



## Is a peaceful solution to the Palestinian question possible at last?

As moderate forces from within Hamas attempt to bring change to the movement, Western decision-makers are in peril of contributing to self-fulfilling prophecies by inadvertently supporting radical forces within Hamas. It is the radicals who thrive under the current policy of isolationism.

By Michael Bröning

I am neither Palestinian nor Israeli. Yet, I have long felt passionately about the Middle East and the consequences that decades of conflict have inflicted on Palestinians and Israelis alike.

My introduction to the region began at a (perhaps) unlikely place: in the 1990s, an Israeli collective community north of the Negev desert welcomed me for a year and a half of joint work and study. The place had been founded by survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. As a young German, it was a deeply moving and challenging experience. Since those days, 15 years have passed. For 15 years, a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict has remained elusive. As the cautious optimism of the early years of the Oslo peace process gradually waned, checkpoints, roadblocks, and Israeli settlements spread in the West Bank and now control more than 40 percent of the territory earmarked for a Palestinian state.

Having returned to the region in 2005 as a representative of a German political foundation, first in Jordan and later in East Jerusalem, I have observed these developments and have witnessed conflict, desperation and hope. My analysis of current trends and developments is captured in the book on *The Politics of Change in Palestine*. While the book does not

attempt to offer a comprehensive study of decades of conflict, it aims to shed light on often overlooked parameters of Middle East peace-making.

My first observation after my return to the region was an unprecedented shift to the right of the political spectrum in Israel. The once powerful Israeli left has today all but disappeared. The public is concerned with rising prices and housing shortages. At the same time, the Palestinian issue is widely ignored. Here, uncompromising right-wing decision makers dominate political institutions and public debates. This has resulted in what at best could be described as reluctance to finding a just solution to the conflict. Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to the US Congress in May is only one example of this. Greeted with standing ovations, the Prime Minister outlined a vision that for Palestinians spelled an endless series of rejections. 'No' to a stop of Israeli settlement expansions, 'No' to negotiations about Palestinian refugees, and 'No' to a shared Jerusalem as a capital of two nations.

My second observation focused on Palestinians. Initially, I suspected that a hardening of stances on one side would also result in radicalisation on the other side. Contrary to these expectations, I found that nothing could be farther from the truth. In the last years, positive and constructive change has come to different levels of the Palestinian polity, be it in political movements, in state-building efforts of the Palestinian Authority or in attempts to struggle for self-determination by means of non-violence.

The third and final observation is that these changes have largely gone unnoticed. Notable segments of the Western public are convinced that peace-willing Israelis simply do not have "a partner for peace" on the Palestinian side, as Israeli Minister of Defence Ehud Barak has repeatedly claimed. This last observation was the reason for writing this book.

One of the most important current trends of change in Palestine is the programmatic re-invention of the Hamas movement – the "Palestinian version of Al Qaeda", as Netanyahu put it in Washington. True, Hamas is hardly a beacon of democratic principles. The movement has traditionally been characterised on the grounds of the Hamas Charter, a grotesquely anti-Semitic pamphlet from 1988. However, the Charter has long ceased to have any significance for Hamas since it has effectively been replaced by more pragmatic policy documents. While adhering ideologically to the abstract objective of "liberating all of Palestine", Hamas has initiated an unprecedented programmatic transformation. Hamas leaders from both Gaza and Damascus have by now openly called for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders and have effectively accepted a two-state solution.

Unfortunately, this change has been largely ignored. As moderate forces from within Hamas attempt to bring change to the movement, Western decision-makers are in peril of contributing to self-fulfilling prophecies by inadvertently supporting radical forces within Hamas. It is the radicals who thrive under the current policy of isolationism.

Change has also come to the secular Fatah-party of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. In August 2009, Fatah surprised observers by holding its "Sixth General Conference". Full sixteen years overdue, the party convention committed Fatah to non-violent resistance, revived



party institutions and elected a new leadership. While by no means a fully functioning political party yet, Fatah bolstered forces that are in favor of a negotiated solution to the conflict.

Also, the Palestinian Authority that governs parts of the West Bank and Gaza has undergone an untold revolution. Breaking with the previous dogma of "liberation before state-building", Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and President Mahmoud Abbas have since 2009 implemented a comprehensive plan of state-building. Fighting nepotism and corruption is attempted via unprecedented institutional reform. These policies are supplemented by efforts to lobby internationally for the recognition

of a Palestinian state. In the spring of 2011, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank pointed out that Palestinian institutions are now "ready for statehood". In September, the Palestinian leadership attempted to cash in on these successes by bidding for an independent state at the United Nations.

While change has occurred at key institutions of Palestinian political life, a fourth revolutionary development has emerged largely outside of formal organisations: A general shift away of Palestinian activists from violent struggle and terrorism to non-violent resistance. While non-violence has never been as sporadic in Palestinian politics as it has been absent in Western (and Israeli) news coverage, the concept has by now been embraced by all relevant political institutions. While it is unclear, whether this trend will prove irrevocable and sustainable, it has the potential to fundamentally alter the equation of confrontation last but not least in terms of global public support for Palestinian demands. After all, legitimate claims have often been compromised by illegitimate forms of resistance which have not only created human suffering amongst civilians – Israeli and Palestinian – but have also played into the hands of hard-line decision-makers.

The book discusses these *Politics of Change* against the background of key Western demands. In his June 2009 speech to the Muslim world in Cairo, US President Obama called on Palestinians to "abandon violence," "to focus on what they can build" and "to develop their capacity to govern, with institutions that serve the needs of their people." Taking stock of political developments in Palestine, it seems that the Palestinians have fulfilled these calls for constructive governance and non-violence to a very large extent. As Palestinians demonstrate a readiness for the two-state solution, only one question remains: Will Israel and the West seize this chance? An accurate assessment of current developments on the ground will be a starting point. It is hoped that this book will be understood as a modest contribution to such an endeavour. ■