

'Ballots, not bullets, for Palestine'

Lt General Jibril Rajoub, general secretary of the Palestinian National Movement FATEH and former national security adviser, speaks to Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star about the atrocities being committed in Palestine and the recently passed UN resolution on ceasefire.

Since the ICJ ruling against Israel, the Netanyahu government has only continued on in the same violent vein in Palestinian territories. How do you view the ongoing atrocities? First, I would like to appreciate the Government and people of Bangladesh—the first country after South Africa to support and encourage this historic judicial step against Israeli fascists, racists, colonialists, and even neo-Nazis. I'm pretty sure what the Israelis are doing is genocide—killing, destroying, bombing. The majority of the casualties are women, children, and the elderly. If this is not genocide or ethnic cleansing, then what is it? I believe the Israeli government is just looking to kill and expel Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

The UN Security Council resolution that was passed on March 25 mentioned that Hamas must unconditionally release hostages. Will that happen? And will Israel listen?

The substance of the resolution is primarily focused on the cessation of hostilities committed by Israel. They [Israel and the West] keep talking about hostages from October 7, but around 15,000 Palestinian hostages—including women—have been kidnapped and humiliated by Israel long before. The US, Egypt and Qatar are working on it, and the only way to sustain the ceasefire is to exchange prisoners. As for the second part of the question: no, Israel will not listen to this as they do not listen to anything.

Who, or what, can really stop the genocide?

It has to be the international community, led by the US and President Joe Biden. But the US, the UK and other European countries are protecting criminals. What Israel is doing goes against their ethics and values. Israel's goal is to bury the Palestinian national and political identity, according to international organisations. They are starving millions in Gaza, and even in the West Bank, they're ruthlessly suffocating Palestinians with the agenda that we will leave.

But we as Palestinians have no other choice and no other place.

Do you think Biden's stance on Israel is shifting?

What Israel is doing is against regional security and global peace. The US is starting to understand that they cannot tolerate that anymore, and that, coupled with domestic reasons such as the upcoming election, has underlined Biden's recent decisions to contain Israel's government.

There is an international consensus that now is the time to settle this conflict by recognising the rights of the Palestinian statehood, Palestinian people, and our right to self-determination. It's a matter of stopping Israel in advancing their malicious agenda of drastically changing the demographics on the ground. The ball is in the US's court, to lead the international community and stop the double standards. It is for the

Nazis, almost a century ago. We, Palestinians, were not involved in it. So why should we suffer for it? Why are we paying the price? We are not scapegoats! The conclusion is simple: stop the Israeli unilateralism to negate Palestine from the map. We have millions of people who have been living under occupation for years. We have the right, as owners of the land, to defend it and that has nothing to do with the Holocaust or anti-Semitism.

I also think the Europeans, the Germans, who committed this sin against Jews in World War II, should not be supporting those whose ancestors were victims of the Holocaust to commit the same crimes to annihilate a complete population. The Germans have some kind of complex guilt, but why should innocent Palestinians pay the price for what their ancestors did to the ancestors of the Jews in Israel? Why us? But it's not just



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truth that has been unveiled about Israeli lies and the scale of atrocities that the Biden administration, despite its blind support for Israel, cannot hide anymore. They are starting to realise that they cannot deny the crimes against humanity which clearly contradict their talks about human rights, democracy, ethics. What Israel is doing now is a threat to US national security and its interests all over the world, especially in the Middle East, and the politicians should realise that too.

How do you view the use of Holocaust rhetoric to silence support for Palestinians?

The Holocaust was perpetrated by someone else, the German

Germany; all of Europe must reckon that this double standard will lead to nothing but suffering on both sides.

What is your view on Israel's stated goal for waging this "war" being to "destroy Hamas"?

The issue of Hamas is an excuse to demonise all Palestinian people. You know the history of this conflict did not start on October 7, 2023. If you count the atrocities that Israel has perpetrated for decades before October 7, the Hamas attacks would seem like kindergarten brawls. I firmly believe that the attacks were a reaction to Israeli expansionist policies and those who are responsible for what happened are the Israeli occupation

forces, those who continue building walls and settlements, those who unjustifiably dictate realities for millions of Palestinians on the ground. The Israelis cannot on the one side enjoy building settlements, enjoy humiliating and killing, and also enjoy peace and security on the other side. It's logically impossible. Anyone would expect a reaction coming, and that is what happened. But then look at how many they have killed and injured now in response. Most people in Gaza are either in jail, under rubble, or have been killed. All hospitals, civilian structures, sports grounds—everything has been destroyed. We need the international community to say it's time to stop now.

What is the situation like in the West Bank? Has it improved after the US sanctions on settlers?

It's very complicated. There are checkpoints, growing numbers of incursions, and even killings. After 6pm in the evening, the situation is grim: you don't see any Palestinians walking around because of the Israeli policing and humiliation to paralyse Palestinians. In East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the situation is obviously worse than before. If this type of policing and injustice continues, the explosion will come to the West Bank too.

What happened in Gaza will be nothing compared to the explosion that will happen in the West Bank. As for the US sanctions, it is just lip service. The US should tell Israel to stop all of its unilateral atrocities on the ground, whether it's in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. That's the only way. The US should understand that our reaction, our resistance is legitimate, and that we Palestinians will not suffer alone.

There were talks about "post-Gaza" in the US media after Israel successfully "destroys" Hamas, replacing it with leadership from the Palestinian Authority. What is your take on this?

Excuse me, but Hamas was, is, and will always remain a part of our national fabric forever. Neither the US nor Israel has the right to decide who should lead us. The US has to lead a campaign to make the international community recognise all the Palestinian entities as one unit, and help the Palestinian Authority form one government which functions both in Gaza Strip and in the West Bank. This newly formed government should take care of all Palestinians, and all Palestinian Occupied Territories. This government should have the precinct of all political factions in Palestine. They should have three

missions: 1) unite the territories, institutions and services under one umbrella and one policy; 2) rebuild Gaza; and 3) ballots not bullets—prepare the nation for general elections, to build a sharing of power through a democratic process.

So again, Hamas will remain part of our people and no one—not the US, not Israel—gets to decide otherwise. The Israeli officials should go look at themselves in the mirror and see their own fascism, the apartheid, their faces now painted with genocide. They have no right to decide or dictate what we Palestinians will do. We have the right to elect our own leadership according to our own interests—this is what I believe and what my movement FATEH believes.

Can you tell us a bit more about your movement FATEH, and how you're navigating the eruption of this conflict since October 7?

From day one, we initiated diplomatic efforts with international bodies, including the UN and its Human Rights Council, and began direct contact with everyone. We are trying to achieve four goals:

- 1) Stop the Israeli war; cessation of hostility in Gaza and West Bank
- 2) Relief and aid for our people in Gaza
- 3) Confront or undermine any effort to displace Palestinians
- 4) Ending the occupation and establishing our own independent sovereign

Our channels are open with all political factions of Palestine, including Hamas, and all the relevant important players in the Middle East. I recently visited Qatar, and then Turkey and Algeria, to discuss these issues. We were, and we remain, one family. The issue of division between Hamas or other political factions is most concerning for us. What we require most is national reconciliation and unity to lead us to independence. We have to establish ourselves as a legitimate state that can add to global security and stability. We understand what our responsibility includes, and we will act according to that—achieve sharing of power by turning pages in the book of democracy.

Moscow terror attack and its aftermath



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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At around 8pm on March 22, a horrendous terrorist attack took place at the Crocus City Hall in Krasnogorsk, just northwest outside of the city limits of Moscow, in which more than 140 people were killed and over 180 injured. Four terrorists carried out a mass shooting; some were filmed gruesomely killing unarmed citizens.

The Russian security services quickly arrested the four attackers and detained at least 12 other suspects, preventing some of them from reaching the border with Ukraine. On March 24, the four men accused of carrying out the attack appeared in a Moscow court, bandaged and battered. One entered with his partially severed ear covered—clips had circulated before on social media showing Russian servicemen cutting it off and shoving it in his mouth. Another entered in a wheelchair, with one eye swollen, his hospital gown open and a catheter on his lap—indicating the brutal handling he endured at the hands of his capturers.

In Russia's recent history, videos of torture were not made very public, said Olga Sadovskaya of the Committee Against Torture, a Russian human rights organisation. But videos of these men being tortured were found circulating widely on social media. The decision to display it so publicly, in a way that the Russian forces have not done before, was intended as a sign of revenge and a warning to potential

terrorists, analysts speculated.

The last major terror attack in Russia took place in 2011. President Vladimir Putin's success in the Russian "war on terror"—including ending the Second Chechen War—has been one of his major achievements and one of the main factors behind his political longevity. Putin has been widely credited for bringing security and some semblance of order to Russia after the turbulent decade that followed the collapse of the

USSR. However, this attack, which appeared shockingly easy despite the Russian capital being one of the most surveilled and guarded cities in the world, may shatter some of that confidence.

Even besides this attack, parts of the Russian population already see the period of stability, security, and economic growth that Putin has been acclaimed for as being over. War is literally at Russia's door with Ukrainian forces conducting incursions into Russian territory, sending drones to strike oil refineries and allegedly damaging Russian battleships in the strategically important Black Sea.

The attack on the Crocus concert hall, which the ISIS affiliate Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) has claimed responsibility for, comes while Russia's war against Ukraine continues. So, unsurprisingly, within

a few hours of the attack, Putin and the head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) were already linking it to Ukraine. Their claims derived from the fact that four of the suspects who had carried out the attack were detained about 140km from the Ukrainian border. In his address to the nation, Putin claimed that they had been offered an "open window" at the border, supposedly by Ukraine's security services. Ukraine, of course, denied any involvement. And US officials were also adamant that Ukraine had nothing to do with it.

A couple of days later, even though Putin said that the attack was conducted by radical Islamists, he reasserted his earlier claim of Ukraine's involvement. Putin said, "We know that the crime was committed by the hands of radical Islamists... we are interested in who

ordered it." He further added, "This atrocity may be just one part in a whole series of attempts by those who have been at war with our country since 2014 [meaning the US] by the hands of the neo-Nazi Kyiv regime." Meanwhile, Russian investigators claimed that large sums of money were transferred to the Crocus City Hall attackers from Ukraine.

Interestingly, on March 7, just two weeks before the attack, the

But regardless of how Putin and the Russians choose to respond, the attack comes as a reminder that the threat of terrorism posed by groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda—which have often been funded and supported by powerful countries for geopolitical gains—is still alive. ISIS-K, the group which has claimed responsibility for the Moscow terror attack, for example, reportedly planned some 21 attacks

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PHOTO: REUTERS

US Embassy in Russia warned that a terror attack may take place in Moscow within the next few weeks and advised US citizens in Moscow not to visit shopping malls—the Crocus City Hall was attached to a shopping mall. According to The New York Times, the current "adversarial relationship" between Washington and Moscow prevented US officials from sharing full intelligence about the terror plot. And that, too, is being seen somewhat suspiciously by the Russians.

What is worrying is that, if the Russians truly believe that Ukraine was involved—or would like to make use of such projection—the war may only get more violent in the coming days. Unverified reports have already claimed that Russia has been launching more airstrikes in parts of Ukraine following the terrorist attack. And that may jeopardise more lives and further escalate violence in Ukraine and worsen tensions between Russia and the West.

in nine countries in the past year, up from eight the previous year. With hostility, tension, and violence flaring up between powerful countries and more power vacuums being created in countries that are being used as theatres for proxy wars between superpowers, these groups can only gain more opportunities to establish their footholds, recruit greater numbers of followers and carry out bigger attacks.

Whether the leaders of any of these powerful countries are ready to recognise this reality and find ways of cooperation—including against terrorism—rather than confrontation in which they often use terror groups to destabilise their geopolitical rivals, remains to be seen. But it is difficult to be hopeful in that regard. After all, it was their past failures to recognise this reality that gave rise to the threat of present-day terrorism and the biggest terror groups in the first place.