ROUNDTABLE | POLITICS

Allying Against Iran: Repercussions for Palestine

By: Diana Buttu, Osamah Khalil, Mouin Rabbani · August, 2018

When the Iran deal – or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – was signed three years ago, Al-Shabaka analysts did not see significant changes in store for US-Palestinian relations, although they predicted that Palestinians' situation would worsen when the US inevitably placated Israel and its lobby for, in Ali Abunimah's words, "mildly defying" them.[1] Indeed, the following year, the US pledged to give Israel $38 billion in military assistance over a 10-year period – the largest military aid package ever given to Israel, or to any country, by the US.[2]

Now, with the Trump administration having pulled out of the JCPOA and the US reinstituting sanctions against Iran, what does the U-turn mean for Palestinians? Diana Buttu, Osamah Khalil, and Mouin Rabbani examine how the closer relations among Israel, the US, and the Gulf states – with Iran as their common enemy – have informed US actions to the detriment of Palestinians, the repercussions of these developments on Hamas-Iran relations, and what Palestinians can do to challenge the forces against them.

Osamah Khalil

The benefits to Israel were in evidence before the US withdrew from the JCPOA, particularly with Trump's decision on Jerusalem. The level of coordination and shared perspectives between the Trump administration and the Netanyahu government appears to be even closer than the cordial relationship between

George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon. At the same time, Trump's Jerusalem announcement fit into a broader historical pattern of the US attempting to impose a solution on the Palestinians and appeared to have the support of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It also appears that Trump's eventual peace plan will rely in part on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Arab states pressuring Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian leadership to accept a proposal that will be far less than their minimal demands. Washington will again blame the Palestinians for failing to seize the moment and will demonize the Palestinian leadership, including calls for change. This has already begun and was demonstrated again with the interview given by Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law and advisor, to al-Quds.

In some respects, Abbas has already prepared for this with his convening of a Palestinian National Council (PNC) meeting in April. The PNC members were Fatah cronies selected by Abbas. Although the goal was to provide Abbas with the appearance of legitimacy at a time when his domestic and international support has waned, it had the opposite effect. Abbas further demonstrated how ineffectual and unimaginative he and the Palestinian leadership have become.

Palestine and the Palestinians remain the major impediment to open and friendly relations between Israel and the Arab Gulf states. Although the Gulf states publicly object to Israel's continuing occupation and oppression of the Palestinians and unwillingness to reach an agreement that would lead to the creation of a Palestinian state, their protestations are increasingly less strident and support for Palestinian self-determination is not a priority. Instead, the Gulf states are focused on maintaining and extending their rule as well as curtailing Iran's real or perceived influence.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) is susceptible to pressure from the Arab governments, Israel, and the United States because it is dependent on aid for its survival. Moreover, the PA's authoritarian rule is in line with that of other Arab states. The PA's repression of critics is not merely to satisfy Israel and the United

States, although those are important factors, but to ensure the continued dominance of a discredited leadership whose rule is maintained by patronage, fear, and a perceived lack of alternatives. With Abbas in poor health, it is likely that his replacement will be an individual from the security services who has been approved by Israel and the United States. Indeed, there are reports that representatives of the Palestinian security services have held meetings with their Israeli and Arab counterparts to prepare for the announcement of the Trump plan. Thus, Palestinians can expect an even more repressive PA that seeks to curry favor with the Trump administration, Israel, and the Arab states.

As for Hamas, it is in a difficult position. Although it still holds power in Gaza, regionally it is weaker than ever before. Nor has it demonstrated an ability to break Israel's siege on Gaza or improve the movement's standing regionally or internationally. Relations between Hamas and Iran and Syria are strained. It has a tenuous marriage of convenience with Egypt. Its ties to Qatar have also weakened, although Turkey has provided some limited support. Meanwhile, the US and Israel continue to portray Hamas as an extension of Iran's influence in the region. Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah have encouraged this portrayal.

Though Abbas has negotiated and signed multiple national unity agreements with Hamas, he has no intention of implementing them without the movement's total surrender. Abbas and his advisors do not appear to care how many Palestinians in Gaza suffer as a result of their policies, as they have hoped for over a decade that if conditions in Gaza are intolerable the population will eventually overthrow Hamas. Meanwhile, Abbas and the PA security services conveniently label any critic of their repressive rule as Hamas supporters. They have even extended this to protests in support of Palestinians in Gaza, as occurred recently in Ramallah. The PA's security services and Fatah thugs dispersed a June protest with violence, intimidation, and sexual harassment. With the US's withdrawal from the JCPOA, the above trends can be expected to continue.

As in Yemen and Gaza, Washington and its allies view Syria as another arena to curtail Iranian influence, real or perceived. Bashar al-Assad's regime currently has the advantage against the opposition, whose control over territory is shrinking and support from outside powers has decreased. Regime and allied forces have recaptured most of the territory held by the opposition in southern Syria and may focus their efforts on Idlib next. At the same time, there is a concerted effort by the United States, Israel, Turkey, and the Arab Gulf states to ensure that Syria remains divided and unstable. As demonstrated by the destruction of the Yarmouk refugee camp, Syrian Palestinians will reflect the country's political and geographic fragmentation.

As part of a broader Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) effort, there are opportunities to challenge the policies of the US and its allies in the region. One way is to focus on divestment from fossil fuels by major pensions funds and employers. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE are attempting to diversify their economies, they are still heavily reliant on revenues from oil. Indeed, there is already a concerted effort by leading universities, cities, states, and major employers in the United States and internationally[3] to divest from these holdings. Studies indicate that divestment from fossil fuels coupled with investment in renewable energy can have a positive impact on portfolio performance. Activists and civil society organizations can therefore make a financial and moral argument in favor of divestment.

Similarly, the United States benefits through the recycling of petrodollars, particularly through arms sales to the Persian Gulf autocracies. A divestment effort focused on major military contractors, in particular those whose weapons have been used across the region, can demonstrate the implications of the policies and actions of the US and its allies in the region as well as the complicity of investors in gross human rights abuses. This is particularly important as many pension funds and major investors have corporate and investment responsibility guidelines and

policies.

These actions would dovetail with existing BDS efforts focused on divestment from companies benefiting from the Israeli occupation. This can be expanded by emphasizing the shared interests and policies of the Trump administration, Netanyahu's government, and the Gulf autocracies.

Diana Buttu

It is important to highlight how Israel benefited both from the JCPOA and from the US withdrawal from it. It is also important to underscore that Israel continues to evade de-nuclearization by continuing with its clandestine nuclear program. By some estimates, Israel has between 80 to 400 nuclear warheads, yet Israel has never submitted to inspections or even declared that it has nuclear weapons despite the real threat that it poses to Palestinians and neighboring countries. It is this double standard – one standard for Israel and other for Iran – and the benefits that Israel has reaped despite refusing to submit to inspections that should be highlighted.

Meanwhile, Israel's strategy toward Iran is the same strategy it has adopted toward Palestinians: Make a ruckus and demand harsh sanctions with concomitant aid or weapons, and after receiving the compensation, push for the cancellation of any agreement and for even more aid and even more weapons. With the US withdrawing from the JCPOA, Israel will continue to demand even more US aid and weaponry while simultaneously attempting to link Hamas with Iran with the aim of ensuring that it has carte blanche to maintain the siege on Gaza and demand additional sanctions against Palestinians in exchange for not attacking Iran. The current US regime will undoubtedly oblige, given Trump's close relationship with Sheldon Adelson, who has not only bankrolled Israel's Birthright program, an Israeli university in an illegal settlement, and the right-wing newspaper *Israel Hayom*, but has donated to Trump's campaign and had

expressed frustration that Trump had not moved the embassy sooner. This will mean that while Israel continues to build and expand settlements in the West Bank, it will push to impose an even harsher blockade on Gaza under the guise of fighting Iran.

Assistance from Arab neighbors cannot be counted on. For decades, the Arab world's support for Palestine has never been unconditional, and for several years countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia have simply paid lip service that they support Palestinian freedom. These countries, like others around the world, are driven by their own narrow interests and not by larger regional interests. This means that, when fearing Iran's nuclear program, they willingly side with Israel, fulfilling the adage that "my enemy's enemy is my friend." Their views, however, are shortsighted: Though Jordan has cozier relations with Israel than with other countries in the Arab world, this has not prevented Israel from killing Jordanian citizens with impunity or stealing Jordanian resources. It will simply be a matter of time before Israel once again turns against these nations.

The cozier relationship between Israel and the Gulf states may also translate into increased pressure on Palestinians to accept any proposed American "deal." In the past, Palestinians were believed to be the key to normalizing relations between Israel and the Arab world. Now, however, the Trump administration is viewing things through a different lens: Palestinians will be delivered through the Arab world. Using this logic, the Trump administration will continue to exert pressure on Iran to appease Israel and the Gulf states, with the quid pro quo that these same Gulf states will exert pressure on Palestinians. Again, this is shortsighted: Palestinians will not support any leader who makes these major capitulations to their rights, and it will only be a matter of time before the tide turns against such leaders, too.

Mouin Rabbani

The US withdrawal from the JCPOA has been an Israeli strategic objective from the moment the agreement was signed, and thus represents a major Israeli achievement and one that will further embolden Israel regionally and strengthen its sense of impunity in its dealings with the Palestinians. It is also relevant to note that this US decision was accompanied by a number of others, such as the US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem, the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the US assault on UNRWA, and the US withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council, that were conceived and implemented as US measures to further strengthen Israel in its relationship with the Palestinians. In other words, we are dealing with a US administration that is not only fully aligned with Israel like its predecessors, but is increasingly aligned with the most extreme forces in Israel when it comes to the Palestinians and the Question of Palestine more broadly.

On this basis, the question is not so much how the US renunciation of its international legal obligations pursuant to the JCPOA will affect the Palestinians, but rather how this decision reflects a broader US initiative to align even more closely with Israeli policy. And what we have seen is a change in US policy, from becoming a tireless advocate and uncritical defender of Israel policy to what might better be characterized as an implementer of Israeli policy, including vis-à-vis the Palestinians. If Palestinian civil society wants to make a meaningful contribution to opposing these developments it should focus primarily on the rejuvenation of the Palestinian national movement.

It also seems fairly clear that the US is determined to pursue increasingly confrontational policies toward Iran, both in the region and with the objective of regime change in Tehran. And in this context the constant denunciation of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Palestinians more generally as Iranian proxies, much like the PLO was habitually written off as a Soviet proxy during the Cold War, suggests that the US considers Israel's war against the Palestinians as contributing to its

own campaign against Tehran. We have seen this with the tirades in the UN Security Council by US Permanent Representative Nikki Haley, and in Jared Kushner's obscene censure of murdered Palestinian demonstrators in Gaza as "part of the problem." Hence we should expect even greater Israeli impunity in its dealings with the Palestinians.

The reality of Iran-Hamas relations is that they took a substantial turn for the worse after the Hamas leadership broke with the Assad regime and relocated to Qatar in 2012, and Iran began to focus primarily on assisting Islamic Jihad. Relations began to improve again with the installation of the current Hamas leadership, particularly Yahya Sinwar. Sinwar's approach has been that Hamas cannot afford to limit its regional relationships to Qatar and Turkey, and has thus sought to diversify them by reaching out not only to Iran but also Egypt and others. The new Hamas leadership also felt it was important to repair relations with Tehran because Iran, along with Hizbullah, are its main sources of military support (a form of support it did not receive from Qatar or Turkey, at a time when the Abdel Fattah El-Sisi regime in Egypt has severely constrained its ability to smuggle weapons into the Gaza Strip via the Sinai Peninsula).

For its part Iran recognized that while there may be more affinity between Iran and Islamic Jihad, Hamas is a much larger and more influential organization. So the relationship had already been improving for reasons that have little to do with the US renunciation of the JCPOA. But with both Iran and the Palestinians now under siege by the Trump administration, and the prospect of a new conflict substantially greater, this will have helped strengthen the relationship further.

In regard to Arab regimes, there is no doubt that they would like to be rid of the Palestinian question in order to remove remaining obstacles to their alliance with Israel, based on a shared understanding that Israel is an ally and not an enemy, whilst Iran is an existential threat rather than a neighbor. But, particularly in Saudi

Arabia, which has the most substantial population of the Gulf states, this is easier said than done. Even under the current circumstances of regional upheaval and polarization, Palestine remains a central concern for public opinion, and can thus affect the legitimacy of the regimes in question, particularly when they are already confronting intra-elite dissent as in Saudi Arabia. That said, it's undeniable that these relations have improved very substantially in recent years, and that this has cost the Palestinians dearly. But it's too easy to simply denounce Gulf autocrats for collaborating with Israel – true as that assertion may be. The absence of a unified Palestinian leadership able and willing to exercise influence in the Arab arena is a key part of this equation.

The Syria conflict produced an interesting realignment within the Palestinian political system. Hamas, which despite its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood had enjoyed a close relationship with the Assad regime, ruptured with Damascus while Fatah, which has been either at odds or in open conflict with Damascus for decades, improved its relations substantially.

More generally the Syria conflict and the attendant regional polarization has been politically catastrophic for the Palestinians. It should hardly come as a revelation that for virtually all of the regional and international parties involved in the Syria conflict in its various dimensions Palestine has become an at best secondary concern in recent years. Arguably, Syria was the arena in which the promise of a renewed and more energetic Arab approach toward the Palestinian cause, widely anticipated after the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, died a premature death.

The Syria conflict has also been not only a political but also a human and humanitarian catastrophe for the Palestinian community in that country. Entire Palestinian camps and neighborhoods have been reduced to rubble, and in many cases stateless Palestinians resident in Syria have encountered greater difficulty escaping the conflict than Syrian citizens. Syria is arguably the only country that since 1948 consistently afforded Palestinian refugees on its soil the same rights

and privileges extended to its own citizens. Its destruction is beyond tragic, not only for the Syrian people, but also for the Palestinians.

1. *Iran, the EU, and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany) signed the JCPOA in 2015, which aimed to ensure that Iran's nuclear program remains peaceful. Al-Shabaka published a roundtable on the effects the deal might have on Palestinians, with contributions from Ali Abunimah, Diana Buttu, and Mouin Rabbani.*
2. To read this piece in French, please click 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.
3. Attracta Mooney, "Growing number of pension funds divest from fossil fuels," Financial Times, April 27, 2017; Frank Eltman, "NYC looks to divest pension funds of fossil fuels," Associated Press, January 10, 2018.

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.

Al-Shabaka materials may be circulated with due attribution to Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. The opinion of individual members of Al-Shabaka's policy network do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization as a whole.