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After Trump's Jerusalem H-Bomb: Weighing Options for Palestinians

By: Nadia Hijab · December, 2017

Protests around the world are planned against US president Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. In so doing, Trump dispensed with such details as boundaries and borders – indeed with international law itself – and repeated the long hollowed-out US commitment to facilitate "a lasting peace agreement."[1]

Given the sheer outrage of Trump's policies on Jerusalem and on Palestinian rights more broadly, as well as the fast pace at which his administration is moving to gut human and environmental rights in the US and worldwide, it is easy to fall into despair. Yet at such a time it is important to remember the longer-term trends working in the Palestinians' favor and to position the Palestinian national movement – at both the political level and that of civil society – to best advantage.

Israel's Long Trajectory to Exposure

Many of the trends in the Palestinians' favor are due to the fact that Israel is overreaching. It has won many battles but cannot win the war. That may sound like wishful thinking given the vast military, political, and economic strength that make Israel a regional superpower. But consider the country's trajectory. Its 1967

victory would have enabled it to have peace with the Arabs on its terms over the 78% of Palestine it had colonized in 1948 and thus bury the Palestinian cause forever.

Instead, it continued on the track established by the hard-core Zionists of the twentieth century that were bent on colonization and dispossession to ensure a minimum number of indigenous Palestinians and a maximum number of Jews. As Moshe Dayan said in 1950 of the 170,000 Palestinians who were able to remain in what became Israel in 1948 after 750,000 had been forced to become refugees: "I hope that, in the years ahead, another possibility might arise to implement a transfer of those Arabs from the Land of Israel." Dayan went on to become an Israeli war hero in 1967 when nearly 450,000 more Palestinians were forced to become refugees.

Starting slowly in 1967 but picking up at a breakneck speed since the Oslo Accords, which were ostensibly intended to bring peace when signed in 1993, Israel's relentless drive to colonize the newly acquired territory has produced some 600,000 settlers in 200 settlements that fragment the West Bank and divide the Palestinians from one another. Israel's master plan for Jerusalem is quite open about the 70:30 ratio it envisages between Israeli Jews to Palestinian Arabs as a result of thinning out East Jerusalem's inhabitants.

Based on their "success" in these endeavors, Israeli leaders now believe there is no need to cloak their ambitions and are declaiming their goals freely, including plans to further dispossess the Palestinians and to discriminate against those who remain. The number of laws that discriminate against the Palestinian citizens of Israel has shot up from around 50 to nearly 70 in the past few years.

Both official bodies and right-wing organizations are increasingly meting out similar treatment to Israeli Jews that seek to defend the rights of all human beings regardless of faith or ethnicity. Attacks against Breaking the Silence, an NGO that

facilitates Israeli soldiers speaking up about what they are made to do to Palestinians during their military service, are just one example. Education Minister Naftali Bennett's crackdown on ACRI (the Association for Civil Liberties in Israel) is another. Max Blumenthal's *Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel* chronicles Israel's increasingly draconian trajectory through the twentieth century to the present time and is a must-read for anyone concerned with this issue.

The "light unto nations" status Israel enjoyed as the "only democracy" in the Middle East is long gone. By now, the settlement project, with its flagrant violation of Palestinian rights, has put Israel's core quest for a Jewish state into jeopardy. Many have used the term apartheid to describe what is happening to the Palestinians in the occupied territory (OPT), including segregated roads, divergent systems of justice, and severe limits on access to water, land, and even the electromagnetic spectrum.

Increasingly the situation in the OPT has forced states and civil society advocates to take account of what is happening – and what has happened – to the Palestinian citizens of Israel. When none other than the former *New York Times* Jerusalem Bureau Chief Jodi Rudoren, who was caution itself in her reporting during her tenure, says that the term apartheid is more relevant to the treatment of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, then it is clear that the true nature of the enterprise has percolated to the surface. The evidence is in: It is not possible to have a state that privileges Jews without discriminating against "non-Jews." Who can now make the case that Israel is a democratic state with a straight face?

This reality has led to perhaps the most important longer-term trend in this conflict: The change in the views of American Jews. There is now a small but quickly growing percentage of US Jews that is mobilized to work for human rights in the Palestine solidarity movement. Leading this shift is Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), which upholds Palestinian rights as defined by the Palestinians themselves

in the 2005 call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it upholds international law and which plays a key, strategic role in the US movement for rights.[2]

The second larger, and more recent, shift in the US Jewish community is due to the surfacing of underlying tensions between Israel and the Reform and Conservative Jews who account for two-thirds of US Jews. There has been a spate of articles and analysis on the issue that suggest Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his allies are betting on the US Orthodox Jews and dismissing the rest – indeed, even treating them like second-class Jews. This is a major strategic mistake on Israel's part: US Jews contribute greatly to philanthropic causes as well as to mainstream politics and discourse. By alienating this important constituency – even as it spends millions to control the discourse and to conflate criticism of Israel and the political Zionist project with anti-Semitism – Israel is fast-tracking shifts in the US that will erode the automatic political support and massive military aid it receives and enable mainstream support for Palestinian rights and appreciation of the Palestinian story.

Palestine's Regenerating Struggle

The Palestinian struggle has developed and evolved alongside Israel's trajectory. Thirty years after the British colonial rulers crushed the 1936-39 Palestinian uprising for rights and freedom, and 20 years after the catastrophe of the loss of four-fifths of Palestine in 1948 and the dispersal of four-fifths of its people, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) took the stage and quickly became a force to be reckoned with. However, repeated Israeli – and Arab – assaults on the PLO, together with the considerable mistakes made by its leadership, led to a near-terminal blow with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the PLO's exile from Beirut, its last base bordering Israel.

Yet within just five years, the Palestinian struggle took on a new shape with the

first Intifada, the nonviolent uprising led by local leaders in the OPT. The Intifada positioned the Palestinians on the world stage and within reach of their goals given the George H. W. Bush administration's commitment to secure a fair deal in the wake of the first Gulf War in 1990. Tragically, the PLO's secret negotiations with Israel that led to the Oslo Accords frittered away the carefully nurtured Palestinian sources of strength, which included a global solidarity movement and Third World support.

Despite such setbacks, the Palestinians are not going away. Since 1948, the national struggle has been marked by a flowering of literature, art, film, and culture that reinforced and cemented Palestinian identity. As Steven Salaita said in a recent piece, "Not hing threatens Israel more than the survival of Palestinian identity through successive generations." And even though the Palestinian national leadership is in disarray, to put it mildly, the Palestinian cause is backed by an international solidarity movement that includes and is reinforced by the Palestinian-led BDS movement. For the past five years Israel and its supporters have thrown their full weight against this movement in an effort to reclaim the high ground and to control the discourse, but it is alive and kicking.

How much easier it would have been for Israel to do a deal with Jordan, Egypt, and Syria in 1967 than to gamble on having it all and deal with the constantly evolving and regenerating Palestinian movement for rights.

Palestinian Options in the Struggle for Rights

Against this background, what options do Palestinians have? There is no question that the present period holds great dangers for the Palestinians. The settler movement has received a green light to forge ahead from Trump, who could not even bring himself to say "Palestinian state" in his statement on Jerusalem, simply speaking of peace as "including…a two-state solution" and quickly making even that contingent on Israel's blessing by adding "if agreed to by both sides."

The greatest fear is for Jerusalem itself – both the Palestinian Jerusalemites and the Al Aqsa compound. There are serious concerns that Israel will speed up the dispossession and displacement of the Palestinians, using the many bureaucratic techniques it has perfected over the years as well as the bulldozer and wrecking ball. And, although Trump spoke of continuing to "support the status quo" at Jerusalem's holy sites, this is easily brushed aside by the Temple Mount movement that wants to build a third Jewish temple in place of the Al Aqsa compound.

There is also much to fear from the "Arab Quartet" – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt – and its ringleader Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, who is pushing the US-Israeli annexation plan and who reportedly offered the Palestinians a capital in Abu Dis, a suburb of Jerusalem separated from the city by the unlawful Wall Israel built largely within the OPT and which separates Palestinians from major settlements and from each other. On the other hand, the extent to which the Arab Quartet can achieve the results it wants is in question. Bin Salman himself has been overreaching with his war on Yemen, crackdown on his fellow princes, and ultimately unsuccessful push to force Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign in an attempt to weaken the Iran- and Syria-allied Lebanese party and military force Hezbollah.

Thus Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas couldn't be in a more unenviable position. If he rejects the pressure of the forces arrayed against him, he will lose US and much Arab aid, without which civil servants cannot be paid, affecting some 1.5 million people. If he bows before it, he will be forced to sign away Palestinian rights. In all cases, Abbas' arch-enemy and former Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan, the Emirates' protégé, is waiting in the wings, and is more than likely prepared to sign.

The heavy price of defying the international community is clear in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas has refused to concede defeat or give up its arms. The cost that the Palestinians in Gaza have borne over the past decade, and continue to suffer, is

high indeed. And among the rumors that abound about the final settlement Israel and the US plan to impose on the Palestinians is the transfer of Gaza's Palestinians to the Egyptian Sinai desert, far away from the borders of their original homeland (some 70% of Gaza's 1.9 million Palestinians are refugees).

On the other hand, the PLO/PA and Palestinian civil society supported by the global solidarity movement are not without options if there is a willingness to pool resources and to use all avenues available, as must be done to counter this great threat to the quest for Palestinian rights. Internally, intra-Palestinian reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas must be achieved not only as a good in itself. It is also essential to enable the Palestinian political system to pull support from diverse Arab and Asian states, some of which are closer to one party than to the other. Every possible connection that Fatah and Hamas can each separately and together gather to strengthen the Palestinian position must be tapped. It is a good sign that Abbas plans to call the PLO Central Council to an emergency session to which "all factions" will be invited.

Ways must also be found to reduce and phase out the PA's security coordination with Israel. This will be very hard given the measures Israel can take against the Palestinians, the leadership, and Abbas personally. At a minimum, Abbas's very ability to move beyond the confines of the West Bank and to travel would be curtailed. Yet expertise on the security sector exists and there is copious literature on it, including solid policy analysis from Al-Shabaka's network. This expertise would be readily available to the PA if it were to decide to scale back its coordination. It is also past time to move beyond calls for international protection for the Palestinians and develop a consistent strategy to secure such protection.

The PLO/PA must be most active on the European scene. So far those European countries that uphold international law have given Israel an easy ride. The European Union in 2016 reinforced its position that settlement products entering the EU must be labeled to give consumers an informed choice – a timid and

ultimately ineffectual measure. The advisories 18 EU states have issued to warn businesses of the risks (legal, reputational, and financial) of dealings with settlement entities have more impact but have not been streamlined in domestic law or regulation.

Despite their pusillanimous behavior, the EU and the majority of its member states can never sign off on Israel's occupation. For Europeans, the system of international law erected since World War II is their protection against other devastating wars. To succeed in its attempt to legalize the occupation, Israel will have to undermine – and has been undermining – that entire legal framework. So far, the Europeans have been able to turn a blind eye and do the minimum on the Israel-Palestine front, content to leave it to the US to be the so-called honest broker.

Trump's declaration of recognition of Jerusalem, with its concomitant assault on international law, will force the Europeans into the driver's seat, unless they want to see the careful structure they put in place tumble around them. Moreover, the question of occupied territory and annexation has become up close and personal for the Europeans since the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Having imposed sanctions against Russia, the Europeans are ill-placed to continue to treat Israel with kid gloves as it seeks to legalize its unlawful settlement enterprise.

The PLO in particular should take advantage of the Europeans' rejection of Trump's recognition and embark on an extensive public relations and outreach campaign to European governments and diplomats. It should be resolute and determined and push European countries' responsibility for upholding international law, and insist on tangible support for their position and steps against Israel's depredations. The PLO has some very seasoned diplomats it can field to do this work – after all, some of them led and won the case against Israel's Wall at the International Court of Justice in 2004.

In other areas of the globe, Israel has worked to reverse Palestine's partnerships and alliances in the Third World that were major sources of support in the 1970s and 1980s. It has successfully done this in Asia, especially India, Africa, and Latin America. But it is not too late for the Palestinians to recover ground and nurture these ties, offering services and connections where they can. Most importantly, the PLO/PA must work hard to prevent other countries from following in Trump's footsteps to recognize– or, worse – to actually move their embassy to Jerusalem.

In this work, and in particular in the US and Europe and increasingly in Latin America, the PLO would be supported by Palestinian civil society and the global solidarity movement, which can tap tens of thousands of supporters to pressure their political representatives. In the US in particular, the Palestine solidarity movement has established several strong institutions that advance Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices in the media, provide legal support to students and teachers under attack for speaking up, advocate for Palestinian rights with Congressional representatives, and pull in increasing numbers of Jews to the struggle for equal rights for all.

The role of Palestinian and global civil society, in addition to maintaining the pressure on Israel and pushing back against its attempts to control the discourse, is to keep the PLO on the straight and narrow. What Trump has done might deal a terminal blow to the Palestinian cause if Palestinians and their allies offer no coherent and coordinated response. By thinking through these and other issues and developing strategies, Palestinians and their allies can turn this tragedy into an opportunity.

1. Al-Shabaka publishes all its content in both English and Arabic (see Arabic text here.) To read this piece in Italian or Spanish, please click here or here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.
2. *It is important to underscore the second part of this sentence given the misunderstandings around*

BDS. The language of the BDS call makes it clear that the movement is against Israel's policies, not its existence, and that once the movement's goals are achieved – self-determination, freedom from occupation, justice for refugees, and equality for the Palestinian citizens of Israel – then BDS will end.

Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, is an independent, non-profit organization. Al-Shabaka convenes a multidisciplinary, global network of Palestinian analysts to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide.

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