PODCAST | POLITICS

The Arab World and Gaza Genocide with Elham Fakhro

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The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Elham Fakhro 0:00

So I think the question that civic movements across the Arab world are asking is, where is the ceiling here? Is there any point at which these governments are going to start taking real action? So while governments may be unwilling to go further in jeopardizing what they see as their own interests, they are going to face mounting pressure from civil society, which really does want to see action taken at this point.

Yara Hawari 0:29

From Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, I am Yara Hawari, and this is Rethinking Palestine.

The genocide in Gaza, which began in October 2023, is ongoing. Nearly the entire population has been displaced from their homes, with the majority forced into tiny areas in the south near the Rafah border with Egypt. Upwards of 30,000 Palestinians have been killed, a third of whom are children. Many more are trapped under the rubble of their bombed homes.

In the Arab world, demonstrations have taken place in Jordan, Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, and beyond, against this brutal assault and in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Yet by and large these demonstrations and the popular

sentiment have not been represented in the form of action from their governments.

Indeed, there is a very stark disconnect between the popular Arab support for Palestinian liberation and the action — or inaction — of the Arab regimes and leaders.

To discuss this more, I'm joined by Dr. Elham Fakhro. Elham is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter and an Associate Fellow at the Chatham House MENA program. She's the author of an upcoming book on the Abraham Accords and Arab normalization with Israel. Elham, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Elham Fakhro 1:49

Thank you, Yara. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Yara Hawari 1:52

Elham, obviously this is a huge topic and we can't homogenize the region into a one-size-fits-all, but I think it would be good to try and cover as much as possible and to get an overview.

So, with that in mind, perhaps you can start off by giving us a summary of what the reaction to the genocide in Gaza has been amongst people across the region.

Elham Fakhro 2:11

Absolutely. So there's been massive support for the Palestinians across the entire region, and I think that's quantifiable in three ways.

We've seen popular protests taking place across the Arab world, particularly, as you noted, in the countries where protests are more or less allowed. The numbers that we've seen coming out onto the streets in places like Jordan, Egypt, Morocco,

and Yemen haven't really been seen since, I would say, the Iraq War protests shook the region in 2003 and during the Second Intifada.

So there's huge popular mass support for Palestinians in Arab cities. We've also seen a revival of the boycott movement — a lot of support for BDS right now, particularly targeting the brands that support the occupation and support the settlements in particular. We've seen Starbucks targeted, McDonald's, and even lesser-known brands like Caribou Coffee. People do their research. Caribou, for example, operates in the settlements and people have targeted them as a result. So it's an expansive boycott movement. Even Joe and the Juice, which is not a usual target for these movements, has also been targeted for boycott in cases like Bahrain.

People on social media are raising awareness, educating themselves when access to this information just isn't available on usual media networks or the mainstream media. And we're also seeing evidence of this support in polling data that's been coming out in the past few weeks. For example, a recent poll from the Washington Institute found that 96 percent of Saudis now oppose normalization with Israel — a jump from previous numbers. Another poll released by the Doha Institute found that 97 percent of Arabs experience psychological stress from the conflict in Gaza.

People are deeply, deeply affected by the devastation and the genocide that they're seeing play out on a day-to-day basis. And I'll just anecdotally point out from my own experience that social media is flooded with images from Gaza, and has been every single day for the past three months. People aren't letting up. You might expect there to be fatigue at this point, but there isn't. People are determined to keep the awareness going and to keep the pressure going as much as they can.

Yara Hawari 4:25

This popular sentiment that you've outlined for us stands in direct contrast to

many of the Arab regimes and their governments, who've largely been inactive.

Can you tell us why this is the case and perhaps give us a few examples?

Elham Fakhro 4:40

Yeah, absolutely. So the Arab states have been active nearly at the level of rhetoric only. They've come together during several summits — the Saudi-led summit in particular at the beginning of the war — to call for a ceasefire. They've called for eventually a return to talks around the two-state solution and for greater humanitarian aid to enter. These are the three points around which they are united. But this rhetoric hasn't translated into any kind of meaningful action.

Jordan is the only country that has even recalled its ambassador to Israel. The other Arab states that have ambassadors haven't even gone so far as to do that. It's a far cry when you think about the past actions that have been taken at the level of, for example, the 1973 oil embargo. Arab states have been very, very timid this time around. They're placing their own interests above the Palestinian issue. It's clear that they aren't really willing to respond to popular pressures to do something about this — or at least to cut or downgrade diplomatic relations. And that's what we're seeing across the board.

Yara Hawari 5:47

Elham, you are largely based in Bahrain. Could you tell us about what's been going on there and the protests there?

Elham Fakhro 5:54

Yeah, so Bahrain has been one of the most active places on this, despite it being very small and having a smaller population relative to the rest of the Arab world. We've seen weekly protests every single Friday in support of the Palestinians. These take two forms.

There are official, licensed protests that are sanctioned by the government. These are usually led by a society called the Bahrain Society Against Normalization with the Zionist Enemy — a civil society group established in 2002 during the Second Intifada to resist any kind of normalization with Israel, whether through trade, official diplomatic relations, or anything like that. This society has been organizing weekly protests, and to some extent the state tolerates it and allows it.

But I do have to add a caveat: it's within carefully confined areas. The licenses given for these protests are either within a closed-off courtyard in Manama — away from public view — or they take place outside the capital, again away from the main highways. This is really where we see what the government is willing to tolerate in terms of public visible dissent.

There are also plenty of unauthorized protests that take place, organized by other political groups — some of which have been banned in connection with the Arab Spring protests. These take place usually in villages, also away from public view, and these are the ones more likely to be subjected to a crackdown. People found protesting in these demonstrations have been the target of arrest, and Human Rights Watch has recently issued a report outlining the arrest of children under the age of 18 at some of these demonstrations.

Yara Hawari 7:42

And why is it that Bahraini authorities allow some protests to take place and not others?

Elham Fakhro 7:47

It's a great question, Yara. I think they are aware that completely banning protests around this issue would be a step too far. I think there's a consciousness that people feel very, very strongly around this issue — perhaps an awareness that there needs to be some kind of release for the pressures that people face.

So they do allow these protests, but I think we do need to recognize that that's unlikely to have an impact on public policy in the state. It's more of a sense of: okay, let the people release some of the frustrations and anger that they feel around this issue, we'll allow it to take place away from public view. None of the tourists visiting the country, none of the embassy officials are going to really see any of this unless they go and look for it. None of the journalists certainly.

And so in this way, they're able to balance between popular pressure and their own policy of maintaining relations with Israel.

Yara Hawari 8:41

And that's the strategy that we've seen elsewhere as well — where authorities allow demonstrations as a way to release popular outrage against the genocide. We've certainly seen that in Jordan. And you mentioned earlier that Jordan was the only regime that has relations with Israel that actually took action and recalled its Israeli ambassador.

And I think Jordan has been an interesting one to follow. They obviously have to play a very delicate balancing act between their domestic and foreign considerations. The majority of the population has Palestinian backgrounds, and Jordan has seen massive protests in support of Gaza and the Palestinian struggle. Meanwhile, the Jordanian regime has a very strong relationship with the US — it's actually the second-largest recipient of US aid after Israel. And so many in Jordan are calling for the government to do more, to cut diplomatic ties with the Israeli regime. And it's worth noting that they did endorse South Africa's ICJ genocide submission.

But do you think this is as far as they will go?

Elham Fakhro 9:50

We are waiting to see where the red lines are for the Arab governments. What

number of dead Palestinians is going to spur further action from them? It wasn't 10,000, it wasn't 20,000, and it isn't 30,000. So I think the question that civic movements across the Arab world are asking is, where is the ceiling here? Is there any point at which these governments are going to start actually taking real action?

For Jordan, as you noted, it's very, very dependent on the United States. So is a country like Bahrain. And so governments for now are choosing to prioritize those relationships. But it is impacting civic perceptions on the ground. I mean, opposition and anger towards not only Israel but the United States is at an all-time high right now. Even polling data reflects this — the earlier poll I referenced from the Doha Institute found that 70 percent of Arabs, across 16 countries, are articulating anger towards the United States as well.

So while governments may be unwilling to take action or go further in jeopardizing what they see as their own interests, they are going to face mounting pressure from civil society, which really does want to see action taken at this point.

Yara Hawari 11:05

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A lot of these regimes are incredibly worried about civil unrest and how this might spill over into criticism of domestic policy, because I think Arabs across the region are realizing that the Palestinian struggle is directly linked to their own liberation from authoritarian regimes.

Elham Fakhro 11:40

This is where we see the two issues as related. Arab governments have not been responsive on the Palestinian issue, but this also brings back memories and

existing grievances for Arab populations about their own local demands, which is why we do see the two issues linked in the popular consciousness for many people.

Yara Hawari 12:00

So, of course, over the last few years, policy vis-à-vis the Israeli regime in the region has been characterized by the Abraham Accords, which you have written extensively about. These Accords ushered in a new and, quite frankly, frightening era for the Middle East, where diplomatic relations with the Israeli regime grant all kinds of privileges, including weaponry from the US.

Now, prior to October 2023, Saudi Arabia was actually poised to be next in line to normalize, and it seemed like negotiations were speeding along. What happened there, and what's likely to happen in the coming years — particularly noting that polling data you mentioned, where 96 percent of Saudis now oppose normalization?

Elham Fakhro 12:49

So the issue of Saudi normalization is a very interesting one, because most of what we hear about this comes from US sources and from Israeli sources. And I think Israeli sources in particular have always wanted to make it seem like the Arab states are on the cusp of normalization, that they're just about to, or that they want to — and that they're willing to do it cost-free.

Now, this was the case for the UAE and Bahrain, and largely Morocco and Sudan, who entered these Accords without really ensuring anything for the Palestinians. It was cost-free in that sense. But Saudi Arabia, for its part, has at least at the formal level maintained a commitment to a two-state solution and maintained its commitment to something for the Palestinians, even if that might fall short.

Now, of course, there are differences between what a country sometimes declares as its formal policy and what it's willing to do in fact and what it's negotiating

behind the scenes. But I think it is notable that Saudi Arabia hasn't yet backed down from this. And whenever asked by media sources, Saudi officials repeat the same thing — whenever they're asked this question, the answer is always the same: we won't normalize without progress on the Palestinian issue or something akin to a two-state solution. And I think this is significant because it does show that, as much as there's a lack of clarity around this, there is still some level of commitment to Saudi Arabia achieving something for the Palestinians.

It's not exactly the way Israeli media and Israeli officials portray it, which is that Saudi Arabia is ready to sign tomorrow. I think on the other side of it, there are also questions around US commitments. Saudi Arabia has asked for a lot in return for normalization — they've asked for nuclear know-how, advanced missile technology, and something akin to a US security pact. Whether the US is prepared to deliver all of these things to Saudi Arabia in exchange for normalization is another open question. So even before October 7th, there were a lot of real gray areas around whether Saudi Arabia was prepared to go the full route.

It's worth pointing out that Saudi Arabia also has a lot to lose. It does risk its moral authority as the leader of the Arab and Islamic world. There's a possibility that relations with Israel would inflame its existing tensions with Iran. Saudi Arabia has been committed to de-escalating with Iran, most notably over the past year, and I don't think they want to see that reversed through a new relationship with Israel.

So where I'm getting at is: Saudi Arabia has a lot to think about. It's not that straightforward, not that clear-cut, and I don't think a deal was really as imminent as Israeli and Western officials made it seem. Now, post-October 7th, I think it's even less likely. Saudi Arabia has to be conscious of — and is conscious of — popular sentiments, not just within the kingdom but within the broader Arab and Islamic world. And so this is definitely one area where the Gaza war has impacted the decision-making of an Arab government.

Yara Hawari 16:08

One of the things that I've read, or I've seen Saudi officials doing, is framing normalization as strategic — not only for Saudi Arabia itself, but also for the Palestinian people. So they sort of frame it as a mechanism for leverage to achieve Palestinian rights or to move closer to a Palestinian state.

Elham Fakhro 16:27

I don't think it works if you come into this and say, okay, we're going to establish the relationship and then later we're going to use it as some kind of leverage, or later we're going to use it to secure something for the Palestinians. That clearly doesn't work.

Yara Hawari 16:42

Elham, I want to move us along because we haven't talked about Egypt yet, and Egypt plays quite a significant role. Not only has it normalized diplomatic relations with Israel several decades ago, but it's also complicit in the siege of Gaza through the Rafah border. Now we've seen some mobilization in Egypt — noting, of course, that it's an incredibly repressive environment for political protest — but we've also seen on a diplomatic level a lot of pressure placed on Egypt by the US and by Israel, and there've been rumors that Egypt will be forced by the US and Israel to rehouse, or forcibly expel, Palestinians from Gaza into the Sinai.

Now, Egyptian president Sisi has denied these rumors — not out of love for Palestinians, but rather because he has his own security concerns in the Sinai. What do you think about Egypt's role in all of this? And do you think that the level of outrage of the Egyptian people could have some kind of influence on government policy?

Elham Fakhro 17:44

Again, like all other Arab countries, we haven't seen that happen yet, and it's not clear where the threshold lies. Egypt has been under pressure — certainly so has Jordan — to open its borders and rehouse, as you say, or "voluntarily resettle" as the Israelis say, the Palestinians. It has not been willing to do that yet. Again, it's not clear if that changes down the line, but so far that's the case. And Egypt's official position towards Israel really hasn't budged in spite of popular pressures on it to do so.

Yara Hawari 18:20

So perhaps we can turn finally to Yemen.

Now Yemen has historically been a big supporter of Palestine. The Yemeni people have been hitting the streets over the last few months in their hundreds of thousands. And Yemen has also taken direct action in opposition to the genocide in Gaza by disrupting the shipping lanes in the Red Sea.

A lot of people in Palestine obviously feel like this is the kind of thing that other Arab regimes should be doing — disrupting and really making the world pay a price for their complicity in the genocide. How is this action that Yemen has taken being seen across the region?

Elham Fakhro 19:06

Yemen's action has been pretty extraordinary. It's one of the poorest Arab states. We all know that the conflict has been going on since 2015, it's in a dire humanitarian condition, and yet the Houthis have been able to pretty successfully impose a blockade on Israel, which no other Arab government or country has been willing to do.

As a result of that, we have seen a lot of support for the Houthis from across the Arab world. Their popularity has of course risen. So has Hamas's popularity. One of the polls I cited earlier — the one by the Washington Institute — in fact found a

four-fold increase in support for Hamas within Saudi Arabia.

And so this is one area that people have been, I think, positively moved by. It's seen in the context of global solidarity for the Palestinians — also what we've seen with South Africa bringing the case to the ICJ, Namibia supporting that, Bangladesh supporting that. So I think there is this fascinating emergence of the Global South as a point of solidarity for the Palestinians, beyond just the Houthis and Yemen.

And I think the US- and UK-led bombardment of Yemen in response is very telling and really reinforces perceptions. This is Western support for a settler colonial state facing resistance — not only from the Palestinians, but from the Arab masses and elements of the Global South.

Yara Hawari 20:35

Thank you, Elham. And I think this is really a turning point in the region. I think there's no going back from this. I think what people are increasingly realizing — from Jordan to Bahrain to Yemen — is that the Palestinian struggle for liberation is inherently tied to their own liberation. Support from the US in countries such as Jordan and in many of the Gulf States is really only benefiting a very small minority of the population, the elites. And so people are recognizing that the situations that they're in, the hardships that they're facing, the authoritarianism that they face, is ultimately tied to the Palestinian people's struggle.

And this is something that I think a lot of the Arab regimes are worried about — that this will spill over and cause instability domestically. Because for so long, these regimes have really tried to isolate Palestine and make the Palestinian struggle this sort of single-issue cause, or to use it as a political pawn. And people are, I think, refusing that understanding of Palestine and what the struggle for liberation means.

Elham Fakhro 21:48

Absolutely. I think this is circling back to the issue of a lack of representation in the Arab world — this is really tying everything together. And I think if you look at Bahrain, it's a very good example. I mean, people are out on the streets, they're protesting the war in Gaza, they're protesting the US base, but they're also asking questions around their own government's policy that they were not consulted on: why is Bahrain participating in the naval effort to patrol the Red Sea? Nobody has been consulted on this issue. And so, yeah, what we're seeing in Gaza very much ties into the lack of representation across the Arab world right now.

Yara Hawari 22:25

Elham, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine. We'll leave it there, but we hope to have you on again soon.

Elham Fakhro 22:34

Thank you, Yara. It was great to join you.

Yara Hawari 22:40

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