

What is Mahmoud Abbas waiting for?

It appears clear to all but the Palestinian president that resistance, not supine collaboration, is the only strategic option, writes **Ghada Karmi***

With the appalling death toll in Gaza, relentless assaults on the West Bank (in which negotiations chief Ahmed Qurei's own bodyguard was killed), and Israel's blatant settlement expansion, one must wonder what Israeli atrocity, if any, would make the Palestinian president change course. True, last week he raised with his colleagues the possibility of suspending peace talks with Israel if it persisted in its assaults, but he has not acted. Why not?

Surely Gaza's plight should have been enough to outrage him, as it has done legions of people across the globe. The crowning act in a catalogue of murders took place on 15 January when Israeli tanks and helicopters invaded the Zaytoun district of Gaza, killing 19 people and wounding 50 in just 24 hours. The following day, Israel's army killed another three Gazans, and the day after it bombed the Gaza Interior Ministry, killing one woman and wounding 46 others. Many more will die after this week's power shutdown across 80 per cent of the Strip.

The number of dead in Gaza has been rising steadily for months. Last November 36 Gazans were killed. In December this figure jumped to 60, and in the first two weeks of January 55 have so far died. Last week, Ehud Barak, Israel's defence minister, announced the closure of all crossings into Gaza, cutting off the pathetically small amount of food, medicine and other essentials that had been entering the Strip. What was already a humanitarian crisis in Gaza following Hamas's election to office in 2006 is now likely to become a full-blown disaster. A whole generation of Gaza's resistance leaders has already been wiped out by Israeli targeted assassinations. Undeterred by legality or consequences, Israel's prime minister, Ehud Olmert, pledged to increase the attacks until "the firing of rockets stops", but this is not the main objective. Israel's actions clearly show it aims to destroy Gaza, economically and structurally, and annihilate its every means of resistance.

Nor has the West Bank, supposedly Abbas's domain, been spared. The Israeli army has repeatedly invaded towns and villages there, carrying off scores of Palestinians in the process and destroying acres of cultivated land. In one such operation in Nablus on 5 January, 23 people were seized, including several Fatah members. This elicited a rebuke from Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, which changed nothing. Meanwhile, Israel announced it would build 1,000 new homes to expand the Har Homa settlement currently choking Bethlehem, and swell the already bloated Maale Adumim settlement in East Jerusalem. Another settlement sprang up in the Ras district of Hebron, linking Kriyat Arba and Tel Rumeida, the most intolerable settlements for Palestinians to bear. In addition, and despite Israeli undertakings to the contrary, outposts, illegal even under Israeli law, still proliferate across the West Bank.

Given such ample proof of Israeli ill intent, it is legitimate to ask why the Palestinian Authority (PA) does not halt this charade, call an end to a peace process conducted on such terms, refuse to lead an authority that has neither power nor resources, and whose main function, no matter what its members imagine, is to safeguard the Zionist project. A conviction is growing in some Palestinian circles that the PA should terminate negotiations with Israel and transform itself from the present failed organisation, supine before Israeli and Western diktat, into a leadership body of a people under occupation.

There is much merit in such a course. It calls Israel's bluff in spinning out the peace process interminably while it consolidates its grip on Palestinian land; it frustrates Western attempts to protect Israel, by way of bribing the Palestinians -- to the tune of over \$7 billion -- into settling for a fraction of their legitimate rights; and it incidentally helps to improve the PA leadership's image, now widely

regarded as quislings and Western puppets. But most importantly, it re-establishes reality for the Palestinians that there is no state-in-being; that they are an occupied people who must fight by every means for their freedom. And to this end, they must set aside internecine enmity and factionalism.

None of it will happen, however. Despite the manifest failure of the "peace process" to date and Israel's increasing gains at Palestinian expense, Abbas and his colleagues want to continue with the process. Though Arafat was a case apart, it is the same error he made over Oslo and set the pattern for subsequent Palestinian strategy. Simply put, this regards Palestinians as too weak to impose any terms against the might of Israel, America and Europe. So they can only hope to salvage something from this line-up by acquiescing to the demands of these powers, even at the expense of Palestinian rights -- so the theory goes. Abbas has added his own ingredient to this mixture by rejecting all forms of armed resistance, believing that Palestinian passivity will succeed better than force. Security collaboration with Israel (a euphemism for thwarting Palestinian resistance), the inability to defend even PA officials and Fatah members against Israeli assaults, helplessness in the face of Israel's violations of all agreements, and current paralysis over the horrors unfolding in Gaza are all consequences of this strategy.

Clearly the strategy has failed. No amount of collaboration, passivity and obedience to the other side has worked. The Palestinian situation is far worse today than in 1993, and a different approach is needed. The Palestinians may be weak, but they have one major strength: the power to say "No". Imagine if they now refused to negotiate with Israel on current terms, dismantled the PA as the scapegoat and whipping boy for Israeli occupation it has become, and established a leadership of resistance that refused to cooperate while under occupation. Such a move would wreck the whole construct so carefully designed by Israel and its allies *and whose pivot is Palestinian acquiescence*. President Bush would have no trophy to save him from total ignominy; Israel would face a rebellious Palestinian population without leaders to do its dirty work; and Europe would have to confront its own ignoble complicity with the occupation by its funding of it. Above all, Palestinians would regain their self-respect and their right to resist, and their cause would once again unite the Arab world against its enemies. Fear of such an outcome, disastrous to Israel and its allies, is the Palestinian trump card, if they care to use it.

* *The writer is author of Married to Another Man: Israel's dilemma in Palestine*