

Opinion

Decades of Fear, Exhaustion

The 60th anniversary of the creation of the illegitimate regime of Israel provides an appropriate occasion for looking back at the past, if only to assess the situation now and plan for the future.

It has been 60 years of pain, of hopes constantly dashed—and that is only for the Palestinians living in exile. For those in the West Bank, Gaza and Beit-ul-Muqaddas, it has been 60 years of absolute misery—being forced to live, not in the sunlight like other peoples, but in the shadow of constant humiliation, discrimination, injustice and oppression, of homes bulldozed, lands stolen, arbitrary arrest, no work, being forced to live in squalor, sons and daughters slaughtered by Israeli military.

It has been 60 years of fear and exhaustion. No wonder for Palestinians it is the 60th anniversary of "Al-Nakba", the Catastrophe. Nor is there any sign of the catastrophic consequences ending. Indeed, for the Palestinians in Gaza, things have never been worse. Despite the Bush administration's prediction of a settlement by the end of the year, the so-called road map is kept locked away by the Israelis. Indeed, the way things are going, with the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert under investigation by the police, there may not even be an Israeli government to negotiate with at the end of next week.

Britain's and France's involvement—the Balfour Declaration, the Sykes-Picot Agreement—and those also of the US, the UN and the then Soviet Union at the time are well-documented and well-known. The USSR was initially a wholehearted supporter of Israel and rushed to recognize it in the hope that it would become a close ally. Well-documented and well-known too is Britain's and France's subsequent alliance with Israel which they saw as a strategic ally in their bid to the doomed effort to maintain their continued colonial presence in most of the Arab world. It was an alliance that saw France become the Israelis' initial military backer, providing them with arms and planes and the means to go nuclear with the construction of the Dimona reactor; at its worst, it saw all three in military action together in 1956 in the hope of doing to Nasser what the Americans finally did to Saddam Hussein in 2004: topple him.

The past cannot be unmade. It is what happens now that is important. The Palestinians do not expect the British or the French to undo the great wrong they wrought all those years ago. The only reason there are expectations of the Americans, and resentment when they do not deliver, is that they have the power to force change, to end the oppression and bring a new Palestine into being.

As for Israel, it has never been more unsure of itself. It has lost so many of its friends by its oppressive policies, there is deep conflict between secularists and Jewish fundamentalists and a paralysis as to how to deal with the Palestinians and its neighbors. It resembles a society slowly coming apart at the seams. Sixty years on, it is a regime heading nowhere.

Arab News

Confusion Over Al-Qaeda Leader's Arrest in Iraq

Iraqi police commandos captured the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq in a raid in the northern city of Mosul, Iraqi officials said Thursday, in what could mark a significant blow to the insurgency in its last urban stronghold.

However, the US military on Friday said there were "no operational reports" to confirm the capture of the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq as stated by Iraqi officials, adding the capture of another insurgent might have caused confusion, AFP reported.

Iraqi Defense Ministry spokesman Mohammed Al-Askari said the arrest of Abu Ayyub Al-Masri, also known as Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir, was reported by the Iraqi commander in Mosul, where insurgents have sought to establish a foothold after being widely uprooted from Baghdad and surrounding areas last year.

> Sadrists Killed

Meanwhile, the US military on Friday said US soldiers killed six fighters, who attacked forces with shoulder fired rockets and small arms, in several clashes in Sadr City on Thursday.

Thousands of civilians already have fled their homes in Sadr City which is home to nearly 40 percent of Baghdad's population.

Aid groups say some areas are desperately short of food and medicine after seven weeks of street battles and US strikes on civilians. In other news, a rocket attack on a coalition military base in Basra killed two civilian contractors Friday, while a retaliatory strike and separate attacks elsewhere in Iraq killed 23 others, officials said.

> Sexual Abuse in British Embassy

Meanwhile, an influential committee of British MPs is investigating allegations of sexual harassment and abuse in the British Embassy in Baghdad. The Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee has written to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to ask for a full explanation of what happened at the embassy.

An Iraqi cleaner and two cooks have alleged that a culture of sexual harassment, abuse and bullying exists at the embassy, according to testimony taken by officials last June and seen by The Times. The cleaner said that a British contractor with KBR, the company hired to maintain the embassy's premises, offered double her daily pay if she would stay the night with him. When she refused, she said, her pay was cut and she was later dismissed.

Arab League: Dialogue Better Than Sanctions

Arab League's deputy secretary-general said on Thursday that constructive dialogue was a better way of resolving US differences with Syria than the extension of sanctions announced by Washington.

The Arab League prefers "resolving differences between Syria and the United States through the American administration's opening of a constructive dialogue with Damascus," Ahmed ben Helli told journalists, AFP reported.

US President George W. Bush said on Wednesday that he was extending sanctions against Syria following Washington's charge that Damascus had been building a nuclear reactor with North Korea's help.

"I took these actions to deal with the unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and economy of the United States constituted by the actions of the Government of Syria," Bush said in the order.

Bush accused Syria of "supporting terrorism ... pursuing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs including the recent revelation of illicit nuclear cooperation with North Korea."

Syria said the US accusations were as bogus as American claims that Saddam Hussein's regime had weapons of mass destruction in 2003.

Ben Helli said "Arab League summits, including the one (held in March) in Damascus, call in their resolutions for dialogue and diplomacy to take precedence as a means of resolving differences between countries and of reaching understanding."

News Diary

SUNDAY, MAY 11



■ SERBIA - Parliamentary and local elections.



■ NIIGATA, Japan - G8 labor ministers meeting (till May 13).

Hezbollah Controls W. Beirut



➤ Smoke billows from burning tires as a Lebanese boy flashes the victory sign at a blocked road leading to Rafiq Hariri International Airport in Beirut.

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> Pro-Gov't Media Shut Down

Hezbollah's power was demonstrated dramatically Friday morning when it forced the TV station "Future TV" affiliated to the party of Lebanon's top Sunni lawmaker, Hariri, off the air. Gunmen also set the offices of the party's newspaper, Al-Mustaqbal, on fire in the coastal neighborhood of Ramlet el-Bayda.

Hariri later went on television urging Hezbollah to pull its fighters back and "save Lebanon from hell." He proposed a compromise that would involve the army, one of the sole national institutions respected by Lebanon's long deadlocked factions.

But Hezbollah and its allies swiftly rejected the offer, AFP reported.

Also, supporters of the Hezbollah kept the road to the country's only airport blocked, effectively closing the airport for a second straight day.

> Foreign Mediation

Saudi Arabia led calls on Friday for an urgent meeting of Arab foreign ministers to try to end the crisis in Lebanon as scores of foreign nationals fled the fighting in Beirut.

"The kingdom of Saudi Arabia supports holding an urgent and extraordinary meeting of the Arab League ministerial council in Cairo to discuss the Lebanese crisis and its fallout," a foreign ministry official was quoted by the state SPA news

agency as saying.

Saudi Arabia also reportedly called on Siniora government to step down to ease the tension.

Arab League Chief Amr Mussa cut short a trip to the United States and returned to Cairo to join efforts to try to resolve the conflict which an Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesman said could be held in two days. Egypt and Jordan voiced support for an Arab meeting.

The UN Security Council also urged on Thursday rival parties to stop the violence, immediately reopen all roads, and resolve the country's problems through peaceful dialogue.

> Declaration of War

Earlier on Thursday, Hezbollah's leader warned any crack-down by the government would be tantamount to a "declaration of war".

Sayed Hassan Nasrollah's comments were broadcast on television, as street clashes in Lebanon between government loyalists and opposition supporters entered a second day.

He said the crisis in Lebanon had "entered a new phase". Nasrollah insisted that Hezbollah's telephone network, was an "essential tool for managing combat" and stressed its importance to Hezbollah in its role as a "resistance movement".

"We don't have the technologies that the Americans and Israelis have," he said, calling the government's move "a declaration of war and the launching of war by the government ... for the benefit of America and Israel".