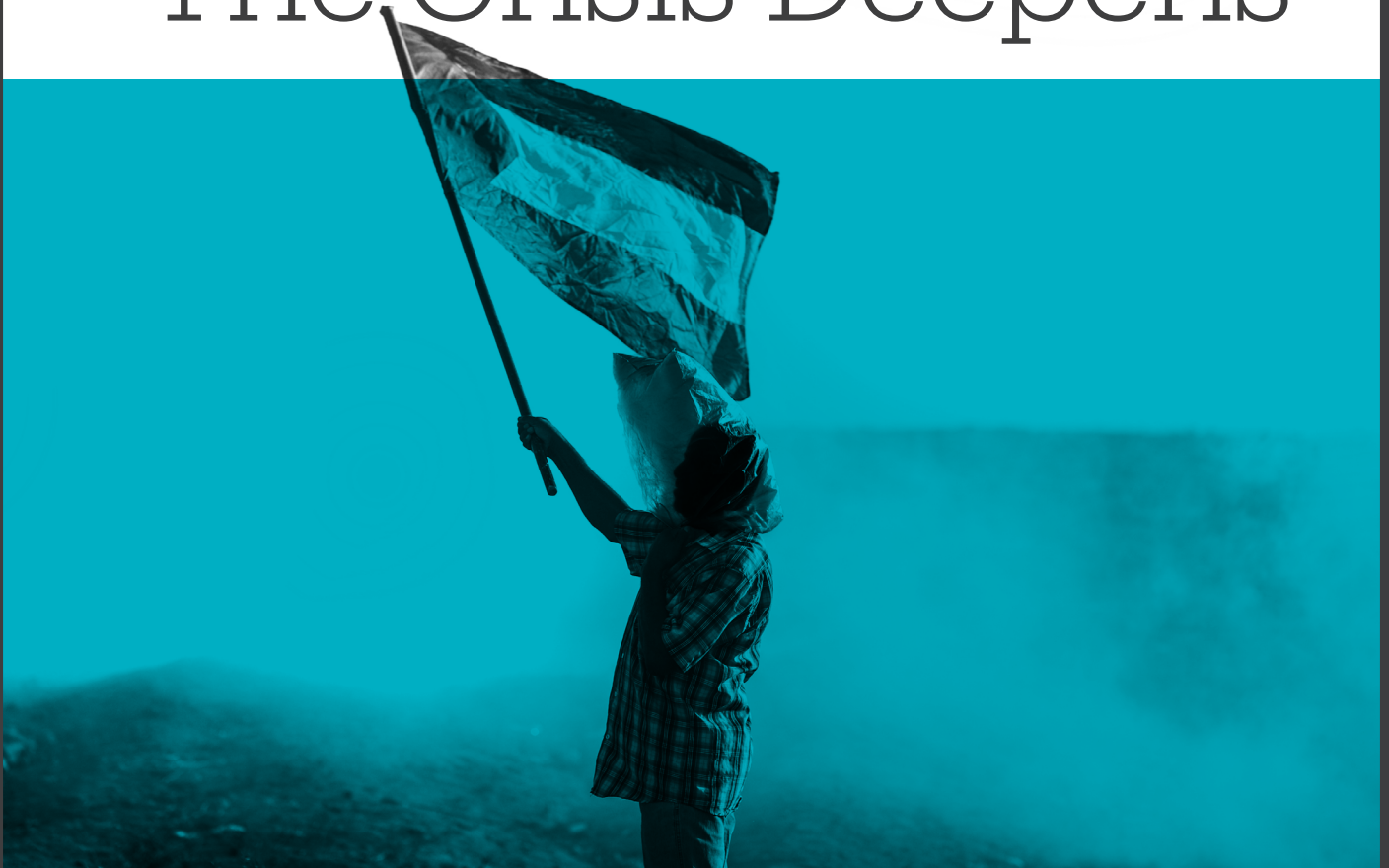


TRT
**world
forum**
2018

Closed Session

The Fate of Palestine: The Crisis Deepens



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Closed Session

The Fate of Palestine: The Crisis Deepens

The TRT World Forum 2018, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 3rd- 4th at the Swissotel in Istanbul gathering together over 600 esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of 8 public sessions, 11 closed sessions and keynote speeches delivered by some of our most esteemed guests, this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the future of the Middle East and the European Union to the growing trend of Islamophobia, refugees, Turkish foreign policy in an age of crisis, the crisis of new media and female leadership in a world of conflict. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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Background

On October 4, 2018, TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting on the developments taking place in Palestine. This was part of a series of roundtable meetings forming part of the two-day TRT World Forum 2018, which included eight public sessions and 11 closed sessions.

This roundtable meeting was held in English under the Chatham House Rule. This rule stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

This session aimed to discuss the question of Palestine in light of the most recent

developments. While there has essentially been a de-facto acceptance of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories by world powers, local Palestinian opposition and resistance in various forms have remained. The internationally recognised two state solution - originating in 1974, UN Resolution 3236 - has seemingly lost its relevance. Most recently, the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and his so-called 'deal of the century' has severely complicated the peace process and effectively eliminated any hope for the two-state solution. The situation in Palestine continues to be neglected, particularly in light of more immediate regional and global crises. The crisis continues to deepen and needs to be addressed unequivocally. This session seeks to address the current fault lines of the question of Palestine and aims to provide a platform for balanced discussion.

Discussion themes of the session:

The specific objectives of the meetings were to:

- Discuss the question of Palestine and the reluctance of global actors to propose a solution
- Explore the different positions of Palestinians on the future of the crisis
- Put the question of Palestine in the wider context of the political landscape of the Middle East
- Prospect the chances for a two-state solution
- Discuss the Palestinian diaspora and its influence on the global representation of Palestine

Another Perspective of the Situation in Palestine: Israel as an Apartheid State?

As the crisis in Palestine enters its 8th decade, the answer to the 'question of Palestine', as Edward Said put it, remains as elusive as ever. However, according to one of the panellists, in the eyes of the world, the realities of the situation in Palestine have become clearer than ever. Accordingly, the predominant Western viewpoint that the creation of Israel represented fair compensation for the historic persecution of the Jewish people in Europe, culminating in the holocaust, is no longer being accepted on a political level as providing a 'blank cheque' to Israeli policies. For one of the panellists, this represents a shift in the terms of debate on a global scale regarding the reality of the Israeli state in a direction that could pave the way for the eventual undoing of the Israeli project.

While there was no consensus on the nature of the future of the Israeli state, there was a general agreement among the panellists that the actions of Israel today, both legislative and 'on the ground' constitute a clearly comparable situation with that of Apartheid South Africa, a notion that has gained

more mainstream appeal in recent years. According to one of the panellists, the situation in Palestine is, in fact, more dire than the South African case and is being exacerbated by political leaders such as Trump and Netanyahu, who seek primarily to gratify their extreme right-winged political constituencies.

The panel was keen to point however, that the discourse on the Palestinian issue is no longer shaped solely by those in power. Palestinian and international civil society have played a significant role in recent times in the shaping of the discourse around Palestine and Israel. Moreover, non-European and American media outlets have also participated in shaping perceptions vis-à-vis Israel and the Palestinians. One recent prominent example pointed to by one of the panellists was the Al Jazeera production 'The Lobby', which exposed how the Israel lobby influences British politics and how Israel has penetrated various levels of British democracy.

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS)

One particularly prominent civil society initiative discussed by the panellists that has had a prominent role in recent years in shaping the discourse on the conflict is the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. BDS is a Palestinian civil society initiated movement advocating for freedom, justice and equality. In addition to interventions from several participants praising the viability of the BDS movement as a mechanism of change, one of the panellists

argued that BDS represents one of the main approaches for holding Israel to account for its actions and policies. Furthermore, participants noted that BDS represents one of several parallels to the South African case wherein anti-Apartheid activists called for and organised around the principle of BDS as a means of pressuring the Apartheid government at the time.

BDS is a Palestinian civil society initiated movement advocating for freedom, justice and equality. This movement represents one of the main approaches for holding Israel to account for its actions and policies.

The Reality on the Ground

The panel agreed on the notion that the political horizons for the Palestinians are mostly barren at the current juncture. One of the panellists emphasized the point that Israel is, de facto, administering a single state in all of historic Palestine, something that is not well understood by analysts and policy makers. The same panellist pointed out that the fact that Israel and the Palestinian territories are effectively one state, that is governed by Israel, and that discriminates against Palestinians in various ways and to varying degrees, means that Israel is in effect an apartheid state. According to the panellist, there are a number of different categories of Palestinians:

- 1.** Palestinians who have Israeli citizenship but have faced institutionalised discrimination since 1948; discrimination that affects all areas of life ranging from land ownership, housing, culture, education, political expression and so on.
- 2.** Palestinians, who live in Jerusalem, which from the Israeli authority point of views has been in annexed totally. This state of affairs will make Palestinians who have residency face systematic discrimination in many areas of their lives.
- 3.** Palestinians in the West Bank, who live under a military regime. Their daily routines are dominated by the presence in the West Bank of more than 200 Israeli settlements, including the so-called official settlements and the settlement outposts.
- 4.** Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, which remains, from the perspective of international law, part of the occupied Palestinian territories. Gaza is effectively an open prison, in which Israel has literally fenced in some two million Palestinians. The Gaza Strip has been under a crippling blockade and the Palestinians there experience Israeli apartheid at its most brutal and most violent form. We have witnessed this year what happened to unarmed Palestinian demonstrators at the great march of return at the hands of well-armed Israeli snipers using live ammunition.
- 5.** Diaspora Palestinians. They are not in Palestine ultimately because they are prevented from returning due to Israel discriminatory citizenship and immigration legislation.

The Israeli authorities have taken deliberate strategic steps over the last half-century towards a de facto annexation of the West Bank. For strategic reasons, until now they have not annexed de jure the West Bank, and that has given them many advantages. For example, the

Israeli authorities in the West Bank enjoy the powers of a sovereign state, whereas the Palestinian residents do not have citizenship rights. This tactic, which stopped short of de jure annexation, has facilitated continued Israeli colonisation of the territories ostensibly dedicated to a future Palestinian state.

The situation on the ground today is one in which the territorial distinction between Israeli and the occupied Palestinian territories remains theoretically essential to the Palestinian struggle and their efforts at political mobilisation at the level of the international community. In reality however, continued Israeli occupation and colonisation of the West Bank, the system of military administration, and the blockade of the Gaza strip have effectively erased the so-called 'Green Line'.

In this context, one of the panellists described how there have been ample opportunities for Israel to normalise its relations with the Palestinians and its neighbours such as the Camp David agreement with Egypt, the Oslo accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), engaging Hamas politically in 2006, and the Arab peace plan which was initiated by the Saudi government. These represented tangible opportunities to enable Israel to live in peace side by side with its neighbours. In the speaker's perspective however, none of these opportunities were capitalised upon. According to the panellist, Israel, through its actions, has continued to reveal the 'true nature' of their project. For the speaker in question, Israel will continue to pursue its current course until a critical international mass realises that there is no distinction between the Zionism of Israel and the Apartheid of South Africa.

Regarding political horizons, one of the panellists underlined the existence of an extensive body of literature, which explains the rationale behind the failure of various negotiation attempts between Israel and the PLO. For him, there is a core explanation, which is quite simple to understand, and that is the Israeli maximum on offer has never come close to the minimum of what Palestinians can accept. There is no genuine two-state solution on the table from the Israel political mainstream. There is no support for a genuinely sovereign independent Palestinian State in the occupied territories.

This position is not just the position of the current Netanyahu government, but will also be the same for any

conceivable government in the future. Even if Netanyahu is not the prime minister, and even if the Israeli labour party forms the government, they will also not offer the Palestinians a genuinely sovereign independent Palestinian state. The only options on the table from the Israeli political system towards the Palestinians are, according to Netanyahu himself "lots of advantages, low risks." There are also Israeli politicians, part of the current governing coalition, that are pushing for more formal annexation of parts or all of West Bank. There are also politicians affiliated with the Israeli opposition who advocate for so-called separation from the Palestinians. Their political vision contends that Israel cannot and should not continue to govern and determine the lives of millions of Palestinians. They consider this as protection for Israeli technocracy in the majority of historic Palestine. The three options on the table are "partial annexation", "total annexation" or the so-called "separation".

According to the speaker, it is important that political decision makers and those working on this issue take into account the fact that there is no genuine Israeli 'peace camp' waiting in the wings. No significant political forces in Israel are motivated to deliver justice and fundamental rights to the Palestinian people. There are genuine anti-apartheid activists and political groupings within Israeli society but they remain politically marginal. Hence, any strategy that relies on this non-existing peace camp is doomed to fail.

Looking ahead, the speaker proposed recommendations:

1. Accountability and substantive pressure on Israel is critical. This aspect is still missing from the recommendations provided by experts and analysts. It is still the missing ingredient when governments and some civil society players approach the question. Until there is a genuine and meaningful substantial pressure on Israel, nothing is going to change.

2. There is a need to pay attention to and - where appropriate - encourage certain developments. For example the growing opposition to not just Israeli policies but to Zionism itself amongst Jewish Americans, and particularly younger Jewish Americans. There is a genuine generational shift and disconnect that is growing. The Palestinian issue is not the only relevant issue, but is an important factor. These developments are taking place in other countries as well, particularly in Europe, however, it is in the US where it is potentially most significant. Another development is the growth of the BDS movement which has become a genuine international civil society based movement that is shifting the discourse and achieving discreet victories in

particular situations. Equally important, BDS is changing the conversation, and in many cases places Palestinian voices and Palestinian experiences in the centre stage, where they have been previously marginalised.

3. There is also a need to encourage those kinds of grassroots civil society based movements, particularly in light of the increasing likelihood that the two-state solution will never be implemented. These grassroots movements will serve to make sure that the parameters of what is possible cannot be limited or defined by what Israel or the majority of Israelis allow or dictate alone.

One of the participants expressed the view that divisions among the Palestinian leadership are also among key issues effecting the reality on the ground. The fact that the main Palestinian factions (Fatah and Hamas) continue to devote significant efforts to opposing each other entails that they will not succeed in developing a strategy that could further international pressure, or even sanctions, on Israel. The fact remains that Palestinian political actors lack the popular and international legitimacy that was garnered by Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa in their struggle against Apartheid.

Accountability and substantive pressure on Israel is critical. Until there is a genuine and meaningful substantial pressure on Israel, nothing is going to change.

Political Developments, Media Discourse, and the Way Forward

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is soon going to be Israel's longest-serving prime minister. Netanyahu is presiding over the most right-wing government in Israel's history. While some pundits distinguish between him and the extreme right forces, the speaker sees no distinction between the two at all.

To elaborate on this point, the speaker gave the example of a new law which was passed by the Israeli government on July 19 2018. The so-called 'Nation-State Law,' was another way to proclaim the Jewish supremacy state law and effectively imbeds the legal supremacy of Israeli Jews into the Israeli constitution. The debate around the nature of the Israeli state, namely whether Israel is primarily a democracy or Jewish state, has played out over the years in the Israeli Supreme Court. The results of these debates have always put more weight on Israel's Jewish character over that of its democratic credentials.

So for example when the Israeli Supreme Court was asked to rule on whether it is acceptable for Israelis to discriminate against Palestinians in the Israeli property market based on the fact that they are Palestinians and not Jewish, the Court gave its stamp of approval in the name of the preservation of the Jewish character of the state. Matters such as where a person can live, the type of jobs they can perform and family repatriation, among other issues, are all dictated by Israel being a Jewish state and the Jewish supremacy law.

The adoption of the Nation-State Law meant that what was a common assumption of the state, was made the official law of the land. Supremacy is now formalised into the constitution. In other words, according to one of the panellists, Israel, after the passing of the law, is now officially and legally in a state of Apartheid. Politically this has also eliminated any effective distinction between Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the extreme right wing parties that make up an important part of his coalition. It was Netanyahu's project and he tried to push forward this law before the last elections.

Israel is in a place currently where it is formalising its long-standing policies of erasing the Palestinian presence in all of historic Palestine. It is the same situation in Gaza, where the erase-replace is at play. The humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza is beyond belief. New reports are

now saying that within a couple of years the Gaza Strip will become completely unliveable. 90% of the water is undrinkable in the Gaza Strip at present. Today in the Gaza Strip, an 11-year-old child has never experienced 24 hours of electricity because of the Israeli blockade. Today in the Gaza Strip, people who are under the age of 30 have never been able to exit the Gaza Strip even to visit the West Bank or Jerusalem. The problem resides also in the way that the international community looks at Gaza. The world looks at Gaza merely from a humanitarian perspective: let's make sure that Gaza has water, electricity, and so on. In other words, the focus is on the outcome and not the cause. There is no focus on the fact that Israel has maintained a very brutal blockade over the Gaza Strip for the last 11 years; a blockade that affects virtually all aspects of life in the Gaza Strip.

For example, there is no place where you can get cancer radiation treatment in the Gaza Strip or the West Bank; not a single hospital in the West Bank and not a single hospital in the Gaza Strip. Not because of the lack of competent doctors, but because Israel will not allow radiation equipment into the West Bank or the Gaza Strip for protocol security reasons. So any patient who has cancer and needs to get radiation treatment is forced to exit the Gaza Strip to get treatment, which they must pay for in an Israeli hospital. Israel's practice since early 2018 is to put people on a waiting list, and if the person who needs radiation has someone from his/her extended family who belongs to Hamas, then this person is not eligible to exit the Gaza Strip to get life-saving cancer treatment. So what they are doing is they are using the right to health as a political tool in order to try to put more pressure on Palestinians in Gaza.

An additional issue is the shift in the media discourse surrounding the Palestinian cause from a political issue into a religious one. What we see at present is a framing of the conflict either as one in need of humanitarian intervention or as a conflict between religions. Instead of focusing on the political reality on the ground, there is a pattern of focus on the humanitarian and religious aspects while ignoring the elephant in the room which is the political factor.

On the ground, Palestinians continue to experience disappointment after another. One example of this resistance is taking place in a small community in the

West Bank called Khan Al-Ahmar. It is a community of 180 Palestinian Bedouins who were expelled from their homes in 1948 and ended up settling in a place that is located a few kilometres outside Jerusalem (they settled there in 1953). Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967 and decided to build a settlement in this area. After this settlement was built, a decision was taken to expel this community of 180 people who do not have access to electricity or water. When this community turned to the international community, they were told Israel is a democracy, and the typical way would be to go and apply for building permits and regularise the

status of the community, and get access to the services. They applied like everybody else but they were not given permits. Nine years later, the community is about to be destroyed any day now.

In this context, the panellist re-emphasized that direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians are not the answer. Rather, the real way forward is for the international community to hold Israel to account. This means focusing on BDS, and holding Israeli officials accountable, and it means taking Israel to court.

The “Arab Spring” Effect

A participant considered that the most nervous moment for Israel was between January 2011 and July 2013. During that period, Netanyahu sent emissaries to Europe urging European leaders to intercede with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas to open a back channel in order to sort out the problem of Gaza and make sure that the Arab Spring would not pose an existential threat to Israel.

Internally, though, the participant underlined that Netanyahu used the Arab Spring events as a reason to justify avoidance of a political initiative in the Palestinian context. This partly explains in his view Netanyahu’s push for the so-called “The Nation-State Law.” From the perspective of Netanyahu, “Israel is facing a period of

instability and uncertainty in the region.” Similarly, Minister of Education Gidon Saar claimed that the upheaval in the Arab world “requires a thorough examination of the Israeli political discourse” and that “the margins of risk that Israel can afford to take today are very narrow.” This narrative was best echoed by Journalist David Merhav from the Makor Rishon newspaper, who wrote that “with Mubarak’s fall, the last nail was driven into the coffin of the left’s political fantasies... Israel cannot afford even a single political adventure.”

The participant also highlighted the correlation between the struggle for freedom and democracy in the Arab world.

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