

DATELINE MEI

No. 36

Monday, 17 September 2012

The Loneliness of Mahmoud Abbas

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MEI@ND

If Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was enamoured by the warmth, hospitality, assistance and above all the ceremonial guard of honour in New Delhi, none can fault him. Like most leaders in today's world, he is more popular outside than among his constituents and foreign visits and meetings are often a consolation and useful diversion for otherwise bleak ground realities.

While Abbas cannot be held responsible for much of the problems facing the Palestinians today, he symbolizes them. For nearly a century, the Palestinian leadership was anything but united and even Israel could not unite them. What began as a feud between powerful clans slowly transformed into the Palestinian plight becoming a pawn in the inter-Arab clash. Rival leaders began propping various factors within the Palestinian national movement to serve their interests and undermine their rivals. Before long, the Palestinians had more groups and factions serving different rulers and professing differing ideologies. The emergence of Hamas following the 1987 Intifada added a strong ideological resonance to these divisions.

Thus, Tuesday's visit was Abbas's fourth to India since he succeeded Yasser Arafat in January 2005. During the same period, he visited the Gaza Strip in December 2006, his first and last trip as president. Political-ideological differences and security concerns have prevented Abbas from visiting the other part of the Palestinian National Authority that he heads.

While the Israel-imposed siege of the Gaza Strip draws international attention, the internal struggle has rarely been noticed, especially within India. During the past decades, the peace talks in the Middle East took an ominous tone. They did not imply Palestinian deliberations with Israel but internal negotiations for unity. Even powerful countries like Saudi Arabia tried their luck and

burnt their reputation. Within weeks after the February 2007 Mecca Accord facilitated by King Abdullah, Hamas took over the Gaza Strip and since then there is very little interaction between the two parts of Palestine. The sense of alienation and indifference was total. During Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip in late 2008, where over a thousand Gazans were killed, the West Bank remained indifferent and quiet. Thus, a three-state solution (Israel, and two Palestinian states of West Bank and the Gaza Strip) looks more promising than a two-state solution of Israel and Palestine co-existing side by side.

The continuation of the Palestinian divisions could not have come at a worse time. Ever since Tunisian vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi unintentionally started it, the Arab Spring has swept the region. With the sole exception of Qatar, the country with the world's highest per capita income, no country in the region is free from popular protests and unrest. Most Arab rulers are busy fighting for their survival. Popular yearning for change, good governance and political openness is palpable across the region. While the final picture is far from certain, it is obvious that the most dramatic change in the region since the end of World War II is domestic and revolves around institution-building.

For a change, these protests are not directed at Israel or driven by its omissions and commissions. Despite some aberrations like the attack on the Israeli embassy in September last year, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been marginal to the Arab Spring. Moreover, rulers of Syria and to a lesser extent Jordan, are fighting for their survival. Syria is emerging as a second Iraq and sensing the internal situation, a number of Hamas leaders who spent long years in Damascus have moved out to "safer" places. Similarly, a series of concessions offered by King Abdullah have not satisfied the hard-line Islamists.

Things are not better in Egypt either. The victory of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi raised hopes among the Palestinians, especially Hamas. As the ideological offshoot of the former, Hamas was hoping for a complete reversal of Hosni Mubarak's accommodative policy towards Israel. These hopes were dashed within days. The suspected involvement of Palestinians in recent attacks against security personnel forced Morsi to settle for Egyptian security over ideological proximity with Hamas. With the already lawless Sinai Peninsula he does not need another spoiler in the form of tunnels used to smuggle weapons into the Gaza Strip. At least in the Middle East, there is a growing fatigue over the Palestinian issue, especially among the beleaguered Arab rulers.

The international situation is equally gloomy. Most Western countries are struggling to wriggle out of the economic crises and US President Barack Obama is busy with his re-election bid. The region is more concerned about a possible Israeli military strike against the Iranian nuclear programme than about Palestinian statehood. Above all, Abbas and his colleagues have not evolved a mechanism to deal with the only interlocutor they have got: Benjamin Netanyahu.

While Israeli intransigence often gets widespread attention, Palestinians face serious internal challenges. Once he returns to his Ramallah complex, Abbas will continue to look for an answer to the twin problems that have plagued the Palestinians for decades: national unity and political vision.

Note: This article was earlier published in *The Indian Express* (New Delhi) on 13 September 2012. Web link: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-loneliness-of-mahmoud-abbas/1001731/>

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