



# **Shifting Dynamics: The International Order in a Post-Pandemic World**

— 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> of December | 2020 —

A black and white photograph of several world leaders, including Joe Biden, Benjamin Netanyahu, Donald Trump, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, standing together and holding up a large document, likely the Abraham Accords. The image is dark and serves as the background for the text.

## **The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Israel's Engagement with Arab States**

### **EXPERT ROUNDTABLES**

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# The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Israel's Engagement with Arab States



- Normalisation agreements between Israel and Arab states are being concluded on the basis of shared geopolitical interests, potentially leading to a false impression among both the Israeli public and government that coming to terms with the Palestinians is no longer part of the regional equation.
- The viability of the two-state solution is increasingly being challenged by the facts of the ground, with many activists now arguing that focus should be on a rights-based discourse rather than the details of a political solution.
- The normalisation deals struck between Israel and several Arab states further complicate the prospects of a two-state solution, particularly as they have effectively negated the former 'land for peace' equation that was the hallmark of the Arab peace initiative.
- The Biden administration is unlikely to prioritise the Palestinian issue and no major changes in American policy should be expected.
- The international community should take responsibility to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and pressure Israel to end the illegal occupation by taking solid action beyond condemnations.
- The path forward for Palestinians will increasingly be focused on pushing for equal rights in the coming years.

## Summary of the Session

**T**he Expert Roundtable session 'The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Israel's Engagement with Arab States' focused on a number of topics ranging from the viability of a one state or two-state solution, to the responsibilities of the international community in facilitating long-term solutions to the conflict. Other key topics included the potential impact of the Biden administration on the US-Israeli relationship, the role of national empowerment among the Palestinians, and the prioritisation of civil rights and protections in proposed solutions to the conflict.

Elaborating on the the normalisation deals struck between several Arab states and Israel, His Excellency Marwan Muasher stated that these agreements should be evaluated within the framework of bilateral interests, not as 'peace deals' as they have been framed by their proponents. He further stated that these agreements create the impression that Israel does not need to come to terms with Palestinians in order to establish relations with other countries in the region. Mr Muasher argued that given that the two-state solution, the cornerstone of international efforts to solve the conflict, has been negatively impacted by the recent normalisation agreements, the discourse will increasingly shift away from the specific shape of a political solution to a rights-based approach, particularly among Palestinians. If the Palestinians become convinced that a two-state solution is not possible, then the only way

forward for them is to insist on equal political rights in the areas where they live, in the areas controlled by Israel.

For Gideon Levy, not only is the two-state solution dead, it was never actually born. In his assessment, there has never been an Israeli statesman or prime minister who genuinely intended to put an end to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory or who was genuinely prepared to extend sovereign rights to an independent Palestine. Drawing on his years of experience, for Levy, given the current state of affairs on the ground in the territory that would in theory make up the future Palestinian state, the only possible route forward is a single state comprised of both Arabs and Jews. In order to advance this perspective, Levy argued that a new rights-based discourse must be brought forward, both on the local and the international level.

Dr. Ahmad Azem stated that there needs to be a paradigm shift in the understanding of the Palestinian issue. He challenged the current paradigm that makes an equivocation between occupied and occupier and stressed that Palestinians should not be expected to keep offering peace initiatives while it is them who are under occupation. He also added that the international community should recognise Palestine as an independent and sovereign state, as it does in the case of Israel, if it wants to solve this issue; emphasising that to recognise Palestine as a state will have long term consequences for peace both in the region and globally.

# Marwan Muasher's Highlights



## Former Deputy Prime Minister of Jordan

Marwan Muasher is the Vice President for studies at the Carnegie Endowment, where he oversees the Endowment's research in Washington and Beirut on the Middle East. Muasher served as Foreign Minister (2002–2004) and Deputy Prime Minister (2004–2005) of Jordan. He was also a senior fellow at Yale University as well as Senior Vice President of External Affairs at the World Bank from 2007 to 2010.

He is the author of *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation* and *The Second Arab Awakening and the Battle for Pluralism*. He is a member of the American University of Beirut Board of Trustees, the Global Centre for Pluralism Board of Directors, and the Asfari Foundation Board of Trustees.

” “I do not think we can expect the Biden administration to launch a major effort to revive the peace process. I think the new administration is going to be preoccupied with a lot of domestic priorities. The Arab-Israeli conflict is going to come at a very low priority for the new administration.”

” “The third point I want to make is what is happening between Israel and several Arab states, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in particular. A lot of people are calling them ‘peace agreements’. I would not call them peace agreements. These are bilateral agreements done for purely bilateral interests between the two countries and between Israel. For the first time, an agreement with Israel is not about land for peace.”

” “I am afraid that in doing so, the Israeli public and certainly the Israeli government might get the false impression that they do not need to come to terms with the Palestinians if they can forge agreements with the Arab states that don't require Israel to withdraw from any part of the Arab territory. I think that these agreements are going to further kill the two-state solution, which is the cornerstone of international efforts to solve the conflict.”

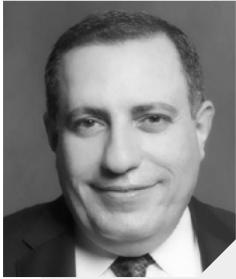
” “So where are we heading from here if there is no serious effort? I think that we are moving into an era where the focus of the conflict is going to shift from people focusing on the shape of a solution, to people focusing on equal rights, particularly among the Palestinians. If the Palestinians become convinced that a two-state solution is not possible on Palestinian soil, then the only way forward for them is to insist on equal political rights in the area they live, namely in the areas controlled by Israel.”

” “Today we are in a one state reality. It is not a one state solution, but it is a one state reality. It just happens to be an undemocratic reality for the Palestinians. And if the Palestinians become convinced that there is no future, or no horizon for a credible Palestinian state, then the Palestinians are going to start pushing for a rights-based approach and not for what shape of a solution might come about.”

” “The international community cannot just keep talking about a two-state solution and do nothing to affect its implementation. What that means, in my view, is that Israel is just going to have more time available to annex more land, to create more facts on the ground and to kill the very idea of a two-state solution. This is where I believe the conflict is going to be heading in the next phase.”

” “I would say this, forget the international community. It is not capable of solving the problem. Forget the Arab peace initiative, it is today dead. Forget the Oslo process, it is today dead. The only solution is going to be through a Palestinian struggle for equal rights in the coming years.”

# Ahmad Azem's Highlights



## Head of the Strategic Affairs Unit, the Prime Minister's Office, State of Palestine

Ahmad Jamil Azem is a member of the PLO's Palestinian Central Council. He is the Head of the Strategic Affairs Unit in the Palestinian Prime Minister's Office and an assistant Professor of Political Science in Birzeit University. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Edinburgh. He was also a senior fellow at the School of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge. Previously, he worked for about ten years at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research in Abu Dhabi. Has authored and co-authored around 20 books and research papers. For 15 years, Azem was a columnist in several newspapers.

” “According to our understanding, for the Biden administration Palestinians are not the priority. Even trying to solve the problem according to the old American parameters is not really a priority. So, even if we manage to get a Palestinian priority [agenda] again, I think it is a problem to return to the idea of conflict management again, to have this peace process without a clear condition or a clear path to reach peace. In this way, it is important to understand that Palestinians do not need a reset process, but a new dynamic within a kind of paradigm shift. We need to redesign things again. And this will not be solved through the United States only.”

” “On the Palestinian side, [there are] three major options. The first option is to start negotiations under international umbrella organisations, [such as] the UN. The second option can be going back to negotiations, to restart negotiations that stopped in 2014 and go from there, starting [with] releasing Palestinian prisoners. The third option is that Israel should commit itself to the [previously] signed agreements. We have more than 20 agreements signed with Israel that Israel has not committed itself to. This should not be addressed only in the United States of America. I think the whole international community should think about a new paradigm.”

” “For example, when you are saying you are balanced between Israel and the Palestinians, it is not balanced if are saying you are supporting a two-state solution, but you do not recognise the two states. If you are recognising Israel and you are balanced, you should recognise the Palestinian state. This is one thing I think that we should focus on in the next few months and in the coming period.”

” “If there is no balance between the occupier and the occupied, that means that the idea that international community is balanced needs to be changed and the definition of ‘balanced position’ should be defined again. You cannot ask Palestinians to keep giving peace initiatives. Palestinians accepted to have a state of 22 percent of their historical land so actually the occupier should be asked to provide, first of all, its peace initiative and also to provide a identifying the borders of Israel. Palestinians believe that leaving a problem like the Palestinian question without solving it, will have long-term consequences on peace in the region and on stability in the world in general.”

” “We know that the Trump administration has a proposal to end the whole idea of the Palestinian sovereign state. Now, I am not just suggesting the creation of one state with equal rights for all citizens, but it is important to remember that we are still on the ground. We will sign agreements with Arab countries, but this will not solve the problem. Any Israeli politician will wake up in the morning and will find us Palestinians on our land. We will be here all the time. A main principle is to encourage national empowerment. So, we will continue on the ground. We will continue [to be] here.”

# Gideon Levy's Highlights



## Journalist, Haaretz

Gideon Levy is an Israeli journalist and author. Levy writes opinion pieces and a weekly column for the newspaper Haaretz that often focus on the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Levy has won prizes for his articles on human rights in the Israeli-occupied territories.

” “The two-state solution not only is dead, I would say more than this: it was never born. I do believe that there was never an Israeli statesman, an Israeli prime minister who really genuinely meant to put an end to the occupation, who really was ready to give the Palestinians full rights and, obviously, a sovereign state like any other state. This was never on the table. And we have to realize that the occupation is not a temporary phenomenon. It is here to stay. From day one, there was never any intention to put an end to it. We have to face it. We might like it. We might hate it, like I do. But that is reality.”

” “Now, the question is, where do we go from here? We are facing a certain kind of a crossroad. One way is to continue to speak about the two-state solution while knowing that this train left. Seven hundred thousand Jewish settlers, the most powerful political group in Israel, who is going to evacuate them? And if you do not evacuate [the settlers], what kind of Palestinian state would you have? What does it mean in a state with all kinds of Bantustans connected with bridges and tunnels and canals; this is not a viable state and it will not hold. And it is not a just solution. So, if we really face reality, the only option on the table right now is one state. This struggle must focus, from now on, on the regime of the state, because the state is going to stay either as an apartheid state or as a democracy; there is no third way.”

” “We must focus now on a new discourse, on a new way of struggle. We have to start to speak about equal rights. This will be the one and only challenge, first of all for Israel and secondly, for the world. Would Israel say no to the equal rights idea? It would. Then, Israel [would] declare itself officially and formally as an apartheid state. And then it is the challenge of the world, of the

Arab world, of the Western world—all over the world—to decide whether we accept a second apartheid state.”

” “If Israel would say yes [to equal rights], we really would have the beginning of a new reality, a vision, a dream which might come true one day; let us do it. I know that today [this] sounds to many people as a little utopia, and it is a utopia, but let us start somewhere. This is the only way to see some light at the end of the road, a democracy [with] equal rights between Palestinians and Jews in one state. As much as it sounds far-fetched, it is the only open way for any kind of justice.”

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