

Palestine needs justice, not bombs

by Chibli Mallat

Here are some reflections originally triggered by Eugene Rogan's article on this page last Monday. Their urgency has increased with the downhill slope since that sole ray of light in a dark week.

How right was Dr Rogan in his call for a scientific and exhaustive mapping out of Palestinian original rights in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine. How right he was to highlight the importance of international law as a yardstick and guide.

As Lenin once said, only the truth is revolutionary. All the Islamic militants of the world can shout their rancour against Israel, as did the Nasserites for decades, and occasionally plant a bomb at a crowded station, the empty equivalent to yesterday's plane hijackings. Such hysterics will achieve not one inch of progress.

Yet again, the momentum of defeat which has been surrounding Benjamin Netanyahu for a while is being deflected by a dynamic of created facts on the ground, and by the sporadic and ineffective acts of violence on the street. As usual, the Arab leaders are throwing their hands up in the air, leaving for street emotions to express their impotence, in one miserable way after the other.

That was the case of the bombs of Hamas last year which brought Mr Netanyahu to power. The bombings last week and the killing of teenage school girls by 'deranged' or disaffected soldiers are exactly what the beleaguered Israeli prime minister wants - ineffective and wanton acts of terror which are to the sole political benefit of his extremist agenda.

So while we in the Arab world go back to our empty rhetoric and lamentation over lost rights, Netanyahu and his lot get away with murder and with their bulldozing in east Jerusalem - building on marginal terror on the streets of Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem to deflect attention from their illegal policies.

It is sufficient to watch his smug contentedness on American television interviews in recent days - in contrast to his reserved and embattled unease only a week earlier - to

appreciate how well those pointless attacks serve him, and how he is using them to regain ground he had previously lost through nine months of mismanagement.

Frustrations are running understandably high, but anger is not sufficient: the arguments of despair will not carry us very far. The situation of the Arab world, on the issue of Palestine, seems to have been desperate since the 1930s.

While a few interludes - such as the first week of the October war, and the early days of the intifada - have briefly allowed us to recover some lost ground, the only tangible progress ever made was at Oslo and in the treaties of Camp David and Araba.

It was on these occasions, and on these

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occasions alone, when Israel surrendered some land it had conquered by force.

So what can be done? For a long time, Edward Said has been asking for some serious register inside the West Bank, which would map out in an exhaustive manner, past and existing rights over the territories.

As a matter of record, the first time the Arabs - and the Palestinians in particular - started coming to their collective senses was when the studies of Meron Benvenisti on the West Bank and on Gaza started to show, back in the early 1980s, the extent of created facts in the shape of hundreds of Jewish settlements.

At the time, most of the settlements were still a Labour legacy, and Labour was carefully protecting its 'benign' occupation image. After Benvenisti's figures in the West Bank Data Project, no one could look away any more from the problems in the Territories.

The extent of this damage was indeed what, behind the empty rhetoric the Arab govern-

ments had been, in an ostrich-like manner refusing to face - preferring to repeat the incantation, which one can still hear now, that "time is to our advantage".

In truth, neither our grandparents, nor our parents, nor ourselves have seen even a modicum of reality in this argument. Time has not been to our advantage. Quite the contrary. Nor will the replacement of 'Arab' by 'Islamic' provide the magic of 'our' historic victory over Israel over time.

So instead of joining the chorus of the sad and the impotent - and impotence is sadly expressed when human beings, including the 'martyrs' themselves, are sacrificed in wanton actions - perhaps we Arabs could be working to produce a scientific register: in Lebanon, a register for our lands in the south, or for the Litani aquifer, or for the displaced over the years as well as those still living under occupation.

Similarly, for Palestine, it is time to give the Palestinians of the diaspora, including those in Lebanon, a special voice, so that theirs (and ours) can be heard across the table, in an organised manner, when talks about the refugees finally open.

There is homework to be done in Palestine, as Eugene Rogan suggested, and there is homework too to be done in Lebanon and elsewhere.

Our overall approach must be routed in international law and its ethic of justice. Dr Rogan's point must nonetheless be emphasised time and again. There is no gainsaying how limited the rule of international law appears, especially in the Middle East, but it has stood the Syrian government well through the years.

This is a weapon which cannot be neglected, and it has helped the Arabs well through UN resolutions 242 and 338, which have rooted in everyone's mind "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force". It is on this ground that we must place our feet.

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