



COMMENTS ON THE RECENT ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS

PAOLO BRANCA (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan)

Frankly, after all that has happened and continues to happen in the Holy Land, I do not believe that any other solution is possible than that of a single Federal State. I am perfectly aware that, today perhaps more than ever given the actors in the field, it may seem like a simple illusion, a dream.

But it is precisely because of the strength that dreams have, against any possible or conceivable reality, that it convinces me.

Or rather, I correct myself, it is because of its concrete and reasonable feasibility and effectiveness that I prefer it, by virtue of a ruthless pragmatism.

Dividing, probably in an ambiguous if not unfair way, a small piece of land would give rise to endless forms of irredentism, not different from the current conflict.

The inevitable corollary, however, would be the renunciation by both parties of having hegemony and absolute control over the other.



Unimaginable? If you think about it, it is what we have always done with our neighbors and our own relatives: a utopia within everyone's reach, as long as they want it, of course.

IBRAHIM AL-MARASHI (Associate Professor, Department of History at the California State University San Marcos)

With a cease-fire in place to halt the latest conflict between Israel and Hamas, the recent bout of violence is demonstrative of a larger pattern in the Middle East.

Just as Israel bombarded Hamas from the air, the U.S. air force has targeted Iraqi militias, and the Saudi air force did the same with Houthi militias. All three national air forces are technologically superior to the three non-state actors they targeted. Yet all three non-state actors (NSAs), with unguided rockets or domestically made drones based on Iranian designs, can wreak significant havoc upon their targets.

These three NSAs have used rockets and drones to target Israeli and Saudi military bases, and US forces housed in Iraqi bases. The Houthis and Hamas demonstrated they can also strike urban centers of Saudi Arabia and Israel respectively.

Finally, what unites all three NSAs is their connection to Iran. With the blockade against Gaza, it is undetermined how much Iranian technology and weaponry was involved in the latest conflict.

Regardless, this ambiguity works to Iran's advantage. The very accusations against Iranian involvement in this conflict, or Yemen and Iraq serves as a tacit admission by the Islamic Republic's adversaries, the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, that it has means to strike all three, while claiming plausible deniability.



PAOLO MAGGIOLINI (Research Fellow, at the Catholic University of Milan)

As soon as the cease-fire went into effect, the two main belligerents began to claim their victory. Israel's military seems satisfied with the result of its operations, while Netanyahu is trying again to assert his role exploiting the operation over Gaza to divide his opponents. Hamas is celebrating its military efforts, presenting itself as an effective defender of East Jerusalem and the Palestinians. Nevertheless, this last round of fighting cannot be reduced to the simple struggle between Israel and Hamas. First, while the Palestinian political camp remains fragmented, the recent fighting has revitalized Palestinians who have raised their voices calling for equal rights and justice, from the West Bank, Gaza and Israel to the diaspora. Secondly, the conflict has found a new centrality with different regional and international actors that have tried to influence the events. The successful Egyptian brokerage now seems to prevail over Iran and Turkey's tactical moves, while the US's recent diplomatic mission tried to stem the conflict and reestablish the centrality of the PNA and Abbas, who remained quite silent during the fighting. In this framework, although not really necessary, the Abraham Accords have proved to be only remotely connected with the conflict. Nevertheless, neither can the cease-fire provide guarantees that fighting will not break out soon again, nor does the US's proposal for a new phase of management of the conflict give grounds for hope in a new round of negotiations. However, this does not mean a simple return to the status quo ante. The recent fighting shows that the conflict has already entered a new phase with a different set of rules. Behind the temporary claims of victory, there is a huge question of legitimacy and representativeness that will characterize the future development of this conflict and has already opened an unexpected debate in a part of the international audience, and especially within the US.

**MICHELE BRIGNONE (Executive Director at Fondazione Oasis)**

Last summer, normalization of relations between four Arab countries and Israel epitomised the marginality of the Palestinian question. If on one hand the latest escalation between Hamas and Israel put Palestine back in the limelight, on the other hand it was a confirmation of decades of political deadlock. After a new ceasefire everyone claimed victory, but nobody really achieved what they aimed to. Hamas was able to burnish its credentials in the face of an ineffective Palestinian Authority but failed to arouse a full-scale uprising. Netanyahu's Israel caused substantial damage to the Hamas infrastructure, including their tunnels, and further weakened Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority, but the Israeli leader is unlikely to reverse his political decline. Both sides have significantly increased their military capacity: Hamas launched more rockets in 11 days than it did during 51 days of fighting in 2014; the Israeli Iron Dome proved successful in neutralising the threat coming from Gaza. This further forecloses the possibility of finding a political solution to the conflict. Against this backdrop, invoking the two-state mantra amounts to mere wishful thinking. At any rate, we should not overlook how the latest round started: with serious violations of Palestinians' rights in East Jerusalem. If a comprehensive peace agreement seems utterly out of reach, more pressure should be put to restore a modicum of justice.

HUGH LOVATT (Policy fellow, Middle East and North Africa programme, European Council on Foreign Relations)

At first glance, little appears to have changed after eleven days of fighting between Israel and Palestinian factions led by Hamas. A renewed ceasefire, although offering civilians on both sides an important respite from violence, promises little more than a return to an unsustainable and unliveable situation for Gazans.



The parties themselves have also gone back to business as usual. Israel claims to have degraded Hamas' military capabilities and restored Israeli deterrence. Yet Hamas has emerged from fighting still firmly in control of Gaza and politically emboldened, even if its use of violence cannot break Israel's blockade of the Strip nor win Gazans the dignified future that they deserve. Hamas and Israel have each spoken of the need for a more sustainable solution. But none have presented a viable alternative - beyond trying to force greater concessions from the other during ongoing talks mediated by Egypt. While both sides want calm for now, they are already talking about when, not if, the next conflict will take place.

The international response looks equally directionless. Both the United States and European Union seem to be counting on Mahmoud Abba and his Palestinian Authority to help reconstruct Gaza and contain Hamas. Such a strategy is destined to backfire. Returning PA governance to Gaza is a worthy goal. But doubling down on the current broken and authoritarian Palestinian political system will not help Gaza and risks unlearning the lessons of past failures.

ANNA MARIA BAGAINI (University of Nottingham)

The cease-fire between Israel and Hamas is in place and working for the moment, but frictions within Jewish-Arab mixed cities inside Israel have not disappeared yet; indeed, the agreement did not calm tensions inside Israel in Lod, Ramle, Jaffa, Jerusalem, Acre and Bat Yam that followed as a consequence of the clashes on Temple Mount, at the very origin of the escalation between the IDF and Hamas.

The violence, not so much in Gaza, but more in Israel, divided Israeli opposition parties that were on the verge of finally form a "government of change" under the joint leadership of Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett, turning (in the first place) the tide in favour of Benjamin Netanyahu. Instead, last Sunday, Bennett announced his



renewed support to the anti-Netanyahu coalition, giving on paper to the new government 61 legislators.

Yair Lapid has the mandate to form a government until Wednesday at midnight: he has just three days to reach a deal with Yamina, plus a separate deal with the United Arab List, which will support the coalition without becoming part of the government. It is meaningful that this unprecedented agreement between an Arab-Israeli party and a coalition including right-wing parties is taking place in this important historical moment for Israeli society and politics.

MARCELLA SIMONI (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

In this short piece I enumerate four main reasons why the clashes of May 2021 between Israel and Gaza represent a turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on multiple and interlocking levels. My focus is more on internal than on international dynamics.

The first point is that the context of this war is now broadly understood as colonial or even settler colonial in that it is considered connected to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories (since 1967); for the first time in the clashes between Israel and Hamas, it has brought 1948 back into the picture as shown by the ongoing house evictions of Palestinians who have resided in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah in Jerusalem since 1948-49. Such evictions have been authorized by the Israeli Supreme Court following the petitions of Israeli settlers according to the 1970 Amendment of the Absentees' Property Law of 1950. This law can be appealed by Jewish, but not by Moslem and Christian (Palestinian) Israelis.

The second factor is the deep political crisis that envelopes both the Israeli and Palestinian political systems. Former PM Benjamin Netanyahu has desperately tried to avoid trial for charges of corruption; and in an Israeli Groundhog electoral Day four rounds of elections were held in just two years. It seems that a fifth has just



been avoided, with the possibility of a new government led by MK Naftali Bennet. This process has extenuated and further fragmented an already divided Israeli society, along class, color and ethnical cleavages. In the Palestinian Territories - deeply divided between a Fatah dominated WB and a Hamas dominated GS - no elections have been called at all since 2007 and no judicial system is interested/able to address the endemic corruption of much of the Palestinian political leadership.

The third factor to consider is the constant rise of an unchecked violent and racist political rhetoric in both Israeli and Palestinian camps in the period that preceded the war. This is directly linked to the eruption of physical violence in mixed cities within Israel proper, where economically disadvantaged groups live, in this case Palestinian Israelis and Mizrahi Jews (of Arab heritage). In a colonial situation these two groups would be likely to share an intercommunal interest in trying to subvert the existing framework, but not in Israel proper and in the Palestinian Territories, where nationalist narratives dominate over class sensitivities.

The fourth reason why this specific clash can be seen as a game changer is that it has lifted a veil on the rhetoric of the two-state solution and has made clear that no peace deal based on this formula is even remotely in sight. The expression two-state solution has now lost relevance and adherence to the situation on the ground. Whether the lay of the land has been transformed by the settlement project, the nationalist politics that supported it, the military clashes that have occurred since 1993, the Palestinian fragmentation, the rise of Hamas, the weakness of Fatah, the threat of annexation of the WB and the subsequent move of the US embassy to Jerusalem, or by a combination of all these factors, the two-state solution is no longer a viable option. The Israeli writer A. B. Yehoshua has openly called for a binational State; the well-known political scientist Ian Lustick has written about the need to move towards other interpretative paradigms and other political options.

In closing, I would like to mention one more factor that is not new, but that is not brought into the picture often enough, and that



could add some complexity and nuance to our general understanding. As in the past, during this last war too, some Israeli, Palestinian, Israeli-Palestinian and diasporic grassroots organizations have often denounced that the idea of the inevitability of conflict is the result of precise political choices, starting from the adoption of nationalist narratives that construct identity on religious belief, cultural/ethnic belonging and/or citizenship. From their work derive two corollaries: first, that accepting the existence of the Other's narrative and history does not diminish one's own; and that changing the narrative in this direction may help in shaping a different - and less war recurrent - future.

PAOLA RIVETTI (Assoc Prof, Dublin City University)

As the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas interrupted the military attack on Gaza by the Israeli Defence Force, the world is likely to breathe a sigh of relief before turning its back on Palestine. While we should rejoice for the cessation of the military violence, we should resist the temptation of looking away. More importantly, we should use this time to devote discrete analytical attention to the processes that define what is going on in Palestine/Israel.

Because of the ongoing pandemic, the recent resurgence of military violence has been accompanied by an intense activism of Palestinians on social media, whether they heal from Israel, the OPT, or the diaspora. Their voices matter because they tell us a different story from the one we are used to.

The first lesson we should learn from Palestinians has to do with the language we mobilise to speak about Palestine/Israel. To us, they have made it clear that this is not a conflict and that there is no reciprocity between the two sides. One sovereign state, backed up by world powers, with full military and administrative control of its territory is ruling over - and violently dispossessing - a stateless population, ruled by a complicit elite (the Palestinian Authority)



which has no military force and no economic or territorial sovereignty. Palestinian and Israeli analysts and researchers have made it clear to us that this is settler colonialism in action in the West Bank and Gaza, and apartheid within 1948 Israel.

The second lesson we should learn from Palestinians has to do with analytical rigour. Do not overlap Zionism with Israel and with being Jew, Palestinians have told us, because this is the central trope of historical European anti-Semitic racism (of which the West detains the monopoly) and because that conflation is simply untrue. Not all Jews are Israeli, not all Jews are Zionist, not all Israeli Jews are Zionist. Some of the staunchest supporters of Zionism, even in its present racist and sectarian form, are not Jews and are not even Israelis but white supremacists living in Europe and North America. Racism never translates into good policies or sound analysis. As we keep on forgetting it in the West, Palestinians are there to remind us.

The third lesson has to do with the international law. Palestinian legal scholars have explained to us that unless it is embodied and lived up by institutions and the forces of civil society, international law only serves the interests of the powerful. Information about Israel's repeated violations of UNSC resolutions are widely available, and the recent attack - which showcased unprecedented lethal violence against Gazawis - is currently part of a larger investigation by the ICC of war crimes in Palestine. However, in spite of this, facing the reality seems impossible for political elites in Europe and USA. One question lingers: will they wait until the shallowness of their liberal claim of being 'super partes' is replaced by the far right Islamophobic support for Israel, or will they act?

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