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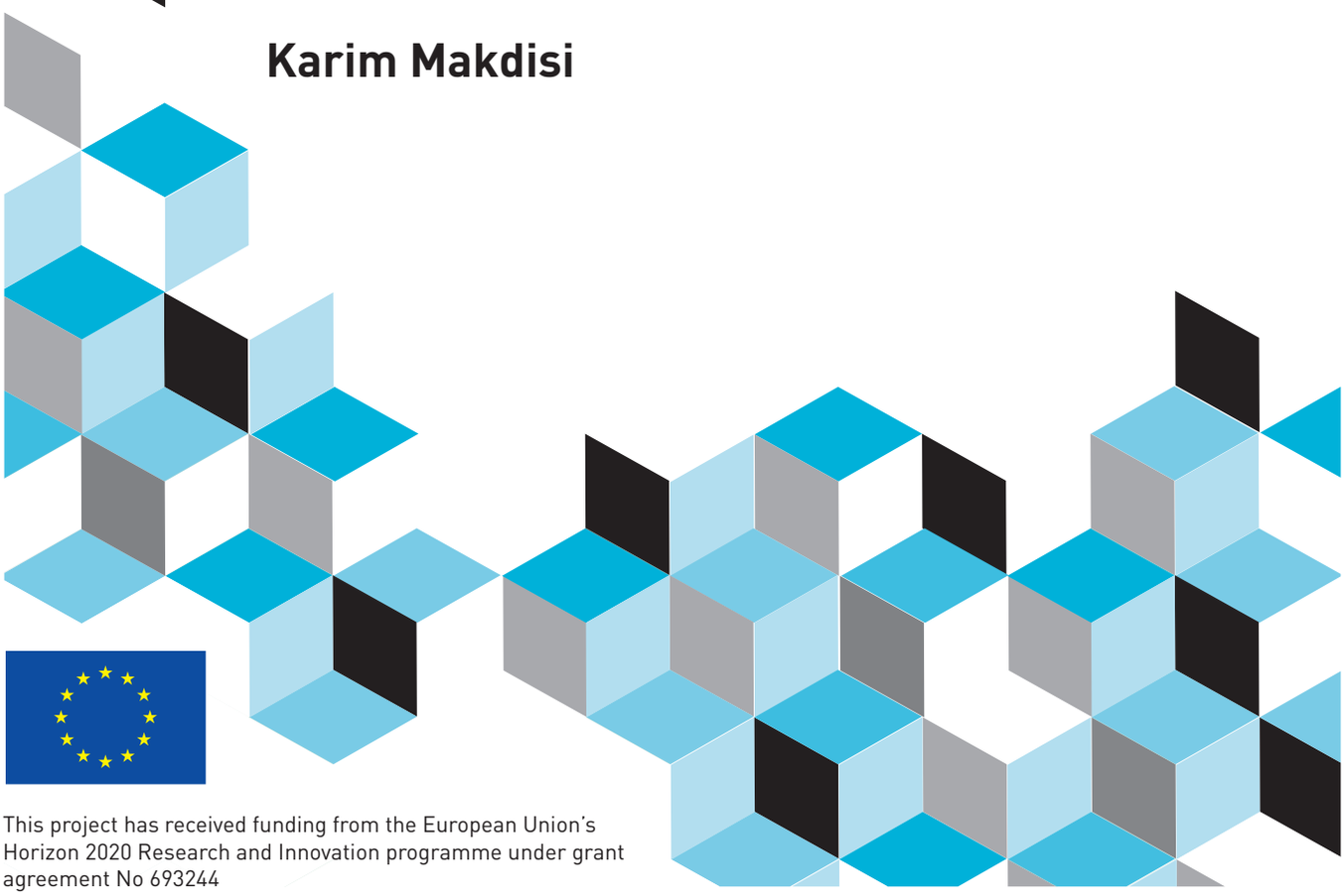

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PALESTINE AND THE ARAB–ISRAELI CONFLICT: 100 YEARS OF REGIONAL RELEVANCE AND INTERNATIONAL FAILURE

Karim Makdisi[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that the Arab–Israeli conflict, and in particular the question of Palestine, has been the major issue of regional concern across the Middle East for over a century. It claims that the failure to resolve the question of Palestine will continue to impact on the region's stability and its geopolitical dynamics and to shape popular opinion while limiting Arab leaders' options. It first situates the Arab–Israeli conflict as a core regional issue in historical context – which is crucial for understanding where we are today – before critically reviewing the Oslo "peace process" and its failure to deliver a just and sustainable peace within the framework of a "two-state solution". It suggests that this failure has resulted in the ramping up of lingering regional problems (e.g. southern Lebanon, the Golan Heights, refugees and in Palestine itself) and the rise of new challenges and frameworks (e.g. the Resistance Axis and the BDS movement). It concludes that the time has come for the international community – including the European Union, which has contributed to the failure of the two-state solution – to consider alternative paradigms and actions.

INTRODUCTION

No Arab leader can concede on Jerusalem or Palestine.
Senior Arab diplomat to *Reuters* (Kalin 2018)

The violence with which the Israeli armed forces treated Palestinian protestors in Gaza during the "Great March of Return" from March to May 2018 refocused international and regional attention on the question of Palestine. Despite various recent attempts to cast the Palestinian struggle as no longer of popular interest or political significance in the Middle East, over the past two decades – especially following the Arab uprisings – protests in support of the Palestinians continued to break out as far away as war-torn Yemen to Egypt, Jordan and in Israel itself. By contrast, the carnage in nearby Syria has failed to register much in terms of popular protests in the Arab world over the past seven years.

It is significant that popular concern for Palestine continues in spite of the clear shift in regional geopolitics whereby many Gulf Arab governments, led by Saudi Arabia, have now joined countries such as Egypt and Jordan in having openly friendly relations with the right-wing government of Israel, and in viewing Iran, not Israel, as the main enemy. It was notable that every Arab and Muslim UN member state supported twin resolutions in June 2018 at the Security Council and General Assembly condemning Israel and calling for international protection for Palestinians, despite strong pressure from the USA (UN News 2018, UNGA 2018). It seems clear that these Arab governments, loosely organized under the terms of US hegemony, cannot justify formalizing an

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alliance with Israel – or fully normalizing relations with them, long a theme in US policy in terms of an Arab–Israeli settlement – as long as the question of Palestine is unresolved politically in meaningful terms.

The US-led Oslo "peace process" of the 1990s failed as Jewish settlements proliferated, occupation persisted amid renewed violence and radicalization on both sides, and the socio-economic conditions for Palestinians, especially in besieged Gaza, deteriorated significantly. Oslo's successor framework, the Roadmap to Peace, first proposed by US President George W. Bush in 2002 following on the heels of the Arab League's comprehensive (though controversial in some circles, including in Lebanon) Arab Peace Initiative, similarly failed despite the ill-fated legitimation by the Quartet – the European Union, the USA, Russia and the UN. Former US President Barack Obama ultimately failed to meaningfully address the Palestine question in terms of a "peace process", particularly after the start of the Arab uprisings in late 2010 and due to his poor relations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the light of the latter's extremist policies. However, current US President Donald Trump has taken the unprecedented step of recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital in the face of global criticism, and he is now preparing what he terms the "deal of the century" which, if ever actually articulated, will surely fail just like its predecessors given the draconian conditions it seeks to impose on the Palestinians.

Nevertheless, the *premise* of Trump's "deal" is that the question of Palestine needs to be "resolved" before a larger Arab–Israeli alliance – the USA has floated the idea of an "Arab NATO" – against Iran can be formalized. That this "deal" is considered dead on arrival among Palestinians is reflected both in the renewed protests in Gaza and in the normally pliant Palestinian Authority leadership's refusal to even meet with the main US envoy, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner – a close personal friend of Netanyahu and a political ally of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohamad bin Salman (Kuttab 2018b). In the meantime, and significantly, the successive political failures in negotiating a durable and just solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict have continued to destabilize the Middle East and led to the increasingly powerful presence of Hizbullah in Lebanon, which in turn has boosted Iran's status and reach regionally.

Accordingly, this paper asserts that the Arab–Israeli conflict – and in particular the question of Palestine – has been the major issue of regional concern across the Middle East for over a century. It claims that the failure to resolve the question of Palestine as mandated by scores of UN resolutions and Arab League declarations, and even the US-led "Roadmap", will continue to impact on the region's stability and its geopolitical dynamics.

This paper first situates the Arab–Israeli conflict as a core regional issue in historical context – which is crucial for understanding where we are today – before critically reviewing the "peace process" and its failure to deliver a just and sustainable peace. It suggests that this failure has resulted in the ramping up of lingering regional problems, including southern Lebanon, the Golan Heights, refugees and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This in turn has led to the rise of new challenges and frameworks (e.g. the Resistance Axis and the boycott, divestment and sanctions – BDS – movement). It concludes that the time has come for the international community – including the United Nations and the European Union, which have contributed to the failure of the two-state solution – to consider alternative paradigms and actions.

1. HISTORICIZING THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE AND THE ARAB–ISRAELI CONFLICT AS A CORE REGIONAL ISSUE FOR A CENTURY

The material and ideational struggle over land, and who is allowed to access and "return" to it, has been at the core of the Palestinian–Israeli and the larger Arab–Israeli conflict for over a century. To discard this context would obscure the reasons why the Palestine question has persisted as a core issue in the Middle East to this day, and why international intervention and mediation attempts have deepened rather than resolved the problem. This section examines this context.

1.1 ZIONISM AND THE ORIGINS OF THE PALESTINE QUESTION

The European Jewish settler movement at the turn of the 20th century, set within the context of British colonialism, crystallized around Theodore Herzl's late 19th-century political Zionist project which aimed to colonize Palestine and create an exclusive Jewish state. As Herzl remarked in reference to what he termed the "Jewish question": "the whole plan is in its essence perfectly simple [...]. Let the sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation; the rest we shall manage for ourselves" (Herzl 1917: 11).

However, this "simple" plan encountered a major problem: the overwhelming opposition of the indigenous Palestinian population – Christians, Muslims and Jews – who initially welcomed European Jewish immigration until its exclusivist settler ideology became clear (Smith 2014: 36). Palestinian resistance to Zionist colonization thus began to mount from its earliest stages, while feelings of solidarity with Palestinians, and opposition to Zionism, were echoed throughout a Middle East region that already felt betrayed by Western colonial duplicity in the aftermath of the First World War.

A key goal for the early Zionist movement was gaining international recognition. They succeeded when the British government unilaterally (and illegally) issued the infamous 1917 Balfour Declaration promising a vaguely crafted term, a "Jewish homeland", in Palestine, against the wishes of the indigenous population. This "represented a major triumph for Zionist diplomacy" given that the Jewish population was less than 10 per cent of the total and the political rights of the remaining (Arab) 90 per cent were "totally ignored" (Shlaim 2000: 7).

Balfour's promise was actualized throughout the period of the British occupation and Mandate, which was, as Lorenzo Kamel argues, part of a broader "colonial process" legitimized by the League of Nations (Kamel 2015: 125). The British ideologically and materially supported the emerging Zionist movement in Palestine, reneging on their international responsibilities to support Palestine's self-determination. European Jewish immigration rose dramatically, while Jewish land ownership nearly tripled from less than 2 per cent of the total land in 1920 (Smith 2014: 147).

The harsh British military response to the "Great Arab Revolt" of 1936–9, a mass popular uprising – backed throughout the region – broke organized Palestinian resistance and resulted in regional actors taking an increasingly more direct role in a broader Arab–Israeli conflict. It also resulted in the British proposing, for the first time, the concept of "partition" and "transfer" of the "Arab"

population out of "Jewish" areas – an idea that appealed to the Jewish leadership, including then Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion (S. Makdisi 2008: 244–5).

The stage was now set for the broader Arab–Israeli conflict.

1.2 PARTITION OF PALESTINE AND THE ARAB–ISRAELI CONFLICT

The horrors of the Holocaust committed in Europe by Europeans led to another large wave of European Jewish immigration to Palestine (Shlaim 2000: 23). In 1945, the British abandoned their Mandate obligations, and two years later, in 1947, the UN General Assembly passed the deeply controversial Resolution 181 endorsing Palestine's partition. All Arab, Muslim and African states immediately rejected this plan.

Partition, for the first time, legitimized Zionist claims to a part of Palestine in international terms, giving the Jewish population, which owned only 7 per cent of Palestinian land, as much as 56 per cent of the most fertile parts of Palestine (Smith 2014: 189). The Israeli historian Avi Shlaim has argued that, as the "main agent working to transform the status quo in the Middle East" (Shlaim 2000: 54), the Zionist movement instigated open conflict between Jews and Arabs in 1947, which in turn produced the first Arab–Israel war of 1948.

Referred to by Israelis as the "War of Independence" – the Israeli state was proclaimed on 14 May – and by Arabs as the *Nakba* ("catastrophe"), the 1948 war resulted in Arab defeat as Zionist forces gained additional territory and cleansed Palestinians from their lands: the vast majority would become refugees overnight, and they are still advocating for their right of return (Pappé 2006, Al Husseini 2017).

Throughout the Arab world, the Palestine partition and subsequent 1948 war inspired mass protests from Libya and Yemen to Iraq, Egypt and Syria. It also ignited an Arab anti-colonial nationalism (Kamel et al 2016: 18) and deepened the Arab perception of "dishonest" international brokers, one that continues to this very day, to President Trump's so-called "Deal of the Century". It is crucial to understand that for Arab nationalists and Palestinians, the root of the Arab–Israeli conflict lay in the *Nakba* period and the removal of the indigenous Palestinian population from their land.

During the Cold War, too, the question of Palestine remained the core struggle in the Middle East – and indeed in the larger Global South (Prashad 2007: 221). Western policy in the Middle East focused on containing the potentially revolutionary regional forces of Arab nationalism (led during the 1950s and 1960s by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser), and protecting Israeli interests and conservative Arab monarchies with their rich oil resources. The forced retreat of the Israeli, French and British armies in the aftermath of the 1956 tripartite invasion of Egypt cemented Abdel Nasser's popular heroic status among Arabs throughout the region as the main figure resisting European imperialism in general, and Israeli colonialism and regional expansionism in particular (U. Makdisi 2010: 250–1).

However, the 1967 Arab–Israeli war – which Israelis call "The Six Day War" and Arabs throughout the region term *an-Naksa*, or "the setback" – led to a decisive Israeli victory and occupation of the

West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem, as well as the Syrian Golan Heights and Egyptian Sinai. As the historian Walid Khalidi (2014: 142) has argued, this war "dealt the coup de grâce to secular pan-Arabism" but, at the same time, it also "catapulted the Palestinian guerrilla movement to the front ranks because it symbolized *resistance* for the entire Arab world after the humiliating rout of the Arab armies". Despite Arab military defeat, in other words, Palestine remained the core issue in the Middle East, backed by huge popular support.

As for the Israelis, the decisive triumph represented by the 1967 war meant, according to Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, that "there was no chance for peace", and so he recommended an "enlightened occupation", later commenting that "the current reality in the territories – that is my plan [...] what exists today must remain as a permanent arrangement in the West Bank" (Segev 2007: 580). Such an occupation continues to this day.

These official policies masked two important consequences in Israel of the 1967 war that are still relevant today. Firstly, Israeli control over Palestinian territories led to "unease" among many liberal Israelis (Segev 2007: 584). Such a legacy may arguably be seen in those Israeli "moderates" who initiated the Oslo "peace process" during the 1990s. Secondly, the war gave rise to "religious Zionism" and a conviction among many Orthodox rabbis, and an increasingly influential political group (presaging the rise to power of the Likud Party), that they "were living in a messianic era and that salvation was at hand". The "sanctity of the land" became a "central tenet of religious Zionism" (Shlaim 2000: 549). Israel's prime minister for nearly a decade, Benjamin Netanyahu, today represents this dominant position in Israeli society.

Following its showing in the 1973 Arab–Israeli war, Egypt, under Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat, effectively removed itself from the Arab–Israeli conflict after it signed a peace treaty with and recognized Israel in 1979 in return for Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. This signalled the end of any lingering and meaningful regional pan-Arab threat to Israel (Heikal 1996). Moreover, Egypt now aligned itself explicitly with US (and, increasingly thereafter, Israeli) regional interests at the expense of its long-standing regional role and influence in the Arab and Islamic world: it was even expelled from the Arab League as a result of this perceived surrender, and Sadat himself was assassinated for similar reasons.

Emboldened, Israel remained (and remains) in occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan Heights (the latter two of which it unilaterally annexed), and it invaded Lebanon in both 1978 and, more dramatically, in 1982, after which it occupied southern Lebanon for nearly two decades following the expulsion of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) fighters who had been based in southern Lebanon for over a decade. Thus the PLO leadership lived in exile in Tunisia throughout the 1980s. This, in turn, led to both increased popular resistance among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, culminating in the seminal intifada of the late 1980s, and a progressively effective Lebanese resistance movement composed of communists, nationalists and Islamists increasingly influenced by the Iranian revolution.

The latter movement eventually coalesced into Hizbullah, which has claimed various successes against Israel including the liberation of southern Lebanon in 2000 and the 2006 Israeli–Lebanese war. As a result of Hizbullah's perceived success, and its influence over Lebanese security

institutions, it has now grown into a regional player, its military reach extending not only to Syria after 2011 but as far away as Iraq and Yemen. It is also a core part of the "Resistance Axis" that includes, most prominently, Iran but also Syria (under the Assad regime) and different Islamist groups operating in Palestine itself (Saad-Ghorayeb 2011).

Over the course of many decades, then, the Arab–Israeli conflict was transformed dramatically, and yet the question of Palestine consistently remained at the core of the Middle East. Much of this period has been defined by various international attempts to frame and reframe the terms of conflict and the possibilities of peace, with the explicit understanding that such a peace was a prerequisite for broader stability in the region. We turn to this in the next section.

2. THE "PEACE PROCESS": THE RISE AND DEMISE OF THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

While the Palestine question is rooted in the fateful Balfour Declaration, international attempts to resolve or mediate the question of Palestine started at the very birth of the UN with the General Assembly's 1947 partition plan. All these efforts ultimately failed to bring peace, but instead legitimated and entrenched Israeli territorial gains over time.

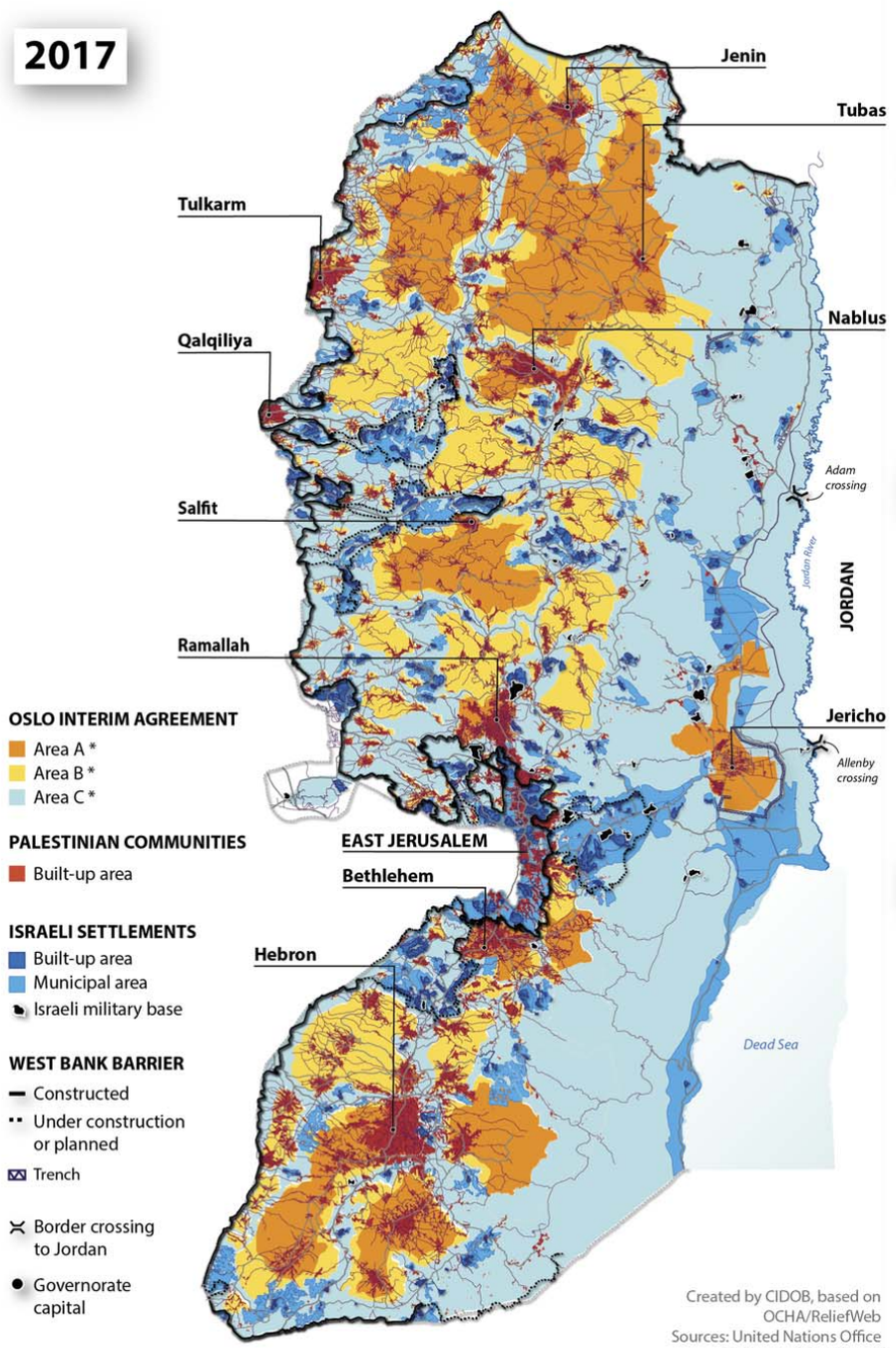
It was the unequivocal Israeli victory in the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, and the passage of seminal UN Resolution 242 (and its "land for peace" formula), that arguably started a new phase in international diplomacy, one increasingly dominated by the USA. The Israeli demand that further withdrawals from ceasefire lines would be linked to negotiated, bilateral "peace deals" began to take hold. The 1979 Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty, rejected throughout the Arab world, was the first expression of such deals, and a Jordanian deal would follow in 1994. The Oslo "peace process" of the 1990s was also rooted in this "deal", as were Israeli attempts in the 1990s to make a deal with Syria (Rabinovich 1998).

Crucially, however, these post-1967 international mediation efforts were still – at least nominally – rooted in core UN resolutions and relevant provisions of international law and backed by the political weight of the General Assembly (K. Makdisi and Prashad 2017: 2–3). As such, the international community via the UN has declared as "null and void" Israel's unilateral annexation of the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem, and demanded the implementation of Resolution 242 with its call for Israeli withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territories. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978, moreover, the UN resolutions were quick and decisive in demanding Israel's "immediate" withdrawal and deploying a peacekeeping mission (UNIFIL) to supervise the withdrawal (K. Makdisi 2014).

However, this paper claims that with the end of the Cold War, the envisioned "two-state solution" fundamentally shifted from its roots in the core tenants of the UN to a more bilateral, power-based negotiation paradigm under US patronage and underwritten by neo-liberal "state-building" projects by the European Union and various UN agencies (R. Khalidi 2017, Turner 2012). The failure of this paradigm, as we shall see below, has resulted in a number of associated regional problems.

WEST BANK: Israeli Strategy in the West Bank: Divide et Impera

The West Bank is a land-locked area sealed off by Israel to its north, south and west; and Jordan to the east. It was entirely occupied by Israel in 1967 (including East Jerusalem), with over 200 settlements illegal built today supporting a total Jewish population of over 600,000. Israel has further annexed thousands of hectares of Palestinian land to build houses, checkpoints, roadblocks, and Jewish only access roads to fragment Palestinian areas and to control it. Moreover, Israel's planned 712 km Israeli separation "Barrier"—85% of which constructed on occupied Palestinian land totaling nearly 10% of the West Bank — further fragments the West Bank, cuts off Palestinian communities from their farmlands, and severely curtails Palestinian freedom of movement and right to work, education and medical care. Overall, the West Bank now effectively comprises 165 non-contiguous and dis-connected areas, with the Palestinian Authority in control over about 18% (mainly the concentrated urban areas) and partially in a further 22% (rural areas). In total, Israeli settlements (and their regional councils) control 40% of the West Bank. The International Court of Justice has ruled the barrier unlawful; and a host of UN resolutions and overall body of humanitarian and occupation law have maintained the occupation of the West Bank and the building of settlements are illegal. The total unemployment rate in West Bank is nearly 20% , and for adults under 30 it is 40%.



** Note: Israel has full military control over all Palestinian territories, while the PA has limited administrative authority over certain areas. Area A is under nominal Palestinian control. Area B is under nominal Palestinian civilian control but with formal joint Israeli-Palestinian security control. Area C is under full Israeli control with no Palestinian authority at all.*

Created by CIDOB, based on OCHA/ReliefWeb
Sources: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the occupied Palestinian territory, "West Bank, Access Restrictions", January 2017.

2.1 FROM THE INTIFADA TO THE OSLO "PEACE PROCESS" AND THE "ROADMAP": THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION PARADIGM

In December 1987, a two-year indigenous Palestinian intifada against Israeli occupation, "aggressive land requisition" and "iron fist" policies began (Smith 2013: 402). This intifada and the ensuing violent Israeli crackdown "sparked major changes in international politics relating to the Middle East" (Smith 2013: 413). The PLO embraced the position of the intifada leaders by formally accepting UN Resolution 242's vision of a two-state solution within the framework of international law and relevant UN resolutions.

Under the terms of the 1993 Oslo deal, the PLO recognized the state of Israel's "right to exist in peace and security", accepted UN resolutions 242 and 338, and renounced the armed struggle and "terrorism". In return, Israel agreed to recognize the PLO as the "representative of the Palestinian people and commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East peace process", though it refused to allow any reference to a Palestinian "state".[2]

The Oslo Accords created what would become the Palestinian Authority (PA) – an interim civil authority with self-governing, rather than state-like, status – that would be allowed to rule the West Bank and Gaza for a "transitional period not exceeding five years" (i.e. to May 1999).[3] The "permanent status" negotiations would then commence latest by May 1997 to resolve the core issues of Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, security arrangements and others.

A second, supplemental agreement ("Oslo 2") in September 1995 specified the PA's rather meagre powers and purview during this "transitional period". Oslo 2 divided the West Bank into three distinct administrative areas (still in effect to this day). In area "A" (roughly 18 per cent of the West Bank and comprising six major Palestinian urban areas, including Ramallah), the PA would have authority over security and internal affairs. In area "B" (selected Palestinian rural areas close to area "A") the PA would control internal matters but Israel would have authority over security. Areas "A" and "B" are non-contiguous and represent, as the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem (2017) has labelled them, 165 "disconnected 'islands'". Finally, area "C" (comprising roughly 61 per cent of the West Bank and contiguous geographically, and including all Jewish settlements as well as the Jordan Valley area) was to remain fully under Israeli military control.

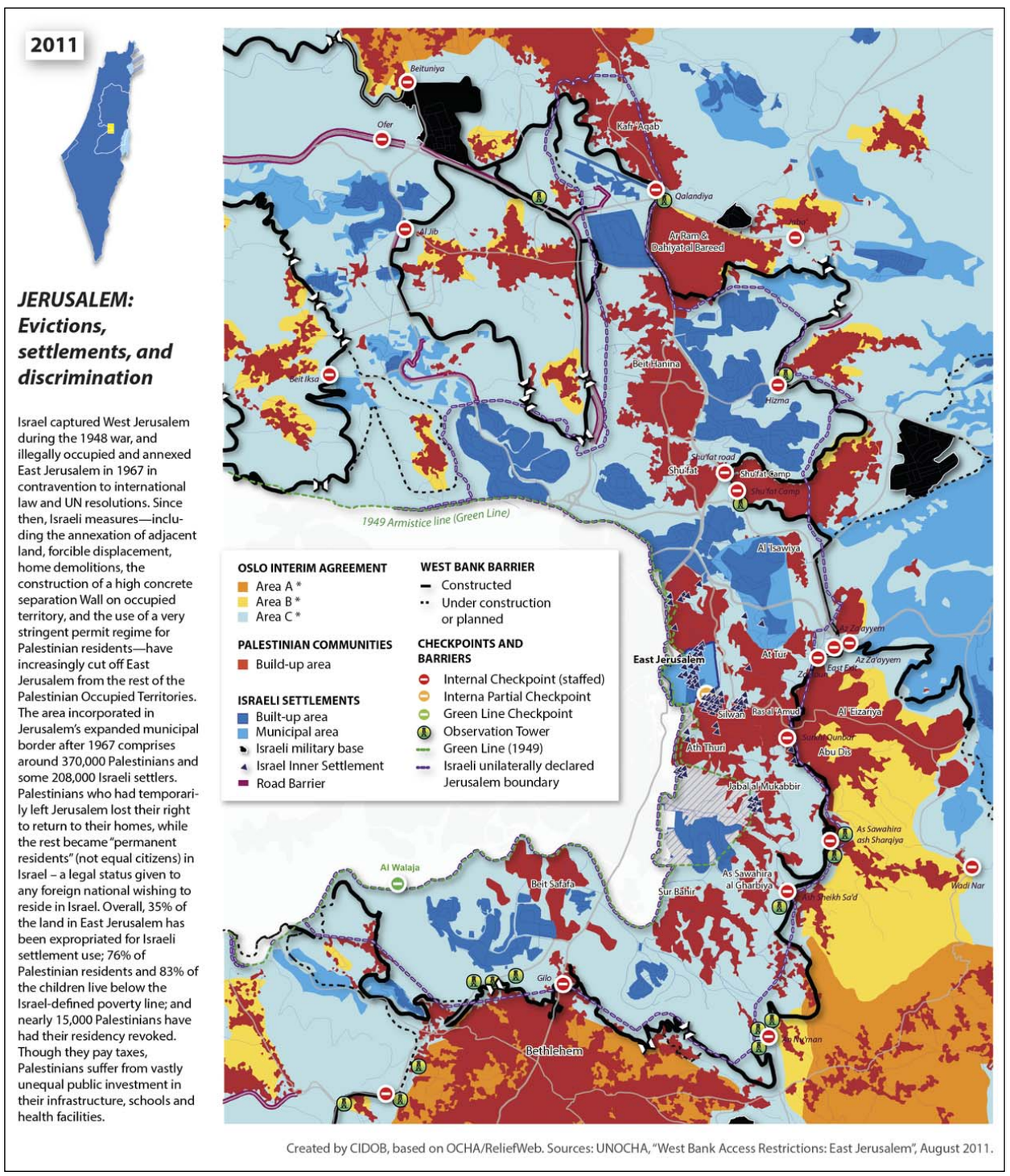
Overall, Israel's Foreign Ministry made clear that the main objectives of the Oslo agreements were merely to "broaden Palestinian self-government" and "allow the Palestinians to conduct their own internal affairs".[4] Israeli settlements in the West Bank grew at a "rapid pace" (Malley and Agha 2001) and Palestinian disenchantment continued. In 1995, Yitzhak Rabin, who had negotiated

2 See the website of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *Israel-PLO Mutual Recognition, Letters and Speeches, 10 September 1993*, http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/mfadocuments/yearbook9/pages/107%20israel-plo%20mutual%20recognition-%20letters%20and%20spe.aspx.

3 See the website of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Washington, 28 September 2005*, http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/the%20israeli-palestinian%20interim%20agreement.aspx.

4 See the website of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *Main Points of the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, September 28, 1995*, http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/the%20israeli-palestinian%20interim%20agreement%20-%20main%20p.aspx.

Oslo and was open to a deal with Syria, was assassinated by a Jewish terrorist representing the messianic and right-wing factions of Israeli society that were now in the ascendency.



Created by CIDOB, based on OCHA/ReliefWeb. Sources: UNOCHA, "West Bank Access Restrictions: East Jerusalem", August 2011.

President Bill Clinton's Camp David initiative in 2000 was, as the scholar Richard Falk (2017: 16) has termed, the "Last Hurrah of Oslo" and ended in failure (Malley and Agha 2001, Ross and

Grinstein 2001). It also resulted in the start of the Second Intifada – and the rise in power and popularity of Hamas at the expense of the PLO – in September 2000 following Ariel Sharon's infamous and carefully staged provocations at the Temple Mount/Haram-al-Sharif in Jerusalem (Smith 2013: 498).

The subsequent period was dominated by the US "war on terror" during the presidency of George W. Bush. Once again, we see that in order for the USA to solicit support from key states in the Middle East, some form of a "peace process" was required. The 2002 Arab Peace Plan sought to extend the "land-for-peace" formula embedded in Oslo in return for formal normalization between (most) Arab states and Israel. The Bush team then officially unveiled what came to be known as the "Roadmap" document – officially under the framework of the Quartet comprising the USA, UN, Russia and the EU – in April 2003, after the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Though the Palestinians had little choice but to accept the plan, the "Roadmap" did not contain clauses protecting Palestinian rights under international law, and instead resumed Oslo's logic of diplomatic bargaining between two players with vast power disparities (Falk 2017: 17).

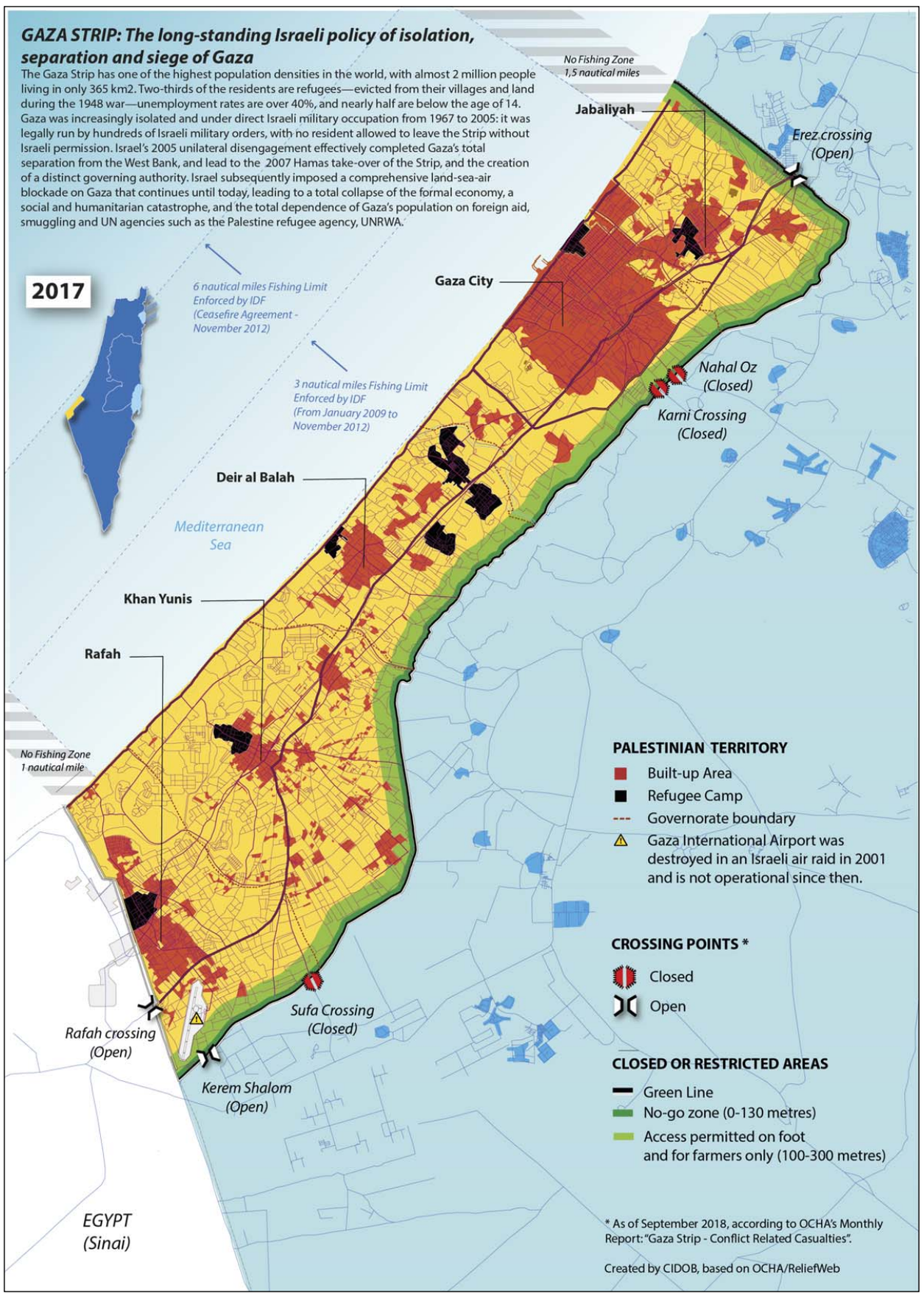
2.2 FAILURE OF THE "PEACE PROCESS" AND DEMISE OF THE TWO-STATE PARADIGM

There is now a general consensus that the Oslo process and the subsequent Arab Peace Plan and Roadmap repeatedly failed, as Israel – supported by the USA – deepened its occupation infrastructure, added successive security conditions for the increasingly discredited Palestinian Authority to meet, approved rapidly expanding Jewish settlements in occupied Palestinian territories and laid siege to Gaza. As the former US Special Assistant to US President Clinton Robert Malley reflected as early as 2001: "Seen from Gaza and the West Bank, Oslo's legacy read like a litany of promises deferred or unfulfilled. Six years after the agreement, there were more Israeli settlements, less freedom of movement, and worse economic conditions" (Malley and Agha 2001).

Since then, the "moderates" or "realists" within the Israeli political system who advocated, at least in principle, for some limited form of statehood for Palestine were largely replaced by hard-line, ideological Likudists and their messianic supporters. Netanyahu has categorically rejected any meaningful peace deal with the Palestinians within the two-state framework, and the expansion of illegal Jewish settlements (which never actually stopped, even during Oslo) has continued.

On the Palestinian side, the Palestinian Authority has become a symbol of weakness, corruption and division (with Hamas ruling Gaza since 2007). President Mahmoud Abbas – who is also Chairman of the PLO and leader of its dominant faction, Fatah – is deeply unpopular and has been in power non-stop since 2004 despite his elected term having expired in 2009. Netanyahu and Abbas together are the very expression of the failure of the "peace process".

The difficult socio-economic situation in the occupied Palestinian territories and the catastrophic humanitarian conditions in the besieged Gaza Strip have been thoroughly documented over the years by a string of human rights (B'Tselem) and relief organizations (Oxfam 2017), as well as the World Bank (2014) and various United Nations agencies (OCHA 2015, UNICEF 2018, UNRWA 2018).


GAZA STRIP: The long-standing Israeli policy of isolation, separation and siege of Gaza
The Gaza Strip has one of the highest population densities in the world, with almost 2 million people living in only 365 km2. Two-thirds of the residents are refugees—evicted from their villages and land during the 1948 war—unemployment rates are over 40%, and nearly half are below the age of 14. Gaza was increasingly isolated and under direct Israeli military occupation from 1967 to 2005: it was legally run by hundreds of Israeli military orders, with no resident allowed to leave the Strip without Israeli permission. Israel's 2005 unilateral disengagement effectively completed Gaza's total separation from the West Bank, and lead to the 2007 Hamas take-over of the Strip, and the creation of a distinct governing authority. Israel subsequently imposed a comprehensive land-sea-air blockade on Gaza that continues until today, leading to a total collapse of the formal economy, a social and humanitarian catastrophe, and the total dependence of Gaza's population on foreign aid, smuggling and UN agencies such as the Palestine refugee agency, UNRWA.
2017
No Fishing Zone 1,5 nautical miles
6 nautical miles Fishing Limit Enforced by IDF (Ceasefire Agreement - November 2012)
3 nautical miles Fishing Limit Enforced by IDF (From January 2009 to November 2012)
No Fishing Zone 1 nautical mile
Jabaliyah
Erez crossing (Open)
Gaza City
Nahal Oz (Closed)
Karni Crossing (Closed)
Deir al Balah
Mediterranean Sea
Khan Yunis
Rafah
Sufa Crossing (Closed)
Rafah crossing (Open)
Kerem Shalom (Open)
EGYPT (Sinai)
PALESTINIAN TERRITORY
Built-up Area
Refugee Camp
Governorate boundary
Gaza International Airport was destroyed in an Israeli air raid in 2001 and is not operational since then.
CROSSING POINTS *
Closed
Open
CLOSED OR RESTRICTED AREAS
Green Line
No-go zone (0-130 metres)
Access permitted on foot and for farmers only (100-300 metres)
* As of September 2018, according to OCHA's Monthly Report: "Gaza Strip - Conflict Related Casualties".
Created by CIDOB, based on OCHA/ReliefWeb

Overall, the UN estimates that one in every two (2.5 million) Palestinians living in the occupied territories will have required humanitarian assistance in 2018 (UNICEF 2018). With unemployment rates among the highest in the world and power outages regularly lasting twenty hours a day, Gaza's besieged refugee population, which is dependent on UN emergency food aid, numbers over one million, ten times the number in 2000 (UNRWA 2018). The West Bank, meanwhile, has been divided into a series of small, often unconnected enclaves, cut off by various Jewish settlement and roads, Israeli military checkpoints and the Israeli wall declared illegal by the International Court of Justice (ICJ 2004, OCHA 2015).

Moreover, key international players embedded in the "peace process" have been, at best, discredited by the failures and, at worst, accused of complicity. As one scholar has written, "the US decides, the World Bank leads, the EU pays, the UN feeds" (Le More 2005: 995). The Europeans have largely underwritten the Oslo process through strictly controlled donations, yet their attempts to translate this funding into diplomatic power has been ineffective, and they have essentially served to keep the PA viable (Turner 2017).

In terms of development, a former long-standing UN civil servant echoed many critical voices when he wrote about the "complicity of the UN system in endorsement and maintenance" of the Oslo framework for Palestinian self-government that "amounted effectively to granting a rights-deficient, international mandate to Israel to indefinitely rule the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territory" (R. Khalidi 2017: 409).

At a fundamental level, then, the very premise of the Oslo "peace process" was the principle of direct negotiations between vastly unequal powers and the removal of international legal protection for the weaker side, the Palestinians (Falk 2017). Indeed, the very legal status of Oslo is controversial as it was never registered with the United Nations and thus "in case of conflict, the obligations of Israel under the [UN] Charter would prevail over any other agreement" (Gowland-Debbas 2012: 523). Rather than leading to a Palestinian state, and security for Israel and Palestine in accordance with the final goal of the "peace process", the situation has never been worse in political, developmental or humanitarian terms.

3. REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE ARAB–ISRAELI CONFLICT

The failure to meaningfully resolve the question of Palestine for over a century, ever since the ill-fated Balfour Declaration and UN partition plan precipitated the Arab–Israeli conflict, has persistently destabilized the Middle East. As we have seen, the most recent failure has been Oslo's promise of two states based on the post-1967 war settlement. This section touches on four persistent, unresolved regional problems stemming from these failures: southern Lebanon, the Golan Heights, Palestinian refugees and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The larger Iran–Israel/Saudi conflict is now a factor in all of these.

3.1 SOUTHERN LEBANON: KEY ACTIVE BATTLEGROUND OF THE ARAB–ISRAELI CONFLICT

South Lebanon arguably became the main active battleground of the Arab–Israeli conflict after the 1973 war and in particular following the subsequent Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty. As the country was plunged into a civil war, pan-Arab and leftist Lebanese factions joined in the Palestinian liberation struggle while right-wing Christian factions allied with Israel and the Lebanese Army split apart, with one part becoming the "South Lebanese Army", which acted as a proxy militia for Israel to patrol southern Lebanon. Israel's first major invasion of Lebanon in 1978 resulted in the deployment of UN peacekeepers (UNIFIL) that continue to operate in southern Lebanon four decades later.

Its second invasion in 1982, including a siege of Beirut, ultimately yielded two major results that continue to reverberate around the region. Firstly, the US-mediated departure of the PLO fighters from Lebanon and subsequent large-scale Israeli occupation (which was to last until the year 2000) produced various indigenous resistance movements that helped drive Israel from Beirut into southern Lebanon. This initially included the Communist and secular Syrian Social Nationalist parties, but Hizbullah – influenced by the 1979 Iranian revolution – gradually took over, and by the 1990s it had basically cemented its place as the leading resistance group, legitimized by all post-civil war Lebanese governments that supported the liberation of southern Lebanese territory.

The second major result of Israel's 1982 invasion was the weakening of the PLO, which had set up its headquarters in faraway Tunisia, and the resulting increased agency and resistance of Palestinians on the ground in the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza. The intifada of the late 1980s, and its use of non-violent mass protests, was seminal in the transformation of the Palestinian movement for self-determination in both developing local institutions and in re-igniting the question of Palestine on the regional and international levels. It precipitated the Palestinian National Assembly's own 1988 seminal meeting in Algiers spelling out the PLO's acceptance of a two-state solution and official recognition of Israel, a move which in turn resulted in the US-led Madrid peace talks and ultimately the Oslo process.

South Lebanon remains an active battleground in the Arab–Israeli conflict, with both regional and international implications. The July 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and war against Hizbullah was crucial in exposing Israeli military limitations against a non-conventional army and creating a de facto "balance of power" along the Lebanese–Israeli border. It further showcased to Hizbullah the importance of Syria as an ally in that it served as an outlet for weapons, humanitarian relief and territory for those displaced from their villages. The UN resolution that ended the war after thirty-three days has since provided a delicate balance both between Israel and Hizbullah – there has been calm and even military coordination when tension has arisen via UNIFIL – and between the main Lebanese political divide of the so-called "March 8" (pro-Resistance and Syria, anti-US) and "March 14" (pro-Saudi and West, anti-Hizbullah and Syria) alliances (K. Makdisi 2011).

This balance afforded some stability in Lebanon as the regional order began to unravel with the Arab uprisings in late 2010, but it has merely "paused" the larger conflict with Israel rather than solved it. Over the past few years, Lebanon – and the larger region – has been braced for a broad-

based war with Israel, and by all accounts such a war would have far-reaching implications for the regional order, not just for internal Lebanese or Israeli politics. Hizbullah's position has grown hugely in the region, and its intervention in Syria has been explicitly justified by its narrative that Israel (and the USA) is behind the plan to remove of Bashar al-Assad given Assad's support for the Resistance Axis led by Iran. The current Israeli–Iranian/Hizbullah confrontation, particularly after the Saudi/Emirati rapprochement with Israel, is arguably the single biggest threat to regional stability. At least part of its roots lay in the unresolved problem of southern Lebanon.

3.2 GOLAN HEIGHTS: UNRESOLVED TENSION AND UNCERTAINTY RETURNS

The second major regional problem stemming from the Arab–Israeli conflict is the unresolved situation of the Syrian Golan Heights, which Israel occupied in 1967 (forcing the entire indigenous Syrian population – except for a portion of the Druze community – northwards) in defiance of UN Resolution 242. Further conflict during and after the 1973 Arab–Israeli war eventually produced Resolution 338 (calling for the implementation of 242) and the subsequent 1974 disengagement plan. The latter led to Israel's partial withdrawal from occupied Golan territory up to the town of Qunaitra and the deployment of UN observers (UNTSO) in the buffer zone between Israeli-occupied Golan and the rest of Syria.

From the start, however, for Israelis the "notion of a full-fledged agreement with Syria was not considered a realistic option" given the Golan's strategic position (Rabinovich 1998: 29). Indeed, under the Likud leadership of Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon, Israel even formally annexed the Golan in 1981, though the UN quickly declared this illegal. The intention was to "pacify" the Israeli right wing and "stop the momentum toward a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace" that US President Jimmy Carter had initiated, and that had led to the 1979 Israeli–Egyptian treaty and limited withdrawal from the Sinai (Shlaim 2000: 394). UN unanimity on the issue, Syrian government threats and Syrian (and larger Arab) popular demands calling on Israel to withdraw all failed. Indeed, the Israeli de facto success in getting away with the annexation encouraged Begin and Sharon to further pursue, as Avi Shlaim explains, what came to be known as the "big plan" for "using Israel's military power to establish political hegemony in the Middle East". This led directly to their plans to invade Lebanon in 1982 in order to install a friendly government, break the PLO to allow the incorporation of the West Bank into "Greater Israel", and expel Palestinians from both Lebanon and the West Bank into Jordan and turn the latter into a Palestinian state (Shlaim 2000: 396).

After the 1991 Madrid peace conference, for the first time serious discussions were held (largely via third-party mediators such as the USA) between Syria and Israel (under a Labour government) to reach an agreement. Itamar Rabinovich, the chief Israeli negotiator with Syria during this period, argued that a deal was close, but Syrian President Hafiz Assad would not accept then Israeli Prime Minister Rabin's terms of partial withdrawal followed by a long period of normalization along the lines of the Israeli–Egyptian deal (Rabinovich 1998: 239). Following Rabin's assassination, as a newspaper interview with Israeli negotiator Uri Savir claimed, Shimon Peres "missed the chance" to conclude a peace treaty with Syria in 1996 by "not making a decision" and instead calling for a general election, which Netanyahu would win (Rabinovich 1998: 240). Netanyahu's first official statement made clear that "retaining Israeli sovereignty over the Golan will be the basis for an

arrangement with Syria" (Smith 2013: 460).

One further attempt at a peace agreement failed in Geneva in 2000 when Israeli Labour Prime Minister Ehud Barak equivocated on full withdrawal from the Golan as per long-standing Syrian demands: the chance for a comprehensive peace plan was lost as the US "war on terror" interventions sought to overthrow the Syrian regime and impose a regime friendly to Israel. Over a decade later, during US President Obama's first term in office, Netanyahu, once again in power, oversaw a parliamentary bill in 2010 requiring a national referendum before withdrawing from any occupied Syrian territory to further stall a peace treaty with Syria and to bind the hands of other Israeli politicians (Smith 2013: 519).

The start of the Syrian uprisings in 2011 led to tension not seen since the 1974 disengagement. Israel encouraged radicalized forces fighting the Syrian Army around the Golan, and by 2014 al-Nusra forces had taken over Qunaitra and UNDOF positions there were eventually abandoned as their positions came under fire. During this period, Israeli on-the-ground strategy regarding southern Syria focused on building a "safe zone" both to push the Syrian army – and its Iranian and Lebanese allies – as far away from Israel's border as possible and to fortify Israel's control over the Golan (Samaha 2018). As the investigative reporter Nour Samaha has suggested, Israel first gained access to opposition-held areas in southern Syria via humanitarian organizations and military personnel, and its goal was to establish a 40 kilometre, Israeli-monitored buffer zone beyond the Golan Heights, ideally with a "Syrian border police force armed and trained by Israel, and greater involvement in civil administration in opposition-controlled areas" (Samaha 2018).

As the tide of the Syrian war shifted decisively to the advantage of the Syrian army and its Hizbullah allies, the Golan (and overall southern Syria) was restored to its pre-2011 situation and most rebels were expelled. The question of the contours of an eventual post-war agreement, including the role of Hizbullah, remains uncertain, and there are fears that US President Trump will accede to long-standing Israeli requests for US recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan (Kuttab 2018a). Such a scenario would lead to destabilization and possible war not just in the Golan and southern Syria, but the larger Middle East.

3.3 PALESTINE REFUGEES: NEGLECTED REGIONAL PROBLEM

One of the most important and intractable consequences of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and in particular the failure to resolve the Palestine question, has been the fate of Palestinian refugees. During the 1947–8 wars, Zionist/Israeli armed forces forced the vast majority of indigenous Palestinians to become refugees overnight (Smith 2013: 197). Roughly two-thirds of them ended up (and remain) in the West Bank and Gaza, while the rest were scattered across Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. The UN General Assembly in 1948 passed the seminal Resolution 194 that recognized the refugees' right of return, and two years later it created an agency providing relief and works for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA). For Palestinians, UNRWA has from its inception embodied the international community's responsibility and commitment to implement the right of return. Moreover, by ensuring that UNRWA's mandate was linked to Resolution 194, Arab countries also "wanted to reassure the refugees and their own citizens, who were then hugely supportive of the Palestinian cause, about their commitment to the 'right of return'" (Al Husseini 2017: 303).

UNRWA's limited mandate (largely health and education) and ad hoc financing reflected the notion, or at least the hope, that the Palestine refugee problem would be resolved in line with the UN resolutions soon after its establishment. This proved to be wildly optimistic given the subsequent evolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and indeed the influx of additional refugees following the 1967 war. During the Oslo negotiations of the 1990s, the refugee issue was one of the final status agreements that were to be negotiated, but as with the other similar negotiations, it ended abruptly and without resolution. The renewed contestation over UNRWA as an exclusively relief-type agency for refugees, or in combination with its function as embodying Resolution 194, has significant bearing not only on Palestine but on the wider Middle East.

Western nations have, by and large, funded UNRWA in recent decades primarily to support regional stability and the ability of host nations to cope with large numbers of refugees, but also to reduce what they see as the challenge of "radicalism" and "extremism" within the camps (Brynen 2014: 269). Most Israeli governments have officially also supported the donor countries' pragmatism in using UNRWA to "muddle through" the refugee problem while limiting the humanitarian impact of occupation policies and the siege in Gaza (Brynen 2014: 274).

However, the USA, the leading UNRWA donor, plunged the agency into an unprecedented crisis after President Trump's abrupt decision to defund it in early 2018 following the Palestinian refusal to accept Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Moreover, key members of Trump's team are actively pushing for the termination of UNRWA and the stripping of Palestinians of their "refugee" status (Lynch and Gramer 2018). As the scholar and expert on Palestinian refugees Mick Dumper has argued, the impact of all these "dramatic, sudden, and unplanned" cuts on the political stability of the Middle East "is incalculable": it would "produce instability affecting some of the key strategic allies of the US, the EU and the UK in the Middle East" (Dumper 2018). UNRWA services are crucial and currently irreplaceable in Jordan (which now hosts 2 million registered refugees), Lebanon (half a million), and Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem (together comprising 3 million). In war-ravaged Syria, UNRWA services still officially cover half a million Palestinian refugees, a portion of whom have become double refugees by moving to neighbouring Lebanon or Jordan.

The battle over UNRWA, both in terms of defunding it and severely curtailing the crucial services it provides, and in terms of stripping it of its de facto political function as an advocate for refugee rights and protection, will have a significant effect on the stability of host countries and of Gaza and the West Bank, as well as on the larger Arab–Israeli conflict's prospects for peace.

3.4 WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: REGIONAL INSECURITY

The impact of the Arab–Israeli conflict also has significant bearing on the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East. Currently, only Israel is a nuclear weapons possessor, though it has never officially recognized this and has refused to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or submit to international inspections. This asymmetry between Israel and the Arab states and Iran, in terms of nuclear weapons and other WMDs (biological and chemical weapons), has created regional insecurity. To address this insecurity and to prevent an arms race, Arab states have long supported the creation of a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) – a proposal

made by Egypt and Iran in 1974 and which Egypt in 1990 expanded to include a WMD-free zone, under the purview of NPT multilateral diplomacy and UN supervision. In 1995, the NPT officially adopted this proposal, but since then, despite some progress in developing the idea, it has been shelved due to strong Israeli opposition (with steadfast US support).

Israel's nuclear programme was created with strong French support during the 1960s, and since then Europe and particularly the USA have supported Israel's position and worked to prevent other Middle Eastern states from acquiring such weapons. The failure to support a regional WMD-free zone form its inception thus led various Arab states to seek WMDs to counter Israel's strategic advantage. Egypt is suspected to have chemical weapons, and has refused to sign the NPT or the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) until Israel has done so. Iraq, and later Libya and Syria, built up their own chemical weapons stockpiles during the Cold War, explicitly using Israeli WMD possession as their justification.

Following the 1990 Gulf War, and given that it had earlier used chemical weapons to attack Iranian and later Kurdish areas, Iraq was subjected to various UN disarmament resolutions and a stringent inspection regime to ensure the destruction of such weapons and the dismantling of its nascent nuclear programme. Indeed, the Western-supported sanctions regime produced a humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq (von Sponeck 2017). Worse still, the USA used the false accusation of Iraq's continued possession of WMDs, and the threat this posed to Israel, as a key justification to invade and occupy Iraq in 2003. This, in turn, caused untold hardship in Iraq and led to an unprecedented cycle of war, regional conflict and the rise of Al-Qaeda and later ISIS armed groups. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, both Libya and Syria were compelled to join the CWC and destroy their respective chemical stockpiles (K. Makdisi and Hindawi 2017).

With Iraq, Libya and Syria stripped of their chemical weapons, and still no meaningful Western pressure on Israel to join the NPT or at least declare their WMD programmes, Israel's asymmetric strategic position has been strengthened. Currently only Iran poses a threat, and the decade-long problem of Iran's nuclear programme has thus been the central focus of Western, and especially US, threats, sanctions and negotiations. In 2005, the UN Security Council passed a resolution under Chapter VII to coerce Iran to stop its uranium enrichment programme, and the resulting sanctions politically isolated Iran and led to intense social and humanitarian consequences (K. Makdisi and Hindawi 2017). When negotiations finally achieved a breakthrough in the form of the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1, then US President Obama came under stinging attack from Israel and its US supporters who accused Obama of selling Israel out. After becoming president Trump quickly reversed Obama's pledge to work with Iran, unilaterally pulling the USA out of the deal. There seems little doubt that Israeli pressure and interest in remaining the only WMD possessor state will cause further tension and instability in the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the continuing relevance and importance of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and particularly the question of Palestine, as a core problem in the Middle East. It claims that the history of violence, diplomatic failures and betrayals over the course of a century – since the issuance of the Balfour Declaration, which eventually led to the partition of Palestine – has been at the heart of key regional problems throughout the Cold and Post-Cold war periods. It has argued that the failure of the Oslo process during the 1990s essentially showed that the two-state solution (based on UNSC Resolution 242), the very basis of the "peace process", has perpetuated the historically single most important impediment to stability and peace in the Middle East, or at least in the Levant region.

A quick look at a map of the carved-up, non-contiguous occupied West Bank – surrounded as it is by illegal Jewish settlement blocs, military outposts and zones, and Jewish-only roads – exposes the hollowness behind the idea of creating a meaningful "state" in even part of the internationally recognized territory of Palestine, namely the West Bank. This has been the case for over a decade now. The 2018 recognition by the USA of occupied Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and the attempt by senior figures in the Trump administration to strip Palestinians of their refugee status and their right of return, and reinforce Jewish colonies in contravention of international law, UN resolutions and even the Oslo and Roadmap agreements, simply makes the situation in Palestine more explicit. The situation in Gaza, which has been under an horrific siege and regular Israeli invasions for over a decade, and suffers some of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes, poverty and de-development globally, will continue to fuel Palestinian resistance.

Perhaps most significantly, the conflicts in Gaza, southern Lebanon and Syria (particularly the occupied Golan Heights) now serve as a central locus of the larger, more dynamic Iranian and Hizbullah-led Resistance Axis's regional conflict with an Israeli–Saudi-led informal alliance, a conflict that has evolved from the Arab–Israeli impasse. This conflict is certainly over material gains – who has greater influence in Syria, for instance – but equally over ideational ones too: while the Resistance Axis places the question of Palestine at its core, in rhetoric at least, the Israeli bloc is at pains to declare Palestine and Palestinians irrelevant.

On a more global scale, Israel's actions, particularly over the past decade in Gaza but also more recently in its role in overturning US negotiations with Iran – and its passage of the dangerous Jewish Nationality law that enshrines the apartheid-like situation inside Israel itself – has provoked an international backlash, with, for instance and most recently, both the UN Security Council and General Assembly voting overwhelmingly against the US decision to recognize occupied Jerusalem as Israel's capital (UNGA 2018, UN News 2018). This backlash is even more prominent within the global civil society movements. The most high-profile such movement is the BDS movement, which borrows from the similar movement against White South African apartheid regime. It exposes, particularly to those in the West, the large gap between Israel's apparent democratic credentials and the reality of its apartheid-like policy of treating Jewish nationals differently from its non-Jewish citizens, to say nothing of its occupation of Palestinian territories. In the words of Nathan Thrall, the BDS has been turning the Israeli government into a "leper among liberals and progressives" (Thrall 2018).

Such international trends and global movements add an extra layer to the regional situation, and until the question of Palestine is resolved in a meaningful and just way, such tension and violence will continue. The evolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict into an increasingly resilient Resistance Axis–Israel conflict suggests that the European Union, and the larger international community, should move on from their own policies of the past two decades and seek more expansive solutions that both recognize this conflict's larger regional consequences.

The European states must also be more self-critical about their role in perpetuating the Israeli occupation of Palestine despite their declared commitment to the two-state solution. The reality is that the EU has deepened its economic, cultural and security ties with Israel, and merely propped up a weak Palestinian Authority and an assortment of NGOs in the name of "peacebuilding" (Turner 2017). As ever, their policies towards Palestine will be the litmus test for their commitment to a just solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and to the core principle of human rights and international law.

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Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

MENARA is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.

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