrated are at the root of Arab powerlessness. They also blame Arab authoritarianism for the fact that deeply-felt popular support for the Palestinian cause tends to degenerate into official lip service.

When the Palestinians look at the West's zeal to punish Iraq, they see more than an effort to restore Kuwait; they see a determination to sanctify a status quo that they consider humiliating and detrimental not only to them but to the Arab national interest.

The Arab-Israeli issue. Perhaps most important of all, the Palestinians understand the present Gulf conflict as a conflict over whether or not the Arabs have the right to challenge Israeli military supremacy in the Middle East. In their view, what prevents them from attaining their national rights is *not* the lack of merit of their cause, or even the lack of international support for it. Rather, it is the imbalance of power in the region. They understand that the absence of an Arab deterrent to Israeli power is the principal explanation of Israeli inflexibility.

In the absence of Arab unity, or even solidarity, Iraq emerged as the only credible challenge to Israel's uncontested military superiority and the West's commitment to ensure that superiority. Iraq alone had the land, the people, the resources, and the infrastructure capable of sustaining an indigenous Arab power. As the Arab power most capable of making wars more costly for Israel, it had the greatest likelihood of succeeding where others failed: that is, to make Israel more amenable to persuasion. Thus, what Palestinians cheered was less Iraq's military prowess than the political implications and consequences of that prowess.

The linkage issue. When Iraq proposed, on 12 August 1990, that it was prepared to negotiate the occupation of Kuwait and Iraqi armament if these issues were dealt with on a regional basis—meaning in conjunction with Israel's occupation of Arab land and its possession of weapons of mass destruction—the idea was dismissed as a devious attempt to distract attention from the occupation. The Palestinians see the linkage as real and take it more seriously.

Palestinians are far from believing that Iraq invaded Kuwait to create an opportunity for the liberation of Palestine, and indeed Iraq itself never claimed this was the case. Nonetheless, Palestinians would make three points giving validity to the linkage issue.

- Iraq's rise as an important military power was to a significant degree (though not solely) motivated by an Arab need to create an Arab military deterrent to Israel in order to influence its politics, particularly on the Palestine question. Moreover, Iraq, with its undeniable commitment to the

Palestinian's two principal concerns, pan-Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause, is the only Arab participant in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that never signed a permanent armistice agreement with Israel. Thus, for the Palestinians, Iraq's linkage between the Gulf crisis and the Palestine question is not just a cover for local ambitions.

- Even as President Bush denies the linkage issue, he affirms it. Practically all the reasons that he and his senior representatives have given for confronting Iraq indicate that the two issues are linked. If the occupation of the land of a neighbor, the violation of his political and human rights, the inviolability of Security Council resolutions, and military bullying are unacceptable in the "new world order," then the Palestinians have every right to complain about singling out Iraq for the sort of righteous indignation we now see. They have every reason to suspect a hidden agenda, and every reason to dissent from that agenda.

The Palestinians, who were denied the right to self-determination at a time when peoples from one end of the third world to another were granted it, are particularly sensitive to double standards. They have every reason to doubt the authenticity of the "new world order" when the United States vetoes a Security Council resolution to dispatch UN observers to the occupied territories not long before it deploys armies to the Gulf to implement other Security Council resolutions, or when the United States threatens to veto a Security Council resolution calling for a peace conference on Palestine at the very time it is girding for war in the Gulf.

- Finally, the Palestinians cannot view Israel as an innocent bystander in the Gulf conflict. The Israeli-led crusade calling for Iraq's economic strangulation and military emasculation began long before Iraq marched into Kuwait on 2 August 1990. Given the Palestinians' conviction of deep Israeli involvement in the crisis that became the Gulf war, they cannot see their national interest as giving aid or comfort to Iraq's opponents.

The Aftermath

The Palestinians naturally view the post-Gulf war future of their region in the light of their understanding of the conflict's nature and aims, declared and undeclared. Their apprehensions are particularly focused on the following four possibilities:

Marginalization of the Palestinian question. While the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, long considered the primary issue in the Middle East and in Arab-Western relations, was put back on the regional and international agenda by the intifada and kept in world attention as a result of the debate over the linkage issue, there are considerable fears that it will be displaced in the post-war period by concern for the restoration of "stability" to the Gulf and the establishment of "security arrangements." These fears are greatly fed by the United States' new preeminence in the post-cold war era coupled with its unsympathetic policy concerning the Palestinians. A shift of focus to the

Gulf situation would moreover be encouraged by Israel, which has long maintained that the Arab-Israeli conflict has been exaggerated as a cause of tensions in the region and which will surely seize upon the opportunity offered by the Gulf war to evade pressures for peace and to proceed with the de facto annexation of the occupied territories.

Renewed assaults on the PLO. The Palestinians are anticipating a revival of efforts to delegitimize the Palestine Liberation Organization and its role in a future peace process. One aspect of the expected campaign would be to fashion a "substitute leadership" more amenable to Israel's plans for the future of the Palestinians and their land.

Reduced Arab support for the Palestinian cause. Given the supposition that the dependence of the West's Arab allies on the West for protection from internal and external enemies will make them inordinately responsive to the Western will, and given the West's policy on the Palestine question, the Palestinians fear that the West's Arab allies are likely to be fickle in their support of the Palestinian cause. If this is the case, the Palestinians in the post-war Middle East will be more than ever the true orphans of the region.

The future of the Palestinian diaspora communities. The animosity of the Gulf states, intensified by political disagreements over the Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis and subsequent events, the uprooting of much of the Palestinian community in Kuwait and its uncertain future, and the political and economic impact of these factors on other Palestinian communities, add up to the possibility of severe hardships, narrowed options, and difficult choices for the Palestinian people. In the aftermath of the Gulf war, the Palestinians may find more of their energies and resources absorbed by a struggle for physical survival rather than by their struggle for their rights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Palestinian position on the Gulf crisis may or may not be understandable to those who do not share the Palestinians' experience or concerns. But it is certainly neither a manifestation of inherent "wickedness" nor merely a blunder. It arises logically out of their unique condition and specific requirements. Their choices were not simple miscalculations, as some have charged. They were essentially dictated by the nature of the issues as they perceive them, by their assessment of available options, and by their definition of the Palestinian and broader Arab national interests.

To fault the Palestinians in standing by Iraq for betting on a "losing horse" is to fault them for not being mercenaries—an accusation to which many Palestinians proudly plead "guilty as charged."

As they face what appear to be uncertain and perhaps grim prospects in the most post-war world, the Palestinians are comforted and reassured by the following facts:

Since their cause derives legitimacy not only from narrowly perceived national interests, but from the universal concept of self-determination, they are confident that their struggle for their national future will ultimately prevail.

The PLO's legitimacy, based as it is on the voluntary consent of its Palestinian constituency, is more secure than it appears to its antagonists. This is not the first time the opponents of Palestinian national rights, Arab and non-Arab, have relegated the PLO to "the dustbin of history." The Palestinians have no serious fears that this time their enemies will succeed where they failed before.

The Palestinians, who faced a real threat of extinction as a national entity after the catastrophe of 1948 and rebounded as one of the most coherent and resourceful communities in the region, have confidence that the short-term hardships they expect to face in the post-war period will be overcome by long-term realities in the region. These include the fact—not sufficiently understood in the West—that the Palestinian cause is also an Arab-Islamic and even a third world cause, and that for that reason it survives the vicissitudes of regional politics.

The best assurance the Palestinians have that setbacks for their cause will not petrify into permanent defeat is the fact that their interests are better integrated with the fabric of popular Arab sentiment than are the whims of the personal, partisan, and dynastic political elites which may float on the surface of Arab national life in the aftermath of today's upheavals.