

Global Palestine

The Question of Palestine Must Remain at the Heart of Global Attention

By Nasser S. Judeh

Very few people in our world today have not heard of the Palestinian problem. Whether it is referred to in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the question of Palestine, the Palestinian problem, the Middle East peace process, or whichever type of terminology is used to describe it (and there are many), the world is more than aware of this lingering conflict, and the inability to resolve it. The rights of the Palestinian people and the tragedy of the Palestinian refugee problem are internationally acknowledged as longstanding issues still in need of a solution. A prominent U.S. politician once remarked that in travels around the world two to three decades ago, the Palestinian issue would be raised by foreign leaders only in passing and infrequently. More recently, however, it would be at the top of the list of topics raised by diplomats, policymakers, and average citizens anywhere and everywhere.

The question of Palestine has undoubtedly provided the world with an international vocabulary that applies today to any number of different conflicts: the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war, occupation, deprivation, the right of return, the peace process, just and durable peace, resistance, illegal settlements, mutual recognition, and so much more. The Arab-Israeli conflict has provided the world with a host of UN General Assembly (UNGA), UN Security Council (UNSC), Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Arab League resolutions. UNGA Resolutions 181, 194 and UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338 have become household terms for millions around the globe. The land-for-peace formula and the two-state solution have provided the substance for peace conferences, public (and not-so-public) negotiations, accords, agreements, understandings, and misunderstandings.

◁ Jordan's King Abdullah II and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas during a reception ceremony in the West Bank city of Ramallah, August 7, 2017. *Mohamad Torokman/Reuters*

The past five decades have seen numerous international initiatives to end the conflict. Many of these initiatives have been put forward by statesmen, diplomats, and policymakers: the Rogers Plan, Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy, the step-by-step approach, the Reagan initiative, Bush's "linkage," the Clinton parameters, the Obama plan and the John Kerry-led engagements in 2013–14, and, nowadays, President Donald Trump's plan for an "ultimate deal," are only but a few. Other initiatives have been associated with international capitals and cities that now bear their names from Geneva and Camp David in the 1970s to Madrid, Washington and Oslo in the 1990s, and Wye River, Annapolis, Aqaba, and Taba in the first decade of this millennium. These are merely the main initiatives and processes out of tens of others.

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Now, in 2017, one hundred years since the Balfour Declaration following Britain and France's agreement to split the Middle East between them, seventy years after UNGA Resolution 181 and the Partition Plan of 1947, almost seventy years since the 1948 war, and fifty years since the Six Day War of 1967 and UNSC Resolution 242, the question of Palestine remains unresolved.

The world forgets that the Palestine issue needs to be addressed comprehensively, now—not just debated, analyzed, and studied. Everything has been tried: international peace conferences, direct and indirect talks, proximity talks, exploratory talks, secret talks, mediation, superpower shepherding, and so many other bold and creative attempts to resolve one of contemporary history's longest conflicts. A sad reality today is that the Palestinian problem has become part of our daily routine—a common subject of debate and discussion, taught as a subject at schools and universities across the world; and the subject of innumerable books, publications, articles, reference material as well as academic conferences and seminars for decades. Undoubtedly, all of this is essential in order to keep awareness of the issue alive, but it should not be an alternative to practical steps to end this tragedy.

Admittedly, a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, at the core of which is the Palestinian-Israeli dimension, would certainly put the peace process "industry" out of business. What will some people write about if the question of Palestine is resolved and what will others protest for or against? It would be an exercise in futility now to go over why we failed, or why on so many occasions we were so close to the finish line, yet never able to cross it. It is also not useful to revisit the reasons for past failures, and what was missing in which initiative, as this has been the subject of countless narratives by the parties themselves and observers of the negotiating history between them. Rather, I aim to emphasize the centrality of addressing and resolving the Palestinian problem, and why it must remain at the forefront of international attention.

One must acknowledge that some traction was achieved, and much progress was made as a result of many of the attempts to resolve the conflict. Sadly, however, the progress made in past attempts was brushed aside whenever a new initiative arose or when new negotiations resumed. Even building on past agreements and understandings was totally rejected by new players who claimed, at different junctures, that they are not bound by past agreements or understandings. The result was a series of vicious circles.

A major shortcoming of several negotiating processes over the past five decades is that they were either stillborn or doomed to be short-lived. In many cases this was because "complicated" issues were either left for a "later" discussion, or left out altogether. Simplistically put, this would be akin to negotiating a property deal while leaving the size and location out of the discussion! Leaving Jerusalem and refugees out of a new initiative is a recipe for failure even before one starts negotiating. Refusing to negotiate according to Resolution 242 and the principle of land-for-peace because this "preempts the endgame," is essentially negotiating for the sake of negotiating without the will or intent to produce tangible results. Successive Israeli governments, including the current one, have resorted to this tactic to avoid concluding a deal. On the other hand, without the pressure of negotiations, Israel gets away with outrageous settlement building.

We, in Jordan, have always maintained that serious, direct, and time-lined negotiations with a clear and early emphasis on borders, right from the beginning, would resolve the discussion on sovereignty, and therefore the issue of the illegal settlements, and put an end to settlement building once and for all. UNSC Resolution 2334 of last December was crystal clear on the illegality of settlements, with which the international community concurs. While the world outlaws, condemns, and criticizes Israeli actions, it takes only a quick look at the horrendous geographic and demographic landscape of today's West Bank to see the intensity of settlement policy over

the decades. Israel has practically never stopped settling. Negotiations, even if at times protracted, tedious, and not totally productive, mean that the world watches and scrutinizes Israel much more closely during these negotiations than in their absence. Some settlement activity may indeed slip through the net while negotiations are ongoing, but far less than the frenzy of settlement building and settlement expansion that takes place away from negotiations. And again, when negotiations resume, they cannot be open-ended. They must adhere to a defined timeframe.

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Progress during negotiations was indeed achieved on several occasions. In 2000, the Arafat-Barak negotiations broke a taboo previously imposed by Israel on any discussion regarding Jerusalem. Even without a formal agreement, it was a significant milestone. In 2008, the Abbas-Olmert negotiations crossed a second major hurdle by having a serious discussion on refugees. Moreover, Israel's long-term insistence that its security in the "Jordan Valley" is paramount was effectively addressed with the active intervention by Jordan, which made it clear that the security of its border with the future Palestinian state is its own sovereign responsibility. Jordan, in effect, put to rest the "potential threat from the east" argument presented by successive Israeli governments as a pretext not to begin or conclude negotiations and agreements.

Jordan's historic view is crystal clear: the establishment of an independent, sovereign, viable and territorially contiguous State of Palestine, and peace and security for the entire region. This vision is at the heart of Jordan's national interests and security. Jordan is directly involved in, and affected by, all final status issues: it is the largest host of Palestinian refugees in the world; King Abdullah II of Jordan assumes custody over the Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, and the Jordanian Awqaf administers the daily running of these sites. Jordan shares the longest border with both Israel and the future Palestinian state; any discussion on borders by definition has to include Jordan. Lastly, the discussion on water, a scarce resource in the region, and a major source of controversy between Israeli and Palestinian interests, has to be not only bilateral or trilateral, but multilateral if it's going to resolve the issues once and for all.

In light of these interests and the implications of the continuation of the conflict for its national interests and security, Jordan has a clear stake in the outcome of any negotiating process between Israel and the Palestinians. Yet Jordan does not negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians. It is well understood that the Palestinians themselves must negotiate the nature, shape, and dynamics of their own state, with our collective support. Nonetheless Jordan remains a major stakeholder given the implications for its interests. I was asked once if Jordan should be at the negotiating table during Palestinian-Israeli peace talks and my answer was that while Jordan does not actually have to sit at the table, it should certainly be in the room.

Negotiations succeed or fail when parties negotiate open-endedly without a timeframe and the result is, as King Abdullah II described it, too much process and no peace. When certain key final status issues are omitted from the substance of the talks, the discussion is obviously void and incomplete. The only way to close this circle is to put everything on the table, at the same time.

The notion that has often guided Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" indeed makes sense. Yet short of everything being agreed, one cannot scrap what has already been negotiated. The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 gave Israel an offer it could not and should not have refused or ignored. The potential for normal relations with the entire Arab and Muslim worlds obviously did not appeal to certain Israeli decision-makers at the time. Ironically, nowadays Israeli politicians call for "expanding the circle" and front-loading relations with some Arab and Muslim states, not only ahead of the endgame but ahead of the negotiating process altogether. This would change the approach toward negotiations between Israel and the Arab states from inside-out to outside-in.

Global Interest Needed for Regional Peace

An overview of the history of the conflict shows that only at times of sustained global interest in resolving the Palestinian problem did all parties move closer toward a solution. It is this much-needed global conviction of the centrality of this conflict that rejuvenated interest, repeatedly, and kick-started new efforts as well as provoked new approaches. Historically, regional crises, like Yemen in the early 1960s, the Lebanese crisis of 1958 and the civil war in the 1970s, "the Arab Cold War" between "conservative" and "progressive" states, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, distracted the region and the world from the Palestine issue. Yet those crises, however severe and momentous, proved to be short-lived distractions that did not affect the centrality of this core issue, and in many cases reaffirmed its importance to stabilizing the region.

More recently, regional and global dynamics are challenging the historically undisputed centrality of the Palestinian problem. The "Arab Spring" has brought an

enormous magnitude of human suffering to many Arab countries, particularly Syria. The political turbulence in Iraq since 2003 has witnessed the most horrific forms of terrorism in modern times, with a human cost not just in Iraq itself but across the region and further afield. Additionally, Sunni-Shia polarization has introduced a new dynamic to interregional relations. All of these developments have sidelined the centrality of the Palestinian issue.

Over the past two decades, only the efforts of prominent individuals, not necessarily the weight of events, have foregrounded the issue of Palestine to the center of regional and global politics, reminding the Middle East and the world that without a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, much of the instability that the region is witnessing will remain, mutate, and spill over beyond the Middle East. In the wake of the outrageous invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's regime, President George H.W. Bush immediately announced the launch of what then became known as the Madrid process. This process paved the way for the Jordan-Israel peace treaty, and the Oslo Accords and engagement on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. In 1998 when the Wye River process was faltering, the late King Hussein of Jordan, who had dedicated his life to the pursuit of peace, left his sickbed to rescue the talks. Following the 2003 war in Iraq and all its repercussions, the world had almost completely forgotten the Palestinian issue; King Abdullah II reminded the world, in a speech to a joint session of the U.S. Congress in 2007, that a solution to the Palestinian problem was a question of peace and security for the entire world, and not just Palestinians and Israelis. More recently, President Barack Obama mustered the weight and moral authority of the United States to launch a last-ditch major effort, and again it was leaders like King Abdullah II and former President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt who flew to Washington to show that although U.S. leadership is essential, Arab stakeholders in the region, as King Abdullah II put it, "have got to do the heavy-lifting."

In the last few years, we are witnessing yet again the marginalization, of the Palestinian issue, as global and regional leaders are preoccupied with the "Arab Spring," war-ravaged Syria, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and the fight against terrorism—and even more recently North Korea. The centrality of the Palestinian problem is being seriously challenged, as the international impact of other regional conflicts resonate in Western countries, in terms of instability, terrorism, or refugees. For many today, the conviction that the Palestine issue is the key to resolving other conflicts and issues in the Middle East is either disputed or overshadowed by civil wars, refugee crises, terrorism, or sectarian polarization. The linkage and causality between these issues and the Palestinian issue is no longer visible, particularly to those in the West. This may be understandable given the urgency that comes with the immediate threats that current challenges pose, but the urgency of dealing with such extraordinary realities should not come at

the expense of the Palestinian issue, which provides the fuel that feeds conflicts and radicalization. Radicalization feeds not only on conflicts but on their roots, especially political, social and economic deprivation. Deprivation always leads to despair and despair leads to extremism.

The world must come to realize, once and for all, that resolving the Palestinian conflict by necessity means understanding and emphasizing its centrality. Global leaders must resume collective work to bring about substantive comprehensive negotiations through direct talks to end this conflict, and allow this generation and future generations in the Middle East and the world to enjoy peace, security, and the chance to unleash the vast potential for prosperity. This is not simply a regional conflict. It is a global one. It is the root cause of much of the instability in the Middle East and the entry point to resolving so many other problems in the region and beyond. Maintaining the centrality of the Palestinian issue is the cornerstone to resolving it. Peace in the Middle East is peace of mind for the rest of the world.