

What Do We Mean by 'Local People'? The Palestinian Case.

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, JUN 23 2017

In response to a recent blog post of my own, Will Trump Be to Palestinian-Israeli Peace What Nixon Was to the U.S and China?, a friend asked what I meant by 'local Palestinians' representing themselves in peace talks better than expats or international actors representing them. Who count as 'local peoples'? And, how can they represent themselves in the absence of a state?

If the grassroots matters in the Middle East more than in some other places – as witnessed by the Arab Spring and other phenomena – how can the grassroots represent itself in a world of states? This, in some ways, is the great *Catch 22* of Palestinians and other stateless peoples. Yes, many will acknowledge that people should have sovereignty and represent themselves rather than having other peoples or states represent or define their ostensible interests. For, in the West, almost all will acknowledge that we represent and define our own interests better than others can do so for us, as a people. But, if a people does not have a state, then who gets to represent them?

The argument in my post, linked above, was that local Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, in Israel, and in refugee camps can best represent their own sovereign interests. So, how-to?

The easiest answer, to my mind, is Palestinian Mayors. Palestinian cities around Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza take care of their daily business to the best of their budgetary abilities. Garbage is collected. Budget and space in Gaza make garbage collection far more challenging than in other places. Schools open and teach children. Streets have lighting and sidewalks, budgets permitting (some towns have more lighting and more sidewalks than others). Markets are open and regulated for health issues. Taxes are collected. And so forth. Budget, war conditions, and space in Gaza make all of these issues of daily management more difficult than in other places. But, who is it who does the hard work of managing these issues of daily life in the modern world in the stateless or semi-state context of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza? And who does it in the state context of Palestinians who are citizens of Israel? Mayors. Mayors, local commissioners, and other local municipal officers.

It is not so hard to find Palestinian leaders who can represent the real, sovereign interests and needs of their people in their local contexts. In some of the Druze towns of the north of Israel, there are women representatives who run municipal offices on women's status and development. In cities, villages, and towns large and small, Palestinian leaderships continue to run the daily business of their municipalities whatever their state-status. It is these leaders who truly lead the Palestinian people, putting in the (often thankless) hard, daily work of making sure that daily life goes on as normally as it can in a stateless or semi-state context.

There are Palestinian Ministers of Knesset in Israel, and others in a range of political parties who, I am quite sure, would be happy to voice the interests of their constituencies. The Palestinians of Israel should be as much represented as are others. They are part of any Palestinian-Israeli peace. They also have a history of working with Israel, which will be useful experience for Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.

In the West Bank and Gaza, municipal leaders do truly thankless and heroic tasks every day. Let them represent their people.

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Mahmoud Abbas is a moderate leader with a great deal of experience as lead Palestinian negotiator in the Oslo peace process. He should head up any such effort. But, the idea that it would be somehow difficult to put together a delegation of *local* Palestinians to speak with him, and to back up his efforts in coalition, is simply a sham. Local peoples can represent themselves wisely, even in stateless and semi-state contexts. The “problematic” of this situation is a pretty fiction that we tell ourselves to make the effort of a peace process sound endlessly impossible to our academic ears, so trained, as they are, to listen to state-level and international-level analyses.

It is neither impossible nor even unlikely. It is simply a matter of initiative and proper application of *imagination*.

Thus far, the Trump administration appears to have more initiative and proper application of imagination in the context of Palestinian-Israeli peace prospects than did prior U.S. administrations – at least going back to George Bush, Senior. I witnessed the demise of the Oslo process personally, walking through the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem from the Muslim Quarter to the Jewish Quarter to the Christian Quarter several times a week throughout the winter, spring, and summer of 2000. The blossoming of languages and commerce seemed to go together in the days prior to July of that year, and to collapsed almost immediately thereafter to the detriment of all. For an outsider electrified by this thriving city in time of almost-peace – Hebrew, Arabic, and many other languages spoken freely throughout – it seems not just a cruel turn of fate, but a pernicious thrust of childish petulance, ambivalence, and hypocrisy that peace is not enforced for the peace-loving, law-abiding citizens of this great city, and all of the other towns and cities like it in the Israeli and Palestinian contexts. It is not only extremists who make this stalemate happen. It is our own privileged, pedantic arrogance, telling ourselves that it is just impossible to *imagine* the world any other way.

It is my own prediction that the Irish (the quarter of myself that is Irish included) will still be angry and mobilizing about the Irish Potato Famine (mid-19th c.) and Oliver Cromwell (mid-17th c.) long after Israelis and Palestinians live in harmony in a *two-state and bi-national state* (in both cases) context.

Just my two cents.

About the author:

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