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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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06.07.2019

Africa and Palestine: A Noble Legacy That Must Never Be Betrayed

Europe's "Scramble for Africa" began in earnest in 1881, but never ended. The attempt at dominating the continent using old and new strategies continues to define the western relationship with this rich continent.

This reality was further validated when I arrived in Nairobi, Kenya on June 23. Although my objective was to address various Kenyan audiences at universities, public forums and the media, I also came here to learn. Kenya, like the rest of Africa, is a source of inspiration for all anti-colonial, liberation movements around the world. We, Palestinians, can learn a great deal from the Kenyan struggle.

Although African countries have fought valiant battles for their freedom against their western colonizers, neocolonialism now defines the relationship between many independent African countries and their former occupiers. Political meddling, economic control and, at times, military interventions, as in the recent cases of Libya and Mali, point to the unfortunate reality that Africa remains, in myriad ways, hostage to western priorities, interests and dictates.

In the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884, western colonial regimes attempted to mediate among the various powers that were competing over Africa's largesse. It assigned each with a share of the African continent, as if Africa was the property of the west and its white colonists. Millions of Africans died in that protracted, bloody episode unleashed by the west which, shamelessly, promoted its genocidal oppression as a civilizational project.

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Like most colonized countries in the Southern hemisphere, Africans fought disproportionate battles to gain their precious freedom. Here in Kenya, which became an official British colony in the 1920s, Kenya's freedom fighters rose in rebellion against the brutality of their oppressors. Most notable among the various resistance campaigns, the "Mau Mau" rebellion of the 1950s remains a stark example of the courage of Kenyans and the cruelty of colonial Britain. Thousands of people were killed, wounded, disappeared or were imprisoned under the harshest of conditions.

Palestine fell under British occupation, the so-called British Mandate, around the period that Kenya also became a British colony. Palestinians, too, fought and fell in their thousands as they employed various methods of collective resistance, including the legendary strike and rebellion of 1936.

The same British killing machine that operated in Palestine and Kenya around that time, also operated, with the same degree of senseless violence, against numerous other nations around the world.

While Palestine was handed over to the Zionist Movement to establish the State of Israel in May 1948, Kenya achieved its independence in December 1963.

At one of my recent talks in Nairobi, I was asked by a young participant about "Palestinian terrorism". I told her that Palestinian fighters of today are Kenya's "Mau Mau" rebels of yesteryear. That, if we allow western and Israeli propaganda to define the discourse of national liberation on Palestine, then we condemn all national liberation movements throughout the Southern hemisphere, including Kenya's own freedom fighters.

We, Palestinians, however, must shoulder part of the blame of why our narrative as an oppressed, colonized and resisting nation is now misunderstood in parts of Africa

When the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) committed its historical blunder by signing off Palestinian rights in Oslo in 1993, it abandoned a decades-long Palestinian discourse of resistance and liberation. Instead, it subscribed to a whole new discourse, riddled with carefully-worded language sanctioned by Washington and its European allies. Whenever Palestinians dared to deviate from their assigned role, they were decreed by the west to return to the negotiating table," as the latter became a metaphor of obedience and submission.

Throughout these years, Palestinians mostly abandoned their far more meaningful alliances in Africa. Instead, they endlessly appealed to the goodwill of the west, hoping that the very colonial powers that have primarily created, sustained and armed Israel, would miraculously become more balanced and humane.

However, Washington, London, Paris, Berlin, etc., remained committed to Israel and, despite occasional polite criticism of the Israeli government, continued to channel their weapons, warplanes and submarines to every Israeli government that has ruled over Palestinians for the last seven decades.

Alas, while Palestinians were learning their painful lesson, betrayed repeatedly by those who avowed to respect democracy and human rights, many African nations began seeing in Israel a possible ally. Kenya is, sadly, one of those countries.

Understanding the significance of Africa in terms of its economic and political potential (support for Israel at the UN General Assembly), rightwing Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has launched his own “Scramble for Africa”. Netanyahu’s diplomatic conquests on the continent have been celebrated by Israeli media as “historic”, while the Palestinian leadership remained oblivious to the rapidly changing political landscape.

Kenya is one of Israel’s success stories. In November 2017, Netanyahu attended the inauguration of Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta, who supposedly received an astonishing 98% of votes in the last elections. While Kenyans rose in rebellion against their corrupt ruling classes, Netanyahu was seen embracing Kenyatta as a dear friend and ally.

Netanyahu’s strategy in Kenya – and the rest of Africa – has been based on the same logic, where Israel would use its security technology to support corrupt and undemocratic regimes, in exchange for their political support.

Tel Aviv had hoped that the first-ever Israel-Africa summit in Togo would usher in a complete paradigm shift in Israeli-African relations. However, the October 2017 conference never actualized, due to pressure by various African countries, including South Africa. There is still enough support for Palestine on the continent to defeat Israeli stratagem. But that could change soon in favor of Israel if Palestinians and their allies do not wake up to the alarming reality.

The Palestinian leadership, intellectuals, artists and civil society ambassadors must shift their attention back to the Southern hemisphere – Africa, in particular – rediscovering the untapped wealth of true, unconditional human solidarity that is provided by the peoples of this ever-generous continent.

The legendary Tanzanian freedom fighter, Mwalimu Nyerere – who is also celebrated in Kenya – knew too well where his solidarity lay. “We have never hesitated in our support for the right of the people of Palestine to have their own land,” he once said, a sentiment that was repeated by the iconic late South African leader, Nelson Mandela, and many other African liberation leaders.

This generation of African leaders should not deviate from that noble legacy. If they betray it, they betray themselves, along with the righteous struggles of their own peoples.

JULY 5, 2019