

# **REDIFINING THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE**

## **by Amir Taheri Gulf News August 23, 2006**

While Iran and Hezbollah celebrate their "strategic divine victory", the real losers of the Lebanon war may be the Palestinians.

The war pushed the Palestinian issue into the background. With media spotlight shifted to Lebanon, the conflict in Gaza and the West Bank dropped out of headlines.

The narrative woven by Iran and Hezbollah around the Lebanon war is designed to achieve three goals:

-To turn Palestine from a political issue into a messianic cause. This means that Palestine is no longer about such issues as statehood, boundaries, security and diplomatic recognition.

-The redefined Palestinian cause is about "wiping the Jewish stain of shame" off the map as a prelude to driving the US and its allies out of the Middle East.

-To make the redefined Palestinian cause into a small part of a much bigger cause: that of challenging the global domination of the "infidel" led by the United States and creating an Islamic world order.

-To transfer control of the Palestinian cause to "the Ummah". This means that no Palestinian leadership, not even Hamas, has the right to make a deal with Israel without the consent of whoever happens to lead the Ummah at any given time. (Currently, Iran and Hezbollah claim leadership.)

If this narrative succeeds, the achievements of three decades of diplomacy, which culminated in almost universal consensus over a two-state solution, could be in jeopardy.

Iran has always opposed the two-state solution. It proposes a "one-state" solution that envisages the reunification of the whole of Palestine as put under the United Nations mandate after the Second World War and the return of all Palestinian refugees.

In such a "greater Palestine", Jews would become a minority in a majority Arab state. The hope is that most Jews would then emigrate rather than live under Arab-Islamic rule.

The one-state solution was backed by all Arab states and a majority of Muslim countries, until 1979 when Egypt made peace with Israel. In 1994, the Palestine Liberation Organisation, led by Yasser Arafat, endorsed the "two-state" formula.

By the mid-1990s, for a majority of Arabs and Muslims, Palestine was no longer a cause but a political issue to be resolved through negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The only Arab country to continue to defend the "one-state" policy was Libya. In 2003, the "two-state" formula received a boost when President George W. Bush committed the US to its implementation.

Some Palestinian radicals may be happy that the "two-state" formula is challenged by Iran and its allies, including Syria, Hezbollah and parts of the Hamas leadership. However, the truth is that, whenever Palestine became a cause exploited by others for ulterior motives, Palestinians ended up as losers.

In 1948, the Arab League turned Palestine into a cause and prevented its solution as a political problem. It rejected the partition proposed by the UN, provoked a war that it

lost and then did everything to prevent the settlement of the refugees.

The Second World War produced more than 50 million refugees in some 60 countries across the globe. By the mid-1950s, all had been resettled all except the 450,000 Palestinians that the Arab League insisted on maintaining in camps as the living symbol of its "cause".

After the 1952 coup d'etat in Egypt, it was the turn of Pan-Arab nationalists to seize control of the Palestinian "cause".

The late Jamal Abdul Nasser's pan-Arab ideology was aimed at creating a single state to encompass all Arabs. To pan-Arabs, the idea of a narrow Palestinian nationalism was abhorrent. During the Cold War, the Soviet-bloc also made use of Palestine as a cause.

Today, it is the turn of pan-Islamists.

They dream of a universal Islamic state, either under Iranian Shiite leadership, as is the case with Hezbollah, or under the leadership of Salafi movements. In their vision, there can be no distinct Palestinian identity, let alone Palestinian nationalism.

Mohammad Khatami, the former president of Iran, has dismissed nationalism as an illegitimate child of the European Enlightenment that, he believes, led to colonialism, imperialism and world wars.

Thus, the idea of a nation-state of Palestine is a western concoction, alien to Islam. Even the "one-state" formula, the fusion of Israel and Palestine, is only an intermediate step. Such a state would eventually be absorbed into the single universal Islamic domain Dar Al Islam.

The Palestinians, including Hamas leaders, need to do some hard thinking. Do they want their problem to be transformed into a messianic cause again and geared to larger strategies in the shaping of which they have no part?

As a problem, Palestine could be resolved through political, diplomatic and economic means. As a cause, however, Palestine could be an excuse for the "clash of civilisations".

The Palestinians must insist that while Iran has the right to pursue its strategies, it has no right to annex Palestine as part of a "bigger cause".

What the Palestinians urgently need is a state of their own based on their national identity.

Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is wrong in putting his predecessor Ariel Sharon's policy of unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank on hold.

For the two-state formula to work it is imperative for Israel to decide exactly where it wants its frontiers to be drawn. Once it is clear where Israel wants to be, it would be possible to discuss where Palestine could be as a state.

One of Iran's goals in the Lebanon war was to undermine the two-state formula and advance its one-state alternative. By freezing the two-state formula, Olmert may be playing into Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's hands.