

Assessment of the Middle East and North Africa situations and futures

Interview with Abdel Bari Atwan, American Herald Tribune, 19 March 2019

Mohsen Abdelmoumen: What is your analysis of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Gaza?

Abdel Bari Atwan: The Palestinian political scene is in a state of paralysis, which is a direct consequence of the disastrous Oslo process. Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is not in good health, so the stage is now set for the post-Abu Mazen period. But nobody has a roadmap for where to go. Abu Mazen is the last of the founding fathers, and his departure will cause the Fateh movement to fragment and lose influence, as happened to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) after the death of George Habash. So chaos and confusion prevail. I wouldn't be surprised if people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip draw inspiration from the demonstrations in Sudan and Algeria.

What about the Palestinians' right of return to their lands stolen since 1948 and the deal of the century that removes the Palestinian right of return? Has the deal of the century been abandoned or is it still valid?

The 'Deal of the Century' cannot be pulled off. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi consigned it to an early death, as it plunged the deal's broker into crisis. No Palestinian could accept it anyway. The Palestinian Revolution began in the refugee camps. It was all about the right of return. To abandon it would be to abandon the Palestinian cause. That right and others cannot be bought off with promises of investment or improved economic conditions, as the deal proposes. Palestine is not Northern Ireland.

How do you explain that at the moment when in Europe and in the USA, we see rising a great critical movement of Israel, like the BDS which advocate different forms of boycott, Arab countries are normalizing their relations with the Zionist and criminal entity of Israel?

These moves towards normalization are not too worrying, as they are confined to the governments and do not extend to the peoples. The peoples reject normalization with Israel, as the cases of Jordan and Egypt show. It's the same in every other Arab country. Israel is alarmed by BDS and how it may develop in future. This explains its frenetic efforts to brand all criticism and opposition anywhere in the world as anti-Semitic: it fears to become a pariah state and the only way it can avoid that is to criminalize and close down exposure and discussion of its behavior.

What is your reading of the Warsaw conference of February 13 and 14, when we saw the alliance between Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, etc. and the Zionist and criminal entity Israel against Iran?

The Warsaw Conference was a one-man show, starring Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It was staged for his benefit, but I believe it was a failure. Its original purpose was to launch a new US-led alliance -- a so-called 'Arab Nato' -- that would act as the spearhead of an international coalition against Iran and include Israel as a member, probably informally at first. But the Gulf States that the US is trying to turn into allies of Israel are not representative

of the Arab world as a whole. They account for less than 5% of the Arab population, and their own peoples overwhelmingly reject normalization with Israel. In recent years these states have been able to play a dominant role in the Arab world due to their oil wealth and their manipulation of political Islam. But political Islam has been changing in nature, and the importance of oil in the global energy picture has been declining, so their 'golden age' is drawing to a close.

How did we get to the fact that some Arab countries come to betray and sell themselves to the Zionist and criminal entity of Israel?

It's not new, and mainly it's a matter of perceived self-preservation. Regimes see the goodwill of the US as vital, and Israel as the key to the US' heart. They talk about a shared interest in confronting Iran but that shouldn't be taken at face value. Israel talks up the Iranian threat as a way of trying to sideline the Palestinian cause, and the Gulf States do the same to bolster the rule of their regimes. This also entails the poisonous fuelling of Sunni-Shii sectarianism.

I did an investigation a few years ago about the activities of the Israeli lobby in Congo. What is your reading of Israel's strategic redeployment in Africa?

Africa is currently an arena of rivalry for influence and competing interests involving many countries – the US, China, Turkey, Israel, Russia, and others. Israel does not have much to offer Africa, other than political influence in Washington. It is eager to establish a presence and exert influence on the periphery of important Arab countries like Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt. These countries are all in a weakened state at present and preoccupied with internal problems. But they will eventually recover and their governments will awaken. Sub-Saharan Africa is their natural hinterland and they cannot be prized apart in the long term.

The people of Yemen is experiencing a criminal war waged by Saudi Arabia and its allies in total silence. How do you explain this silence of the international community and the media?

The West turned a blind eye to the Yemen war when it was launched four years ago because of Saudi influence and interests. It gave Saudi Arabia a chance to resolve the conflict in its favor. But neither Saudi Arabia nor the West appreciated the nature of Yemen or its people into account. They should have heeded the advice of the kingdom's founder, King Abdelaziz, who ordered his sons Faisal and Saud to withdraw when they tried to invade the country. The latest war on Yemen has had a catastrophic effect, but in military terms, it has been a failure. The international silence is now beginning to be broken, and I hope that continues.

What is your reading of events happening in Venezuela? Do you think that the United States will come to a direct military intervention?

What is happening in Venezuela is a US-sponsored coup attempt and I believe it will fail.

There is no longer any mention of the Khashoggi case, which showed the true face of the Saudi regime and raised a worldwide outcry. How do you explain that?

The Khashoggi case is closely linked to Trump's fate. Trump's opponents in the US seized on it as a stick with which to beat him, due to his close association with the current Saudi

leadership. That's why there was such an outcry over the killing, however horrific, on an individual, but no similar reaction to Saudi actions that caused thousands of deaths such as the war on Yemen (until recently) and the proxy intervention in Syria. It should not be any surprise, however, that US and Western interests ultimately prevailed over human rights concerns, in this case like so many others. The Israel Lobby has also played a part in suppressing the outcry. But the affair will have a longer-term impact. It laid bare Saudi Arabia's high-handedness and dominance in the region.

How do you analyze the events taking place in Algeria against the fifth term of Bouteflika?

The protests were not so much against Bouteflika as against the ruling elite that was using him as a front and was too divided to agree on a replacement for him, long after he should have been allowed to retire. The powers-that-be made three mistaken assumptions: first, that the fifth term could be pushed through; second, that Algerians would rather have stability than democracy; and third, that the terrifying memory of the bloody decade of the 1990s would deter demonstrations or protests, for fear of repeating what happened in Syria or Libya. They seemed to think, perhaps based on Syria's experience, that concessions are a slippery slope and not compromising pays off in the longer term. But now they have had to give at least the appearance of backing down due to the strength of popular feeling. The question now is what comes next: a measure of genuine but controlled reform as in Morocco or an Egyptian-style scenario where the army runs things behind a facade of pro-forma elections?

Intelligence reports indicate a redeployment of Daesh to Libya. Can we end the terrorism of Daesh and Al Qaeda without really fighting the ideological matrix of these groups? Is it enough defeating these groups militarily?

Daesh is finished above ground in the Arab world. But it will continue to exist underground because the conditions that incubated still exist. In my view, the challenge is not so much to fight the ideology as to address those conditions. The ideology, or at least its adoption or acceptance in some places and by some people, is a product of these 'failed-state' conditions and the marginalization they cause. In many cases – Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen – they are a consequence, in whole or in part, of direct or indirect Western military intervention. Putting an end to these interventions would be a step to tackling the problem.

Are we not witnessing the continuation of the Cold War between the US administration on one side and Russia and China on the other? How do you explain the need for the United States to have an enemy?

The US can't sleep unless it has an enemy. It has become an obsession, though creating or talking up external enemies has always been a means of advancing the interests of domestic power elites. But the picture is changing. America is no longer rules the world in matters of war and peace. Its real power is not its military might but the US Dollar. Its abuse of its financial and commercial power has become so extensive that an international alliance is taking shape to deprive it of this weapon.

Interview realized by Mohsen Abdelmoumen

Who is Abdel Bari Atwan?

Abdel Bari Atwan is a Palestinian journalist born in 1950 in Deir al-Balah, a Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. He lived in a family of 11 children. After graduating from primary school in the refugee camp, he continued his studies in Jordan. He then studied journalism at Cairo University.

After working for many Arab newspapers, he ran until 2013 *al-Quds al-Arabi*, a newspaper he founded in London in 1989 with other Palestinian expatriates. Today, he is the editor-in-chief of *Rai al-Youm*, an Arab world digital news and opinion website. He lives and works in London.

Abdel Bari Atwan is considered one of the most important columnists in the Arab press. He is regularly invited by *BBC World*, *Sky News*, *Al Jazeera English* and *CNN World*, as well as several networks in Arabic. He has published numerous editorials in various English newspapers, including *The Guardian*, *The Mail on Sunday*, *The Scottish Herald* and others.

He has written several books: *Islamic State The Digital Caliphate* (2019) ; *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda, the Next Generation* (2013) ; *Country of Words: A Palestinian Journey from the Refugee Camp to the Front Page* (2009); *The Secret History of Al-Qaida* (2006).

He is a member of the Palestinian National Council (Palestinian Parliament) since 1990.