

Changes in Domestic Palestinian Politics and Their Influence on Israel and the Middle East

Conference Summary

June 2018

On May 7th 2018, the Mitvim Institute and the Program for Middle East Studies at the Yezreel Valley Academic College held a conference that focused on the changes in the Palestinian domestic politics and their impact on Israel and the region. The speakers at the conference focused on social and political processes in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, the changing role of global and regional powers, and perceptions regarding possible solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This document summarizes the key points made during the conference.

Dr. Ido Zelkovitz, The Yezreel Valley Academic College and the Mitvim Institute

Dr. Zelkovitz claimed that in order to better usher the Palestinians and the Israelis to peace, it is necessary to recognize their interconnectivity. From a Palestinian point of view, the various mechanisms of separation, such as the Green Line, do not disconnect the different Palestinian communities, but merely change the political settings. Zelkovitz claimed that the Hamas movement is undergoing a change, and it de facto recognizes that Israel is strong and viable and that it cannot be destroyed. Therefore, in order to cope with it, Hamas is gradually adopting a more pragmatic position that aspires to integrate into the Palestinian national institutions. This change allows for dialogue between Hamas and Fatah, even though the two sides do not seem to be able to bridge their differences. The Fatah movement itself is losing its legitimacy in light of its failed conduct, its internal struggles, and its failure to realize the national vision. The two Palestinian movements – Fatah and Hamas – are presenting young Palestinians with very different societal visions, but they alone will not determine the path of Palestinian society and politics. The Palestinian future depends to a great extent on the ability to create a multilateral system with the participation of regional players and with the ability to influence the two major movements in Palestinian society.

Dr. Ronni Shaked, Truman Institute, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Dr. Shaked argued that Palestinian society is at one of its most severe national, psychological, social, and economic crises since the Nakba, and that the Palestinians have been pushed to the margins of Arab discourse and outside the Israeli political discourse. The Palestinians are not hopeful about the viability of the two options currently on the table -- either the concept of two states or the vision of a bi-national state -- as both seem impractical; however, there are no other solutions currently in discussion. This perception of reality is attributed to the Palestinians' behavior, but also to Israel and the settlement enterprise, the activities of the Arab world, and the rise of Daesh. The Palestinians and the Israelis are stuck in a hybrid situation, which includes a mixing of the two populations. On the one hand, the Oslo Accords are not relevant anymore, and on the other hand, the Accords created a de facto reality of two distinct "states." The map of the interim agreements

clearly shows this hybrid situation and the mixing of the Israeli and Palestinian populations. Similarly, this is true for the reality in Jerusalem, in which, since Operation Defensive Shield (2002), its eastern part became socially, economically, and culturally marginalized. The Palestinian citizens of Israel who were not included in the Oslo Accords also demand their voices be heard, also through the call for the establishment of a State for All its Citizens. More population mixing and hybridization are manifested in the domestic Palestinian split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. According to Shaked, in the face of all the fragmentations and mixing, what unites the Palestinian society is an ethos of conflict. So even if there is no practical solution, agreed or imagined, the Palestinians will not give up their national struggle, which is the glue that unites all the fragments. He stressed that solutions such as the ideas of a federation or a confederation had not taken hold in both Israeli and Palestinian societies. This description leads to the existing reality of forced ethnic-religious bi-national existence, which is a recipe for the continuation of the conflict.

Prof. Shaul Mishal, Yale University and the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya

Prof. Mishal identified three relevant players to the Middle East: the superpowers (including the regional powers), the countries established under the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), and the various local communities. It is the relationship between these actors that shapes the events in the Middle East. He argues that the power of the nation states has declined, while the power of the communities has increased, and they have come to dictate the political agenda. In addition, the powers and the communities maintain a dialogue (through discussions, commerce, and civil struggle) which shapes reality. According to him, the era of great ideologies has passed, and now the players are more pragmatic and are influenced by the situation on the ground. This is also the case with the Palestinians, who discarded the discourse of "all-or-nothing". Prof. Mishal added that Hamas holds a burning hatred and a desire to exterminate Israel on the one hand, and pragmatism that leads to willingness to negotiate with Israel on the other. Having said that, Israel's role is to push the Hamas movement, as much as possible, toward a dialogue. Since the current regional politics is characterized by the dialogue between the communities and the superpowers, in the end Israel (the superpower) will have to have a dialogue with the Palestinians (both communities – the Palestinian Authority and Hamas), and the sooner the better.

Moran Zaga, The Mitvim Institute and the University of Haifa

Ms. Zaga focused on the changing relations between the Gulf states and the Palestinians, and pointed to the fact that the conflict between the Gulf states is also reflected in Palestinian politics. She noted how in 2009 the Gulf states were divided in their support for Hamas and for Fatah/the Palestinian Authority. Qatar established itself as a patron of Hamas in Gaza, dismissed the Israeli economic attaché in Doha and financially supported Hamas' activities with an investment of more than 800 million USD. In the past year, Qatar has had difficulty sustaining Hamas in the wake of the crisis with its Gulf neighbors and the diplomatic standoff with Egypt, which stopped the channeling of funds to Gaza through Egypt. The transfer of funds from Qatar to Hamas through Israel is possible, and was even carried out, but in a very measured manner. Saudi Arabia, and especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE), filled the vacuum, and as of 2015 started providing funds to the Gaza Strip, mainly through the activities of Mohammed Dahlan. This turnaround did not come about out of care for the Palestinian issue; rather, the Palestinians were used as leverage in the regional struggle between the Gulf states. According to Zaga, Egypt's attempts to promote reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah are intended to help stabilizing the region and dealing with the

threats in the Sinai. The UAE has become the main partner in these efforts. It intervenes in the Gaza Strip by providing civil and social support, rather than supporting political activities. Therefore, its involvement enjoys legitimacy and popular support. Dahlan is responsible for the transfer of funds. In light of the changes and the rivalries in the Gulf, Hamas is now cooperating with Egypt, Dahlan, and the UAE, in order to obtain funding and reinforce its governance. The UAE thus indirectly affects domestic Palestinian politics toward adopting a more pragmatic state-of-mind in the Gaza Strip. According to Zaga, Israel is part of an unofficial alliance between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt and the U.S. The existence of such an external circle of influential and moderate states creates more favorable conditions for progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Lt. Col. (ret.) Alon Eviatar, former advisor to the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT)

Lt. Col. (ret.) Eviatar began by saying that it is a mistake to treat Palestinian society as one unit, since it is not less divided than the Israeli society, and it is important to know the different groups in Palestinian society and the reasons for the splits between them. Eviatar claimed that the Palestinian demands on the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained largely unchanged, with the exception of tactical flexibility only – the 1967 borders, settlements, security, Jerusalem, and the right of return – whereas the issue of the right of return remains the most difficult hurdle to overcome. According to him, even the overall Palestinian strategy remains unchanged, and the Palestinians did not budge since the Oslo Accords and did not adapt to the changes that took place over the years. He feels that since the Palestinians are the weaker side in the conflict, they have to change and become flexible if they want to achieve their goals. According to Eviatar, the moderates in Palestinian society are afraid to raise their voices and are negligible in comparison with the mainstream. What drives the Palestinians to cooperate is the understanding, rather than the recognition, that Israel is strong and here to stay. Eviatar added that the Palestinian leadership has not changed over the years, with the leaders now aged 70 and over, and there is neither an interim nor a younger generation that has succeeded in gaining political power. However, the entire Israeli system (including the political right) understands that Mahmoud Abbas is an asset and hopes that he will continue leading the Palestinians as long as possible.

Dr. Ronit Marzan, The University of Haifa

Dr. Marzan referred to her research on social networks, portraying the Palestinians as having experienced four formative experiences that shaped their identity: (a) "loss of the mother" – the loss of the homeland in 1948; (b) "loss of the father" – the passing of Yasser Arafat, the mythological father that led the united national family; (c) the disintegration of the national family with the split between Hamas and Fatah in 2007; and (d) "the loss of the Arab brothers" – the distancing of the Arab states from the Palestinian issue, especially after the Arab Spring. According to Dr. Marzan, these experiences shape the reality of the young Palestinian generation that feels socially, economically, politically, legally, and nationally marginalized. This generation constitutes 70 percent of the Palestinian population and lacks the physical and mental ability to move in space, to be free, and participate in shaping domestic politics. This should be added to the high unemployment rate, which reaches 30 percent among young people in the West Bank and 61 percent among young people in the Gaza Strip. In addition, the young generation harshly criticizes the existing political leadership, which they perceive as exploitative and corrupt. Gender repression is also exacerbated, when men are prevented from fulfilling their role in the social fabric (livelihood,

security), and thus feel the need to establish even further their dominance vis-à-vis their women and children at home. Under these conditions, it is difficult to expect the Palestinians to change their narrative about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is better to act first of all to improve their living conditions. Dr. Marzan argued that it is possible to identify processes in which young Palestinians turn to national and Marxist literature, create cross-party collaborations, and begin to challenge both the domestic Palestinian and the Israeli systems. Before this social dynamic causes a major crisis and escalation, an agreement between Israel, Fatah and Hamas (and not with each separately) should be advanced, including through negotiations with Hamas. We may not find better partners in the near future.

Elias Zananiri, The Palestinian Committee for Interaction with the Israeli Society

Mr. Zananiri started his talk by referring to the moderate Palestinian voice and drew attention to the PLO's strategic decision of 1988 to accept the existence of the State of Israel and to advance the two-state solution. Moderate and extremist voices exist on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides, but as long as reality is difficult and the two-state solution is not in sight, the moderates are weakened and the extremists are becoming stronger. The Palestinians view the State of Israel as becoming increasingly right-wing and extreme, making changes on the ground that make the two-state solution difficult to implement. Nevertheless, according to Zananiri, this solution should not be buried and ridiculed. The solutions to the major issues of contention are known, and most of them have even been agreed upon by the parties in previous rounds of negotiations between Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas. Already on the eve of the first *intifada*, in the late 1980s, the choice was between the same two currently known alternatives: either the Israelis adopt the two-state solution or Israel becomes like South Africa during the apartheid era. The collapse of the peace negotiations in 2000 led to the second *intifada*, but since then, despite repeated failures and growing frustration, the Palestinian leadership and security forces are doing everything to prevent a third *intifada*. According to Zananiri, the Palestinian Authority loses about 13 billion USD annually due to Israeli occupation and control. The occupation must end in order to rehabilitate Palestinian society. The risk of making peace is less than the risk of continued conflict and violence. Zananiri noted that the recent meeting of the Palestinian National Council (May 2018) was of great importance. The decision taken at the meeting was to allow the Palestinian Central Council to withdraw from the framework of the Oslo Accords, and to move forward in any way it sees fit to achieve the national goal. This is a strategic turning point, which can lead to the PLO suspending its recognition of Israel and declaring the Oslo Accords null and void should Israel fail to step forward on the two-state solution path.