

Let's talk about Gaza

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Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) in Gaza interviewed **Omar Shaban**, an analyst on political economy of the Middle East and the founder of PalThink for Strategic Studies. He was a candidate for the 1st Palestinian parliamentary elections in 1996. He is independent from any political affiliation. He occasionally participates in conferences on political and economic issues, and Palestinian affairs such as the reconstruction of Gaza, the reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Euro-Med cooperation.



Tell me about the current economic situation, what is happening and what is expected to happen?

We always say that Gaza's situation is very hard and has been on the edge of collapse for ten years.

I think we experienced similar conditions in 2008, at the beginning of the siege, and again in 2013 when the Rafah tunnels were sealed. We have endured lot of difficult times in the last decade. Now after 10 years, all of these difficulties have combined to generate

a very painful reality. If the worst has not yet happened, that we might have to endure more in the future, it implies that no solution is close at hand. The latest moves and threats by the PA have created a state of insecurity and worry for the people, even for those people who were not directly affected by the salary cuts to the PA employees. Everyone in Gaza is affected by the new changes, and Gaza is clearly headed towards a very difficult time. The cuts, I would say, had more psychological than financial affects. It was sudden, with no explanation and included employees at all levels. No one was warned it could happen and so no one had time to prepare for the cuts. Some of those affected have loans, some are preparing to get married, and some had borrowed money. It created a state of confusion for the people, which froze their ability to problem solve.

In a society that has gone through 3 wars in under ten years, and which has a very poor economic situation, any hit will negatively impact the situation. That's why 10 or 15 million US dollars (one of the main sources of income for Gaza) cut from entering Gaza's economy every month will be disastrous. The new decision also implies that there will be an even worse wave of cuts next time. Even people who have good jobs are afraid. The situation will only be solved if someone interrupts and offers a solution. We should expect more cuts and more restrictive laws by the PA, in the near future. There are a lot of things that have been said will be cut from entering Gaza, such as water and internet access.

Punitive measures by the PA only serve to punish the entire population of 2 million people.

So you don't think that PA will stop paying for the water/ electricity bill for Gaza which is coming from Israel?

No, they will not stop.

Also, the international community would not approve such a move, and Israel also would not agree to such extreme measures, for its own security concerns. I think they would understand the President's policies are politically expedient during this time, and timed for his approaching visit to the White House. The President will not push far enough to collapse everything.

Do you think that the President's recent practices are orders from the international donors?

No one can confirm the truth about this. Some of Hamas's big leaders claim that these orders were taken at the national level, by the President himself. Some others claim that they were regionally and internationally driven.

I believe both the MENA region and America have shown their interest in putting extra pressure on Hamas, but not to drive them to the edge, and the method of applying this pressure was left to the President to choose. However, I think that the world would not support cutting access to water for the two million people living in Gaza. Ethically and in terms of pragmatism, the need for stability would not allow for such behavior. Some expect that the President will take action beyond what is predicted and will do harm, but I don't think that will happen.

Regarding the electricity company, the President will not pay the electricity bill and gas has been stopped from entering Gaza. How long do you think this crisis will last?

This issue is deep-seated. It is one of a few problems that Israel has no responsibility for. This problem is a Palestinian creation, 100%. The electricity problem is not technical, nor resource-related. It is politically created and powered. Thus, this threat will stay live as a

means for political pressure by one party on another.

We, as the people, don't have all the information related to this problem. Both parties give us a bit of information that doesn't lead to full understanding of what's happening.

The PA should not enforce taxes on basic needs - such as medicine. So, following this logic, they don't have the right to make us pay tax on the fuel which is used for the electricity station.

Thank God this crisis is happening now, at this time of the year, when people don't need cooling or heating devices that run on electricity. I remember the real crisis which happened last December when people were very cold and they didn't have electricity for heat.

We heard recently of a large number of business men declaring their bankruptcy. Why did that happen, you think?

Siege, blockade, movement restriction, and a consistently high state of unpredictability. Business in general, cannot function in the absence of some form of stability and predictability

All of this has created a state where people are afraid to start or even to think about starting any business in Gaza, even at the level of house repairs, a man will stop himself from repairing a broken lamp until he made sure the situation will not worsen. Even the banks have changed their regulations based on the uncertainty of Gaza; they have raised their interest on loans to around 20% to make sure they are compensated. If people have withdrawn 1,000,000 ILS in loans, there is a chance that 300,000 will not come back; that's why the bank raised the interests from 12% to 14% to 20%.

The political situation. What do you see on the horizon? We've been hearing about a reconciliation for 10 years. What can you say about that?

It seems there is a clear alliance regionally with the new Trump administration, on the Palestinian question.

All of the countries in the Middle East, including Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have agreed to go with the new American Administration which supports President Mahmoud Abbas' method. All of them are looking forward to seeing a solution to the separation of the West Bank and Gaza. Abbas has been working to generate support among the international community. On May, 3rd, Abbas will meet with Trump in the White House and will likely reach an agreement with Netanyahu which will result in the resuming of negotiations. It will not mean that there be a final solution, but it means that another process of negotiations will start. It's just about the process, not the outputs. Everyone will be happy and proud for the achievement they have reached.

This vision explains Abbas' recent practices against Gaza; it clearly shows where he stands with regard to political Islam in Gaza, as represented by Hamas. Accordingly, if there is a chance for a political reconciliation, then Hamas should find a way to join President Abbas in generating understanding and support among the international community but I don't think this will ever happen. Hamas will not pursue that diplomatic line and the political division will likely stay. Abbas will convince Trump that he has Hamas in hand, but will follow later, as has been happening in the last 10 years. Even if this happens, it will all be superficial. No real change will happen.

You have said before that what Abbas is doing is driven by an internationally supported plan, but you have also said that the international community will not allow for the crisis to continue. What about that?

The international community, I believe, has agreed on a plan to pressure Gaza by make the Strip starve, but it is not interested in destroying it. Israel doesn't want Gaza, and would love to push its inhabitants to the sea, but they can't. They are bound by rules and humanitarian laws. So they are interested in making Gazans suffer, but to some limit. They only want to pressure Gaza to submit and agree to find a solution, without pushing it to the edge.

Do you see that Hamas, in order to find an exit from this pressure, would take the risk of starting a war with Israel?

I believe Hamas has different options. They always develop methods to find solutions. I don't know them per say, but they're being talked about here and there. They are not necessarily good or positive.

Abbas had several options to deal with Gaza, and some part of his administration pushed towards choosing the option that he used recently. Also Israel experienced the same in their war in Lebanon and other examples. So, surely there is a part of the Hamas administration that is pushing towards starting a war with Israel. However, I think the option of war is difficult to undertake for now.

The recently leaked Hamas political document. What do you think of it?

It is a draft political document/statement that was supposed to be declared on April 17th (on Palestinian Prisoner's day) in Doha during a press conference. There were some typos in the translation from Arabic to English, plus they were waiting for the Rafah crossing to open so that a delegation from Gaza could attend the conference in Doha. Hamas's plan was that Khaled Meshal would make this statement before his retirement; in an attempt to show that this statement is general for all Hamas entities. On the political level, this document represents a qualitative change that we the people have been seeking too. The change would make Hamas differentiate between Hamas the government and Hamas the political and religious party. We as Palthink participated in the process which led Hamas to consider this change at a conference last year, where we presented the example of Al-Nahda in Tunisia and asked Dr. Reda Edris, who is a leader of Al-Nahda movement in Tunis to talk via Skype about it - and Hamas leaders were attending and listening. Our aim was to bring another experience as an illustration and indicator of lessons learned. As elements of Gaza's civil society, we deserve this success too, because we worked on it.

I expect that Hamas has high expectations from this document. But the world community believes in actions, not words. The document is very important, but the world community will not consider any action corresponding to it until Hamas shows actions that prove their intentions.

Municipality Elections, will they happen in the West Bank only as Hamas is refusing to participate in Gaza?

It is possible that maybe they will participate, as in the West Bank in 2012. We, as civil society organizations welcomed the initiative, signed the document and held conferences and calls for elections to advocate for municipal elections. We tried hard to create awareness that also represents community pressure to pave the way for elections. That's because we always believe that elections are an appropriate and a strong way to escape this chronic crisis. . Elections were supposed to be held in October, but were driven into failure because of the negative and in-collaborative practices by both political parties. If it happens next time, and I believe it will, the same will happen and the political division will deepen more.

Do you think there will be elections for the Legislative Council soon, and if it happens, what do you expect to happen, and what will Hamas's response be?

The Legislative Council elections and Presidential elections are on the agenda for the national political reconciliation. There can't be a Legislative Council election without agreement on reconciliation between Hamas and Fattah. All of the attempts to reach a reconciliation to date have focused on conducting the elections. In my opinion, the main solution is the election, because we need new leadership and people need to express themselves. There is no alternative.

People are bored with the political parties, and most of them are convinced that the political parties will not help them. People are polarized, each to the party they benefit

from. Independent figures are very few. Moreover, the new generation of youth has not experienced the benefits of neither Hamas nor Fattah, which means that both political parties have lost a great deal of supporters. Neither party will succeed in polarizing the support of all the people, which is good for national reconciliation and for the future of democracy in Palestine.

A great example here is what happened in France yesterday. A new President who is not polarized politically nor associated with any of the great political parties in France managed to win the elections. This is considered a revolution in the political system in France and to the minds of the people of France. It will also allow other Europe states to copy the principle. Also in the United States Trumps success formed a great hit to the traditional political system in America; a new man who has no historical relation to politics is President.

Dahalan as an alternative?

Dahalan is a case that will not dissolve easily. He still has a lot to offer, has a lot of international relationships, popularity and the love of the people at home in Palestine. He can't be cast away from any system applied in Palestine. Dahalan will be a key part of any political system in the future.

As a Palestinian, what are your hopes?

I believe that it's the time for the Palestinians to start thinking out of the box. It's time for the logos of the old politicians have been using to benefit their own interests to vanish. We also need to re-consider our past way of fighting with Israel. Some people still benefit from the 70-year-old political strategies; they need to be cast away. There should be a lot of changes to the concept of the State, the flag, nationality itself.

I encourage forming a new ideology in dealing with Israel. We need and deserve an independent Palestinian state, and then what will be the relation between Israel and Palestine? Can we split from Israel completely? Is it impossible; is it even in our best interest to split from Israel? A

Palestinian state should have close and strong relation with Israel. A discussion needs to happen to explore those main two questions, because this is what's important.

Countries around the world are now thinking differently, and we're still thinking the same way. Palestinians are still using old methods to deal with new situations.

I hope that Palestinians start thinking like other countries of the world and make real changes. We should end the conflict and have our own state that enjoys good relations with Israel.

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is one of the major institutions of political education in the Federal Republic of Germany. RLS serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as a research center for progressive social development. It is closely affiliated to the German Left Party (DIE LINKE). The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine has supported partners in Palestine since 2000, and established the Regional Office in Ramallah in 2008. Today, the office is in charge of project cooperation with partners in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem, and in the Gaza Strip as well as in Jordan.

Let's talk about Gaza is a collection of interviews from people of Gaza about their personal daily life experience. It describes the sociopolitical and economic situation of the people in Gaza. Views and opinions expressed in the interviews are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily represent the views of interviewer/organization.

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