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VIEWPOINT FROM GAZA: A GROWING FRUSTRATION WITH THE PEACE PROCESS

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**Both Sides Blinded by Cliches / State-Building vs. Security / Blaming Arafat /
Choosing Between Israel and Hamas / Arafat's Worried Advisors / The "Independent"
Opposition / Understanding Hamas**

Both Sides Blinded by Cliches

Palestinians in Gaza and Israelis do not see much of each other anymore, and the cliches grow on both sides. I must admit that I have personally fallen into that trap. Before I arrived here last summer, I thought Gaza was a very dangerous place. I expected to have to live in a very old house with nothing ever functioning. Yet I have never lived so beautifully in all my life.

I found a house in the Remal neighborhood in Gaza City, a very nice area. I have three balconies overlooking the sea. There are more Mercedeses there than in the center of Amsterdam. Actually, it is a neighborhood where many of the PLO officials from Tunis wanted to live, but they had problems. The locals did not want to rent houses or apartments to the Tunis people because they had heard that the

PLO does not pay its bills.

Despite the image many have of Gaza, everyday life there is not particularly threatening. I am perfectly able to move around outside, although I must be careful how I dress and there are clothes I would not wear in Gaza. When I go to a demonstration I wear a kerchief on my head like a blackbird. During the day I can go out and talk to almost everybody, although I decided to stop going out at night.

The Palestinians are very kind. They are always inviting me into their houses. It may even be an advantage to be a woman because people have a tendency to protect you. My husband is there too, working on water projects. People see me operating alone and some do not know I am married, so I simply tell them, of course, to reassure them. People are

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very outspoken and open, especially the people who were here during the intifada. With those who came from Tunis it is a bit more like talking in code.

State-Building vs. Security

Frustration is setting in again in Gaza and the situation is now quite tense. Everybody here is starting to discover that the peace process is not what we all call peace. It is just not going as some people expected it might go in the best-case scenario. The main reason for this is that the Palestinians are concentrating on state-building and the Israelis on security, and these two perspectives often drift apart. The Palestinians say Israel does not help them enough with state-building and the Israelis, in turn, accuse the Palestinians of not helping them enough in security matters, and they are both right. These two completely different agendas are the cause for recurring deadlock in the peace process.

The ambiguity of the language in the Declaration of Principles is another reason for so many current misunderstandings. The Palestinians were surprised that the Israeli negotiators interpreted the words "participate in elections" in such a way as to insist on restrictions in participation, such as allowing certain people to vote but not to stand as candidates. Perhaps this shows a kind of naivete on the part of the Palestinians, but the people around Arafat did not expect this. The PLO people from Tunis are coming to realize the problems by now, but it is too late. They cannot go back to Tunis anymore. The ordinary people as well are now starting to find out what the Israeli interpretation of the Oslo agreement is like. To their surprise, they are beginning to realize that they might not even get control of the West Bank in the way they had expected. One might call the Palestinians dreamers, and they are suddenly waking up now in a very hard way. As a result, they are starting to blame Arafat.

When the Palestinians went to Oslo to negotiate with the Israelis they were with their backs against the wall. They did not have as much money as they once did and had to cope with a world that was changing geopolitically.

It is very ironic in a way that it was the Palestinians from inside the territories who more or less forced the PLO leadership in Tunis to agree to work for what they call a "two-state solution" and to drop their calls for the destruction of Israel. Now it is the Tunis people in Gaza who are sticking to the agreement, at least vocally, while the Palestinians who were in Gaza all the time are getting more and more radical and turning toward Hamas.

Blaming Arafat

Nothing has really changed for the people in Gaza. They really had such high expectations of Arafat. When the new leadership came here, the people expected money and honey. But the money has not come and the honey is not coming either. One Palestinian told me, "All we got since May is cholera."

The Palestinians want results, they want everything, and they blame Arafat particularly because the state-building process is not going very well. One might say Arafat was a good revolutionary, an effective one, but definitely not a good manager.

For example, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Telecommunications there are 60,000 people waiting for a telephone line and only 400 lines available. The whole structure for a joint venture to privatize the telephone system is there, but the director general and the minister seem to be obstructing each other. So nothing materializes.

Since the Israeli Civil Administration left, some aspects of life have become a sort of jungle. For example, people are eager to have water. So they have started draining the sources of fresh water without government supervision. According to one calculation, if this process goes on unchecked, in another ten years Gaza will simply run out of water.

The people have expectations of Arafat personally. When talking to people about building houses or roads, nobody says they expect the government to do it. No, it is Arafat who should do it. In one way or another they want him to be their leader. The "European democratic system," that the so-called liberal Palestinians who are so popular in

the West keep talking about, may not function at all in Gaza. To a certain extent Arafat is to blame for all this, but there is nobody offering any realistic alternative.

Arafat says he cannot make plans as long as he does not have money. The Minister of Internal Affairs says he cannot make a plan for a social system as long as he does not have money. If I suggest that maybe the donors will give money after first seeing a plan, they say, "I cannot make a plan because it means I have to promise people something. I cannot promise them something and not make it come true."

People complain not only that Arafat does not deliver, but are also upset about the kind of people he brought with him to Gaza. Everybody says the Tunis people drink a lot, and this is not accepted in Gaza society. They say some beaches in Gaza are full of empty liquor bottles. The stories are often exaggerated, but they reflect the resentment by many against the people Arafat brought with him from outside. He put them in the best positions, often against the wishes and expectations of the locals. Only Hamas profits from this resentment, for it is the only movement that dares to criticize the "Tunis household" openly.

Choosing Between Israel and Hamas

Warren Christopher said that Arafat now has to choose between the peace accord and Hamas, or, as it was put more sharply, he has to choose between Israel and Hamas. Choosing the peace accord for Arafat means crushing Hamas. But Hamas will be very difficult to crush. If Arafat tries to touch Hamas it would mean civil war. "Algeria" is the word that is used most often by Arafat's advisors these days, as something to prevent. Arafat probably would win such a confrontation. But it would prove that what the people in the streets now accuse Arafat of is true, namely, that he is a puppet of the Israelis. When Rabin and Peres sent Arafat a letter after the Wachsmann kidnapping to thank the Palestinian security services for helping them investigate the case, Arafat kept quiet. He did not want to talk about it among the Palestinians because it seemed to prove what

they already suspect: that he is a collaborator.

It will be especially difficult for Arafat to crush Hamas at a time when Israel is sealing off the Gaza Strip completely. This is a disaster not only for the people who work in Israel, especially the people from the refugee camps with large families who have to rely on UNRWA again now, but also for the upper class Palestinians who are starting to develop businesses. At the same time that Israel is sealing up the Gaza Strip, Arafat appears to be rewarding the Israelis by arresting Hamas people. This illustrates the very difficult dilemma he is in. Choosing for Palestinian unity and not crushing Hamas means, for Arafat, letting down the Israelis and renouncing his own signature on the Cairo Accord. Arafat will probably keep on trying to please both sides a little bit, but that means he does not take any initiatives.

Arafat's Worried Advisors

There is another strange irony in this. Many people around Arafat are very much afraid that Israel will stop supporting Arafat because he does not deliver, because he does not try to control the Hamas people sufficiently. They are concerned that Israel will start betting on another Palestinian leader, for instance, Chief of Police Nasr Yousef, who is known for a much tougher stand against Hamas. So Arafat's ministers and advisors now feel beleaguered. They are afraid there will be a confrontation among Palestinians.

Gaza is a rumor society. People do watch television, they do read newspapers, but their main sources of information are the leaflets that are passed around and the rumors and gossip that people pass on to each other in the streets. So rumors, whether they are true or not, spread rapidly. Everybody is waiting to see what the Israelis will do, and the people who are the most frightened right now are the people surrounding Arafat. One of the Palestinian ministers in Gaza even voiced the hope that the Israelis would intervene in Gaza because he believed they would be able to protect him better against the fundamentalists than Arafat would.

The "Independent" Opposition

Despite the growing frustration and criticism of the PLO's leader, people realize there is no real alternative to Arafat. Most of the so-called independent opposition are people who are not in Gaza; they all live in Nablus, Ramallah, or east Jerusalem. They keep accusing Arafat of everything: that he is not democratic, that he is favoring his friends, that he is playing his ministers against each other to keep them weak. All of this is true. These independent opposition political figures are quite visible in the West, always being interviewed by newspapers and television, talking about democracy. But when these people, who claim to see Arafat very often, are asked if they share the same criticism with him at those meetings, they respond: "No, of course not. He is our leader, and he gets mad. This will endanger my position." So while many Palestinians are accusing Arafat of being undemocratic and corrupt, it is not only Arafat's fault.

In a certain way, Arafat is the leader that the people deserve. One educated Palestinian, who is very strongly against Arafat, told me, "We are Arabs. Our eyes get these strange clouds when we see him." So nobody tells Arafat what is going on — except Hamas.

Understanding Hamas

Hamas, moreover, offers an alternative. It is perfectly able to organize society in Gaza and to

emancipate the masses. They are a "state within a state." They run good hospitals, have their own social welfare system, and train people. They have long proven to be more experienced managers. Moreover, they are known for not being corrupt. Many wonder what would happen if Hamas would take over.

Actually, Hamas is very small; not even 20 percent of the Palestinians sympathize with Hamas. It is important to realize that there is a split within Hamas at the moment. My sources tell me that most within Hamas actually favor the two-state solution, and they have started to work together with Arafat. It is only the hard core, a small fraction, which is still talking about the destruction of Israel.

There are many secular people in Gaza who do not want an Islamic state but who are backing Hamas today. It is not that they all agree with kidnappers and suicide bombers, but rather that Hamas is really the only opposition forum, and one that has cleverly taken over all of the PLO's old demands.

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