

Palestine's Impasse: Israeli Occupation, Regional Conflicts and Internal Division

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Profiling Palestine is certainly far from straightforward. Providing a general overview based on headings and subheadings that are typically used to review other countries could seem tedious if not misleading. Unlike other situations, the principal context that shapes almost all of Palestine's various political, economic and social dynamics, as well as all other aspects of Palestinian life, is the omnipresent Israeli military occupation. The pressures and impositions of this occupation continue to control the present reality of Palestine and the Palestinians, informing any overview of today's Palestine. This does not mean that the Palestinian leadership and various factions are absolved from any responsibility. Dysfunctional Palestinian politics, plagued with internal divisions and a lack of institutional transparency and accountability, have their share of the blame both in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, the impact of the Israeli military occupation remains paramount and thus merits thorough analysis first and foremost.

Neither Peace nor Process

The conflict started in 1948 with the creation of the State of Israel, the destruction of Palestine as a national entity and the expulsion of half of the Palestinian people, who, ever since, have had refugee status. In 1967, a reinforced Israel occupied the parts of Palestine that had remained in the hands of the Arabs (The West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, along with other Egyptian, Syrian and Lebanese ter-

ritories). In spite of a series of UN resolutions condemning the Israeli occupation of these parts, the *de facto* term, Palestine, had become reduced to denoting the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. After more decades of conflict and several wars, the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in 1991 set forth a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians that culminated in the Oslo Accords in 1993. These Accords stipulated a five-year interim phase of negotiations that was supposed to lead to the creation of an independent Palestinian state and a lasting peace deal between the two parties. All major contested issues were to have been resolved, during that interim 'Peace Process' phase, through negotiations. Chief among those issues were the Jewish settlements that had been established in the Occupied Territories, the status of East Jerusalem as psychical capital of Palestine, security and border issues, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and water and natural resource rights.

Not only did the parties fail to adhere to the timeline set out by the Oslo Accords, but the 'Peace Process,' which had dragged on since 1993, became torturously reduced to 'a process without peace,' a cynical cliché that perfectly captured the futility of countless years of negotiations. Depressingly, that grim cliché has become even more meaningless today. What we observe now is neither peace nor process, but rather further deterioration for the Palestinians on several fronts – politically and economically, as well as in terms of security and internal politics.

Fulfilling Israeli Security Concerns

After almost a quarter of a century, Israel has now managed to transform these still-limping Oslo Accords into mere security arrangements founded

solely on the premise that Palestinians succumb to Israeli security concerns. All hopes and promises of creating an independent Palestinian state, as stipulated in the Oslo Accords, have been almost entirely expunged. The security aspect of the Oslo Accords, which has been decidedly kept alive by Israel, operates within the framework of a so-called 'security coordination' between Israeli security forces and the Palestinian Authority (PA). This coordination takes the form of continuous Israeli army incursions into Palestinian cities, villages and refugee camps that are supposedly under PA control, and includes – solely upon Israeli discretion – the killing and arresting of Palestinians within Palestinian territories. These incursions have effectively eroded what was left of the legitimacy of the PA in the eyes of Palestinians. The Palestinian Authority must offer help and intelligence to Israel in pursuing any wanted individuals deemed by the Israeli security forces to be a threat. This one-sided security arrangement practically excludes any reciprocal coordination to maintain the security of Palestinian civilians, in particular from the increasing attacks against them by fanatical Israeli settlers in the same areas.¹

Settlements

Concerning the settlements issue, particularly in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the rate of settlement construction and the expansion of the existing blocs continue to rise. These settlements, along with the land that is controlled by Israel around them under the pretext of 'security considerations,' eat up some 60% of the entire West Bank. These settlements are considered illegal by international law, and the Oslo Accords were hoped to have dismantled them. Instead, the numbers of settlers and settlements since 1993 have multiplied 600% since the

Accords were signed.² To further complicate matters, the current American position toward the illegal settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is slipping towards that of Israel; the American ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, repeatedly states that expanding existing settlements, as well as the building of more new ones, falls within Israel's rights, as these settlements 'are part of Israel.'³ Friedman's public and solidly pro-Israel views, including his dismissal of any 'two-state' solution, has infuriated Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to the point of his publically calling Friedman a 'a son of a dog.'⁴

Jerusalem

The status of Jerusalem, according to the moribund Oslo process, is one of the major issues that the 'peace negotiations' were supposed to resolve. Instead, the rate of illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied eastern part of the city, which was hoped to become the capital of the independent Palestinian State, has exceeded the rate of illegal settlements in the West Bank. Israel unlawfully annexed East Jerusalem in 1980, and since then Israel's official policies have aimed to achieve the de-Palestinization and further Judaization of Jerusalem as a whole, eventually ensuring a Jewish majority. Jerusalemite Palestinians face a matrix of purposely-designed land expropriation and building restriction laws, as well as targeted harsh economic and social conditions meant to force Palestinians to leave the city. Inversely, Israeli policies have been made to favourably facilitate the settlement of new Jewish communities in East Jerusalem. As an accumulative consequence, almost 86% of East Jerusalem is now under direct Israeli or settler control, with more than 200,000 settlers living in what used to be Palestinian areas and houses.⁵ All this makes

¹ See the continuous increase in violence by settlers against Palestinians in the UN reports: THE UNITED NATIONS OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS (OCHA) occupied Palestinian Territory (oPT). *Increase in settler violence during the first half of 2017*, July 2017 www.ochaopt.org/content/increase-settler-violence-during-first-half-2017

² INTERNATIONAL MIDDLE EAST MEDIA CENTER. *Israeli Settler State Created in West Bank, East Jerusalem: REPORT*, 12 July 2016 <http://imemc.org/article/israeli-settler-state-created-in-west-bank-east-jerusalem-report/>

³ L. Morris. "U.S. ambassador to Israel breaks with policy: 'I think the settlements are part of Israel,'" *Washington Post* 29 September 2017: www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/29/u-s-ambassador-breaks-with-policy-i-think-the-settlements-are-part-of-israel/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.959df444c76e

⁴ "Mahmoud Abbas: US ambassador to Israel is a 'son of a dog,'" *The Guardian* 20 March 2018: www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/19/palestinian-president-mahmoud-abbas-us-ambassador-israel-david-friedman-son-of-a-dog

⁵ "How Israel is Judaizing East Jerusalem," *Al-Jazeera* 6 December 2017: www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/israel-judaizing-east-jerusalem-171206102051198.html

any 'negotiation' over the future of East Jerusalem as a part of, and the capital of a Palestinian state extremely difficult.

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To make things even worse, in December 2017 the Trump Administration recognized Jerusalem, not Tel Aviv, as Israel's capital, challenging a long-held international consensus that East Jerusalem is a part of the occupied territory. This recognition has in fact placed the US squarely on Israel's side on one of the thorniest issues of the conflict. This dramatic decision has effectively ended the US role as a broker of the peace process, prompting the Palestinian President to stop any official dealing with US politicians, and declaring that the US is 'no longer qualified to sponsor the peace process.'⁶

Dangerous Regional Context and Conflicts

Within the broader context, and amid continuous regional turmoil centered on the seven-year Syrian conflict and the Saudi/Iranian rivalry, which also involves Israel, the Palestine question has suffered even more marginalization. The looming, and to a degree surprising, alliance between Saudi Arabia and Israel against Iran has suddenly manifested itself, not as the fluke, but as the cornerstone of the Trump Administration. Trump's hostility to Iran and the nuclear agreement that his predecessor Barack Obama concluded with Tehran, is in perfect line with the individual Saudi and Israeli hostilities against the same 'enemy.' Yet the prerequisite to forging a public alliance between the Saudis and Israelis would have to be a solution,

even if a hasty one, regarding the Palestine question. Despite the fact that US policies on Palestine have so far eroded any slim chance of reaching such a meaningful solution, Trump is publicizing this as the 'deal of the century.' What has been understood from the ensuing media fuss is that such a 'deal' could end the conflict not only between Israel and the Palestinians, but also the entire Arab world. Little is confirmed about the contents of such a deal, however. But the logic behind it far from fulfills Palestinian aspirations of self-determination and independence; it rather simply would be responding to Israeli fears concerning an imagined or real Iranian nuclear threat, and allying with Saudi Arabia in the same camp. By removing the Palestinian issue through some regional deal would thus lead to normalizing Arab-Israeli relations, and subsequently allow for building a Saudi-Israeli alliance against Iran. Compared with such a major confrontation between Iran and a US-Israel-Saudi Arabia alliance, the Palestine question would be dwarfed. This would certainly serve the Israeli agenda and weaken the Palestinians.

Divided Palestinian Politics

Internal Palestinian relations marked by the division between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip is yet another devastating feature of the current Palestinian reality. This division was consolidated in 2007 after Hamas took military control of the Strip following an unwillingness to hand real authority over to Hamas after its electoral victory in 2006. The decision of Israel, the US and Europe to disengage with any Hamas-led Palestinian Authority after that election complicated the situation and pushed matters to the brink. The end result was a *de facto* split in the Palestinian geography, demography and leadership that has continued to erode any Palestinian unity right up to the present day. Israel has continued to impose its blockade on the Gaza Strip making conditions there increasingly 'unlivable.' The devastating effects of the blockade have been multiplied by Israel's three wars against Gaza in 2008/9, 2012 and 2014 that caused thousands of deaths and accelerated the destruction of its cities and infrastructure.

⁶ REUTERS STAFF. "Palestinian president says U.S. can no longer broker peace," *Reuters*, 8 December 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-israel-abbas/palestinian-president-says-u-s-can-no-longer-broker-peace-idUSKBN1E22HT

Amid all this, Hamas is clinging more stubbornly to its powerful military and security forces, making any reconciliation with the PA in the West Bank, whose conditions for such a reconciliation include the control of the Strip's internal security, more difficult.

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The legitimacy of Hamas' rule in Gaza and that of the PA's rule in the West Bank (anchored in the election of the current Palestinian President in 2005) is very weak, as both have exceeded their electoral mandates according to the Palestinian Basic Law. Under this law, the Palestinians should organize national presidential and legislative elections every four years, but both parties have dug their heels in. However, maintaining this impasse and the *status quo* of 'no peace, no process' plays in the interest of Israel, hence the ongoing Israeli *de facto* veto on any serious PA rapprochement with Hamas.

Gaza: an Upcoming Explosion?

Within the framework of this inhumane blockade, the main victims of the continuation of this status quo are the two million Palestinians in the Strip. Health, employment, education, food supplies, pov-

erty and unemployment levels, as well as all other aspects of life have been badly hit by the blockade. This depleting of the Gaza Strip, according to UN reports citing its rapid de-development, will render it 'uninhabitable' by 2020.⁷ This mounting pressure on Gazans is only meant, according to Israeli officials, 'to put the Palestinians on a diet'; not starve them to death.⁸ However, according to World Bank reports published in March 2018, Gazan economic growth has decreased to a mere 0.5% and unemployment rates have soared to 44%; while 'access and quality of basic services such as electricity, water and sewerage is rapidly deteriorating and posing grave health risks.'⁹

The actual factors behind the continuous deterioration in Gaza have been attributed to the Israeli-Egyptian blockade, the Palestinian political split and the (American) cuts in funding to UNRWA whose services are fundamental to 1.3 million Gazans.¹⁰ The World Health Organization issued a donor alert in January 2018 warning that health standards are steadily worsening in the Gaza Strip, where household water and electricity supplies are limited to 3-5 hours a day, and 96% of the water is not suitable for human consumption – increasing the [outbreak] risk of waterborne diseases.¹¹ In light of these reports and those of many other specialized agencies that share the same concerns, it seems that a large-scale explosion in the Strip with perhaps an unknown nature and unpredictable consequences is not a far-fetched idea. Perhaps a rehearsal of just such an explosion was seen on the Fridays in April and May when masses of Palestinians gathered along the border fences with Israel in what the Palestinians called 'The Great March of Return.'¹² These confrontations have exposed the extremely dan-

⁷ United Nations News. Gaza could become uninhabitable in less than five years due to ongoing 'de-development,' – UN report <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/09/507762-gaza-could-become-uninhabitable-less-five-years-due-ongoing-de-development-un>

⁸ Amira HASS. "2,279 Calories per Person: How Israel Made Sure Gaza Didn't Starve," *Haaretz*, 17 October 2012, showed how Israeli restriction on the food supply to Gaza was calculated according to the minimum calories needed by every Palestinian in Gaza to just stay alive. See www.haaretz.com/.premium-israel-s-gaza-quota-2-279-calories-a-day-1.5193157

⁹ WORLD BANK. "A Sustainable Recovery In Gaza Is Not Foreseen Without Trade," *Press Release*, 15 March 2018 www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/03/15/a-sustainable-recovery-in-gaza-is-not-foreseen-without-trade

¹⁰ In January 2018, the Trump Administration announced cutting its funding to the UNRWA, depriving the organization of \$125 million.

¹¹ WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION. *Gaza Crisis*, February 2018, www.who.int/hac/crises/international/wbgs/appeal/who-donor-alert-gaza20-2-2018.pdf?ua=1

¹² This is a popular movement that vowed to protest non-violently on each of the six Fridays preceding 15 May, the date that the Palestinians called Al-Nakba, commemorating their mass expulsion during and because of the 1948 war and the creation of the State of Israel. The Israeli army fired against protesters and killed 47 Palestinians and nearly 7,000 wounded (updated: May 10th 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/world/middleeast/gaza-protests-yehya-sinwar.html).

gerous Israeli determination to keep the status quo at any cost. For instance, Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli Defence Minister, stated publicly that there are 'no innocent people in Gaza,' justifying the killing of more than 30 Palestinians and the injuring of hundreds more during these peaceful demonstrations.¹³

Equally, the economic and social indexes in the West Bank are far from healthy. The unemployment rate there in recent years hovers around 24%, with most of the economy financed by external funding and thus accentuating a non-self-sustained development. This external funding, particularly by the US, is politically conditioned and, in effect, cripples the PA when it comes to adopting any political line that could change the internal Palestinian political landscape, such as advancing any reconciliation with Hamas and reuniting with Gaza. The same applies to Palestinian moneys that are hijacked by Israel and used in a carrot-stick fashion to pressure and blackmail the PA politically. Israel

keeps withholding in excess of \$3.6bn dollars generated by taxes and other duties that should be given to the PA.¹⁴

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If there really is serious thinking about any 'grand deal' in the region it should include *at its core* the rescuing of Palestine and the Palestinians from the destructive and inhumane reality they are facing. Today's grim Palestinian reality is a source of future explosions as well as the pretext and context for the rise of further extremism in the region.

¹³ "No innocent people in Gaza' says Israeli defence minister," *Middle East Eye*, www.middleeasteye.net/news/no-innocent-people-gaza-says-israeli-defence-minister-1155018849

¹⁴ The figure of \$3.6bn is from a 2016 report issued by the Government of Palestine to the ad hoc Liaison Committee Meeting, *Stopping Fiscal Leakages*, Brussels: 19 April, 2016 www.lacs.ps/documentsShow.aspx?ATT_ID=27508 .