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On the Problems of Arab Identity: The example of Durban

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I would like to address the problems of Arab identity as a secular identity that has a latent power of dynamism, through self-criticism and its ability to create a dialogue with the Other in order to encourage the creation of universal messages that can find broad global alliances. The example that I have chosen to demonstrate this problem is our work as activists at the Durban Conference and the strategies adopted there.

I will begin with a quotation from Adonis, the Arab Syrian poet: “We, in Arab society, and in the world of Islamic culture, still think and act according to a concept which says that an identity is predetermined, and is more like a stone [as in the stone of a fruit], while individuals are its fruit or outward manifestations, and that their relation to it is like the relation between a branch and its root. But identity requires one to question the Self, and to question the Other, because the Self cannot truly be itself without the Other.”

In Durban, we were part of the Arab group. During the first week, we worked within the forum of NGOs and civil society organizations. The governmental conference was in the second week. The Arab group managed to get everything it asked for and suggested included in both the NGO forum and the final document it issued. It also succeeded to make the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a central issue. During the first week, there was a mass demonstration that the Arab-Islamic group turned into a demonstration mainly in support of the Palestinian cause. The wording and articles in the first document (the NGO document) went so far as to describe Israel and the Palestinian case as a case of “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing,” Zionism as a racist movement, Israel as the last apartheid regime in the world, etc. Thus the media was drawn to the Palestinian issue to the point that the Palestinian cause became the main issue at Durban. In the second week, in the governmental document, there was serious back-tracking from the first document to the extent that there was no condemnation of Israel’s policy, even on the issue of the Occupation, or any demand for the resolutions of the UN itself concerning the Occupation to be implemented. At the start of the second week, the United States and Israel announced the withdrawal of their delegations from the conference and the Europeans threatened to do the same. Mary Robinson criticized the NGO document and initially refused to accept a copy of it.

The battle during the second week revolved around the question of who would triumph: the North or the South. There was no middle way. Things were unequivocal and clear-cut. However, we Palestinians and Arabs felt that we had achieved a total victory over the course of the two weeks. In the first week, we felt victorious because the document embodied the Arab demands, and in the second week because there was a fierce debate about the first week. It was enough that the Palestinian issue had become the focal point of the conference to give us the “sense of victory,” even though the second (governmental) document was very different from the first. I stress this point because, despite the criticism that I will address, there is no doubt that the Arab activists did serious work at Durban that they can be proud of.

But was it really a victory for the Palestinian cause in presenting itself as a just cause internationally? In order to answer this question we should first define what we mean by a

“victory for a just cause.” In my opinion, victory for a just cause for humanity depends on the extent to which this cause is able to deliver a human-political message that gains broad support and solidarity, and to present a challenge within the international community by posing serious questions of a human-universal nature. In other words, to what extent it moves beyond existing identities to create a new kind of identity, an identity that transcends geographical, cultural, religious, and regional differences, allowing for the emergence of a dynamic, constantly shifting identity that is in contact with the Other, rather than negating it, and adopts a new and important message.

In the Palestinian case, we returned from Durban the same as we went there. Some colleagues would argue that we achieved a major victory in Durban because we received wide African-Asian support. But we forgot that the Arabs always had this support, and it was nothing new. Or more precisely, we did not return the same as we went, but in the words of Mahmoud Darwish, “We returned to our tomorrow incomplete.” We failed to take advantage of the conference because we did not send out with a political message capable of drawing new support against the Occupation. We did not have a new strategy for breaking new ground. We did not even manage to open a dialogue over our cause with the Other and with international human rights organizations. Instead, things were divided between “us” and “them,” and those who were “with us” or “against us.” We did not even succeed to recruit those friends who found themselves on the other side. But we rejoiced whenever we saw an African group shouting out like us in Arabic, “We will sacrifice our blood and soul for you, Al-Aqsa.” We got excited whenever Africans tore down the Jewish-Israeli positions that dared to hoist up the Israeli flag, shouting with one voice – but this time not in our own language – “Pansy Israel Pansy” and “Pansy Sharon.”

There were obviously external factors that helped to bring about this outcome, like the eternal US bias towards Israel’s policy and the ability of the US to sway the positions of the European states. However, I would also like to refer to the subjective factors, not external factors, despite their significance. The main subjective factor relates to the Arab identity crisis. We have chosen an identity for ourselves that takes refuge in our roots and negates the Other. The self within it, as Adonis describes it, resembles the relation between branch and root. In other words, the self was cancelled and negated and came to resemble all the branches of the root. It was not creative, critical or dynamic, and hence there was no more looking inward and we went out without creating an internal dynamic with which to strengthen the external message. We did not talk to or about minority groups. We did not enter into a dialogue with the women’s and feminist organizations. We did not walk in solidarity with the other oppressed peoples. We were concerned with nothing other than our own presence, but as a unified presence without contradictions. And so it was easy for us to find an Islamic alliance. If we were to go back to the branches of the root, then Islam is the root. So if it was a question of abandoning the self in return for a broad alliance with the Muslims, then unequivocal consensus was preferable to any other proposition. And so we became less Arab and more Muslim. Our discourse became radically fundamental, rejectionist and cohesive, and prevented anyone from entering into it or departing from it. Friendly human rights organizations against the Occupation, such as Amnesty International, were not able to join our unified, radical camp because they could not find common ground with this identity. Conversely, it was difficult to leave this camp because of the strength of its cohesion. We were not able to talk about ourselves as Palestinian citizens of Israel facing racial discrimination because such a discourse is regarded as an essentially civil discourse, while the conflict was not civil in nature but radical and existential. And so we nullified ourselves, our self, our uniqueness, in order to be a part of the consensus and the Islamic grouping.

And when the discourse became radical-Islamic, we lost our ability as human rights organizations to be professional or political, or both. We were not professional because we only succeeded to convince the radicals among us that Israel is adopting a policy of “genocide”, because our situation is not like that in Rwanda, for example. We did not convince anyone but the extremists among us that the Holocaust was also a Palestinian Holocaust, because Auschwitz is not like Ramallah. Here, we lost ourselves and the support of the international human rights organizations that view professionalism and the adherence to human rights language as a firm basis for cooperation and solidarity. We were not even politicians because we chose a dead end. Politics is the art of analyzing the data and selecting one of the given choices, or even creating a choice. At Durban, we created an impossible choice. Radicalism was not content merely to describe Israel as a racist state, but went to the roots, and therefore our main slogan was “Zionism = Racism = Apartheid.” We made the extremist choice and restored a formula that we could not find any allies for except our Muslim allies.

Had we chosen the slogan “Stop the Israeli Occupation and Racism against Palestinian Citizens”, we would have found many human rights organizations to support us. Amnesty, for example, bravely wrote that the definition of Israel as Jewish state is a racial definition, and it would have been possible to recruit Amnesty and other human rights organizations to our cause. But the slogan that was chosen was alien to these organizations. When we lost the power to convince on a universal and political basis, it was easy for those countries that are supportive but critical of Israel’s policy, to seize the opportunity to convince other governments to adopt a document that is devoid of criticism or innovation, an extremely conservative document. Once we became radical, it was easy for the European states to appeal to “rationalism”, and in the absence of a rallying slogan or discourse, Western “rationalism” prevailed, defeating “radicalism” and emotionalism. And thus the North prevailed over the South.

Of course, I am not downplaying the importance of the Arab-Islamic alliance or the Africans and Asians. The crisis was not a result of this important alliance, but rather of the Arab identity, which did not manage to be critical. Instead, it opted to become a radical identity that did not allow the Other or the North to penetrate it. And when our side was free of contradictions or disagreement, it was easy for the North as a whole to see itself as one camp against the South.

Obviously, had we adopted another discourse we would have taken a different course. The slogan “Stop the Israeli Occupation and Racism against Palestinian Citizens” would have put Israel’s Occupation and racial discrimination on center-stage. Conversely, it would have been possible to forge new alliances and gain broad-based international support, including from international human rights organizations. It would also have been possible to challenge the supporters of Israel’s policy including the United States and others. Such a discourse, had we adopted it, would have made the withdrawal of the US delegation more embarrassing for it, and the governmental document would have been to the left of this discourse and not to the right. We would have given a powerful and persuasive ability to others to call for “An end to the last Occupation in the world”, or “An end to the last form of colonial occupation.” However, none of this happened. Durban was, though, an important experience nonetheless.

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