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Forum Introduction: Prospects for Palestinian–Israeli Relations: What Lies Ahead

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The idea for this *Forum* is based on an increasing concern with the status quo of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: failed peace negotiations, three assaults on the Gaza Strip between 2008 and 2014, continuous expansion of Israeli illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, increasing tension resulting in rounds of severe violence, and unwillingness or inability among political elites in Israel and in Palestine to reach a final compromise through bilateral or multilateral negotiations.

Most importantly, we believe that the parameters of the debate and the principles upon which international diplomacy has relied for decades need to be reassessed because they are built on a scenario that does not exist in practice. The international community's insistence on a final agreement based on a two-state solution in the near future is not only unrealistic; it risks eternalizing the conflict by keeping artificially alive a diplomatic solution that has been on life support for many years. Nothing on the horizon indicates that Israelis and Palestinians are on the way to resuming serious negotiations, and even in the event of such negotiations, the implementation of any agreement seems very complex at best. Other approaches contributing to solve the conflict, such as the Arab Peace Initiative or the EU's Special Privileged Partnership proposal, remain largely marginalized or work-in-progress.

Considering the degradation of the situation on the ground and the persistence of all the impediments to peace for many decades, we want to use this *Forum* to think critically and creatively about the future in order to widen the parameters of the debate. Contributors were asked to reflect about ways to challenge the approach used by the international community over the last decades and to highlight different dynamics that need to be considered when engaging with the conflict. More specifically, we focused on three overarching questions: What are the main pillars of alternative Palestinian and Israeli visions/strategies for lasting peace and justice? How can these visions/strategies be

operationalized – i.e. what can be done to change the status quo? And finally, how can we envisage the future of Israeli–Palestinian relations?

Throughout the *Forum*, there is a general consensus that the two-state solution, despite remaining the ‘conventional wisdom’ amongst the international community and political elites, has reached a dead end. The authors agree that an alternative paradigm is still in the making, and so far all attempts have failed to become concrete, viable or dominant alternative proposals. The contributors, however, propose a number of ideas to operationalize the alternative paradigms. These include a long-term truce, the creation of a new movement that crosses the ethnic–religious terrain, serious attempts to address the Israeli and Palestinian social and political phobias, the growing impact and potential of the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, strategies of legalization and conflict internationalization, a refocus of the policies of international actors such as the EU, and finally the centrality of the people and their beliefs and perceptions in any future solution.

Concretely, *Nathan Thrall* discusses the potential alternatives to bilateral talks as explored by the Palestinian and Israeli political leaderships, and proposes a two-stage solution that aims to achieve a long-term Israeli–Palestinian truce. Thrall argues, however, that this truce requires enduring and determined effort by the multiple actors to make the costs of occupation greater than the costs of territorial withdrawal. *Mandy Turner*, recognizing that both the peace process and the two-state solution are dead, concludes that in the medium to long term there will be one state that comprises the whole of historic Palestine although its form cannot be predicted. However, the key element for a different future is the creation of a movement that crosses the ethnic–religious terrain to facilitate the decolonization of Palestine and provide Palestinian and Israelis with the same fundamental rights, something that does not happen today.

On a different note, *Yonatan Mendel* argues that ideas about future peace must take Israeli and Palestinian phobias very seriously. In order to be eventually accepted, any proposal on the table needs to consider and address the socio-historical elements that constitute Israel’s collective identity. Additionally, Mendel argues that the absence of any real reason for Israel to change the status quo and the asymmetric nature of the conflict have made it harder for the Israeli population to realize the impact of their actions on the Palestinian people, an argument also put forward by Alaa Tartir. The issue of the asymmetries in the conflict is also present in *George Giacaman*’s contribution, in which he discusses the Palestinian civil society-led BDS movement as a viable strategy to address the Palestinian fragmentation and to confront the Israeli occupation and its colonial regime. Giacaman argues that particular dynamics observed in both Israeli and Palestinian elites facilitate the persistence of the conflict, while expecting that demography will remain at the heart of this conflict.

Bruno Oliveira Martins focuses on the mixed record of the European intervention in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and suggests ways of preventing the

normalization of and resignation to the status quo. He argues that the EU should support initiatives that are compatible with its foreign policy based on respect for international law and democratic principles. An alternative EU approach to the conflict should therefore be built upon two pillars: the legalization of the main contending issues and the empowerment of the civil society actors and initiatives that foster dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis. This should be pursued taking full advantage of the leverage that a strong economic and financial position in the region provides the EU, something that has not been explored sufficiently and efficiently so far.

The central role of civil society is also highlighted by *Alaa Tartir* in his people-centred contribution, in which he questions fundamental assumptions about the persistence of the conflict and discusses a number of prerequisites for alternative Palestinian and Israeli strategies. He argues that without addressing the perceptions and beliefs of the people, peace will remain elusive. Therefore, moving to alternative frameworks and tools necessitates first and foremost a firm acknowledgment that the existing framework needs to be laid to rest. Justice, equality and a lasting peace must be preceded by a decolonization of the structures of oppression and repression, Tartir concludes.

Three particular themes emerge from the six contributions: the politics of emotions, the conflict's inwards–outwards dynamics and the current one-state reality. In conflict-affected contexts, the politics of emotions, including the politics of fear, is a feature that impacts on any potential future solution and the persistence of the conflict. As demonstrated in this *Forum*, Palestine/Israel is not an exception. Israeli and Palestinian phobias, collective narratives, security theologies, people's voices and perceptions, fear of demography and fears over addressing taboos in both societies, are some of the dynamics that illustrate the centrality of the politics of emotions and fear. Thrall, in this *Forum*, argues that 'Both sides imagine that the other might come to accept their moral claims, adopt parts of their narrative and relinquish demands for sovereignty over the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount'. This lies at the very core of the problem. Addressing what lies ahead for Palestinian–Israeli relations requires tackling these domains of fear and deeply embedded emotions while acknowledging the asymmetry of power relations. Any attempt to deal with the conflict without recognizing these structural factors may lead to temporary solutions, but will never provide the conditions for a lasting settlement of the dispute.

Furthermore, the contributions in this *Forum* cover both bilateral dynamics (Palestinian–Israeli local and internal affairs) and multilateral dynamics (internationalization of the conflict, strategies of legalization, the role of the EU and the avenues for action in the international theatre). The interaction between these inward and outward dynamics is crucial to understanding the trajectories of the conflict and future relations, especially in a context where developments in the region affect the political destinies of the Palestinian refugees in the diaspora and contribute to disrupting a geographic area already affected

by endless cycles of turmoil. Finally, the existing 'one-state reality' is far from being a monolithic scenario and its future is complex and unpredictable. The contributing authors to this *Forum* reflect on this reality by focusing on different themes and areas and by using different analytical lenses to better understand its implications. The combination of the 'readings' of the one-state reality reveal deeper complexities in the existing status quo and urge actors to engage in more creative solutions.

The combination of these contributions produces important alternatives to the dominant paradigm of the two-state solution reached through negotiations. Reality shows that more than 20 years since the Oslo Agreements, this paradigm has not achieved its goals. It is time to challenge this approach, and we hope to widen the parameters of the debate.

This *Forum* is not about predicting the future. Rather, it is about critically analysing the present, and assessing the future options and possibilities for a lasting peace and justice. Whilst in the short term the future is bleak, it can be brighter in the long run if the imbalances of power are addressed, if international law is respected, if the processes of colonization end and if the cycles of de-development are reversed.