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ABSTRACT

The paper provides historical and political context to current diplomatic and humanitarian developments in the Gaza Strip, and investigates the present and the future of the area. Special attention is given to the political, economic and security dimensions, as well as the relationship between this area and the broader region. The conclusions linger on whether or not the Arab–Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian conflict remains one of the cornerstones of regional tensions, and what this issue and its relationship with broader trends and developments tell us about the past and future configuration of the regional order in the Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

“A place of spacious dimensions and large population, with fine bazaars. It contains numerous mosques, and there is no wall round it.” The Moroccan explorer Ibn Battutah (1958: 73), one of the most celebrated travellers in world history, used these words while visiting Gaza in 1326. Almost 700 years later, “wall” (or barbed wire) is possibly one of the first words that comes to mind for most people when thinking of the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, “mosques” – and more precisely the relevance of religion and/or of religious extremism – are very much present in the collective consciousness in considerations of the Gaza Strip today.

The first section of this paper aims to investigate these aspects, and, more precisely, in line with one of the main goals of the Menara project (see Soler et al. 2016), gives some context to a number of ongoing phenomena: it is based on the assumption that offering historical context is a precondition for serious attempts to provide sustainable solutions. The second part investigates the present and the future of the Gaza Strip, with a special focus on its political, economic and security context, and the repercussions of the ongoing crisis for the enclave, its immediate neighbours, and the broader region. The conclusion focuses on whether or not the Arab–Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian conflict remains one of the cornerstones of regional tensions, and what this issue and its relationship with broader trends and developments in the Middle East tell us about the past and future configuration of the regional order.

1. THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION: WITHIN AND BEYOND HAMAS

In the first half of 2018, the “Great March of Return” has seen thousands of people protest at the Gaza Strip’s fence (not a border) with Israel. It started as a collective quest for dignity and rights

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in one of the most overcrowded places on earth: a tiny piece of land home to 2 million people in which, according to Terre des Hommes, a Swiss-based NGO working in Gaza, 96 per cent of water from the coastal aquifer is contaminated with nitrates and chloride.²

Yet, as also happened during the first Intifada (1987–1993), with Fatah and its founder Yasser Arafat, some of the protests were soon “hijacked” and exploited by Hamas and its leadership. In other words, Hamas has tried to jump on the bandwagon of a spontaneous, bottom-up popular movement.³ It has done so through a calculated campaign aimed at, first, putting pressure on two key rivals, Israel and the Mahmoud Abbas-led Palestinian National Authority (PNA), and second, setting the international spotlight back on to the Gaza Strip’s worsening humanitarian situation.

Many observers have focused on a variety of factors, including the brutality of Hamas’s governance and ideology, the election by the Palestinian people of Hamas in 2006 (over 53 per cent of the population in the Gaza Strip was under 18 years of age at the time of the vote), how Hamas takes advantage of aid resources from international organizations (although at least 78 per cent of humanitarian aid intended for Palestinians “ends up in Israeli coffers”),⁴ Israel’s obligations under international law and its tight control over Gazan territory (Gaza’s population registry is overseen by Israel), and Egypt’s role in deepening the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza. However, very few observers have put this tragedy in its full historical context.

The population in the Gaza Strip is mainly composed of families of refugees. Many of them were expelled in 1948 from Najd, Al-Jura and al-Majdal, present-day Or HaNer, Sderot and Ashkelon (a city of Canaanite origins, that included al-Majdal until 1948). These villages were razed to the ground by the Israeli army, in some cases to prevent the return of their inhabitants (Golani and Manna 2011: 96), who were transferred by bus to the camps and cities of the present-day Gaza Strip.

In the years that followed, several cases occurred in which refugees, or “infiltrators”, crossed the armistice lines to collect possessions and reap unharvested crops, or to raid Israeli settlements adjacent to the Strip. During this period, a number of Israeli fatalities occurred and, in Benny Morris’s words, “Israel’s defensive anti-infiltration measures resulted in the death of several thousand mostly unarmed Arabs during 1949–56” (Morris 1997: 135–6).

Despite the anger and fears connected to its tragic past, the population in the Gaza Strip remained largely apolitical and hesitant toward the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, the precursor of Hamas. The first local branch of the Brotherhood, which was already composed of different factions, was established in Jerusalem in 1946. Its first representatives, however, arrived from Egypt in 1936 with the aim of encouraging Palestinians in their struggle against the British Mandate and large-scale

2 The Gaza Strip is of course plagued by plenty of other humanitarian issues, including that of exit permits for the sick, numbers of which granted have significantly declined in recent years. Water availability might soon become the most pressing problem. See Omer (2016).

3 Amira Hass (2018) noted that “My friends in Gaza are outraged by Israel’s claim that Hamas rules everything. ‘You people always looked down at us, so it’s hard for you to understand that no one demonstrates in anyone else’s name’”.

4 “78% of Aid Intended for Palestinians Ends Up in Israel”, in *World Bulletin*, 9 March 2016, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/palestine/170268/78-of-aid-intended-for-palestinians-ends-up-in-israel>.

Jewish immigration to Palestine. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Brotherhood weakened due to the repression carried out by Egyptian President Gamal Nasser. After the War of 1967, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) shifted increasingly to “violent resistance” and/or terrorism – a strategy that Hamas’s precursors did not embrace. Instead, they chose to focus on social and cultural activities – benefiting in this from the tolerance of the Israeli authorities, which regarded Hamas as a counterbalance to the main enemy, the secularist-nationalist PLO and Fatah – in an environment that was increasingly turning towards religion. Between 1967 and Hamas’s founding in 1987, two decades after the beginning of the Israeli occupation, the number of mosques in Gaza trebled from 200 to 600 (Abu-Amr 1994: 15).

Hamas was established during the early part of the First Intifada. Its founder, the al-Jura-born Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, created it out of the largely dormant Gaza branch of the Brotherhood with the aim of assuming a driving role in the 1987 revolt. The organization carried out its first attack against Israel in 1989, killing two soldiers. For this, Yassin was sentenced to life imprisonment and 400 Hamas activists were deported to Israeli-occupied Southern Lebanon, where Hezbollah and Hamas cemented bilateral ties.

The Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas’s military branch, was established in 1991. Two years later, it started carrying out terrorist attacks in the West Bank, and from April 1994, two months after the massacre perpetrated by Baruch Goldstein in a Hebron mosque, Hamas began its campaign of suicide bombings inside Israel. Anti-Semitic statements by several Hamas members and clerics, similar to the ones included in the Hamas Charter of 1988, have since become increasingly common.

In March 2004, Yassin was killed by an Israeli missile strike. Hamas survived and began to participate in the electoral process, gaining increasing support among the local population, mainly thanks to its social activities, the shortcomings and corruption of the PNA, and the effects of the Israeli occupation.

Following Hamas’s victory in the 2006 Palestinian legislative election, Ismail Haniyeh, the newly elected Prime Minister, sent a dispatch to US President George W. Bush asking for recognition and offering a long-term truce (or “*hudna*”) with Israel and the establishment of a border on the 1967 lines. His message, as with a similar one sent to the Israeli authorities, received no answer. The Arab Peace Initiative suffered the same fate. It had originally been outlined by Saudi Arabia in 2002 and was subsequently embraced by the Arab League in the same year, as well as being re-endorsed by the Arab League in 2007 and 2017.

As with the “Likud Charter” of 1999 (whose main principles, including the rejection of a Palestinian state, have never been retracted), Hamas was still far from being ready to recognize the State of Israel, but was willing to adopt a pragmatic approach. Discussions regarding a long-term truce between Israel and Hamas have surfaced repeatedly over the past few years, signalling the existence of channels of communication between the two and a mutual interest in defusing tensions provided that certain conditions are met. Most recently, in early May 2018, reports indicated that Hamas officials renewed an offer for a truce with Israel in exchange for an easing of the Gaza blockade, even going so far as to consider direct talks with Israel (Harel 2018, Shehada 2018).

Looking back, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's 2007 decision to respond to Hamas's takeover of Gaza with a blockade played into the hands of the organization's military wing (the same can be said about Ariel Sharon's 2005 unilateral evacuation of Israeli settlements in Gaza).⁵ Furthermore, the failure of Hamas's political wing to remove the blockade through diplomatic means undermined attempts to explore pragmatic solutions. "The differences between the [Hamas] party's [electoral] platform [in 2006] and the Islamic Charter [of Hamas of 1988]", in Menachem Klein's words, "do not represent an attempt at deception or the empty and unconsidered use of words. They are a product of a change and modification of lines of thought as a part of the process by which Hamas has become a political movement" (Klein 2007: 450).

Hamas's pragmatic and/or tactical evolution was also apparent following the implementation of the Egypt-brokered ceasefire of 2012, which was supposed to end or at least significantly ease the Gaza blockade while guaranteeing Israel's security needs. In the three months following the agreement, only one attack (two mortar shells) occurred. However, during the same period, Gaza suffered regular incursions and the local population, as recorded by the Israeli NGO Gisha, was once again prevented from conducting day-to-day activities.

Most recently, in May 2017, Hamas announced a leadership change and amendments to its Charter, seeking to soften its image while reassuring regional actors – Egypt in particular – about its links to the Muslim Brotherhood and its exclusive focus on Palestine (Wintour 2017). On the topic of a future Palestinian State, the new Hamas Charter endorsed the 1967 lines as a "formula of national consensus" while however reiterating that Hamas "rejects any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea".⁶ Coupled with the appointment of Yahay Sinwar, one of the founders of Hamas's military wing, as the organization's new political head in Gaza, these efforts signalled a continuation of internal struggles over the trajectory of Hamas in the wake of the tumultuous changes impacting the Middle East since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. While hesitantly welcomed by some, these changes were ultimately deemed insufficient by international actors, which continue to insist that any recognition or dialogue with Hamas can only take place once several preconditions are in place.⁷

The point of providing context and retelling this complex history is not to deny Hamas's responsibilities: its past and present policies are often immoral, criminal and/or counterproductive. Furthermore, several Hamas leaders and sympathizers have often focused on opposing Israel

5 Eyal Weizman (2014) pointed out that "unlike his many fans believe, Sharon had not turned to peace. The wall and the evacuation of the ground settlements in Gaza are parts of the same national security logic of unilateral solutions that the settlements were – perpetuating and intensifying animosity and violence, rather than undoing them."

6 The full passage is as follows: "Hamas believes that no part of the land of Palestine shall be compromised or conceded, irrespective of the causes, the circumstances and the pressures and no matter how long the occupation lasts. Hamas rejects any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea. However, without compromising its rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights, Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus."

7 According to Noam Sheizaf (2013), the most basic preconditions "are to abandon armed struggle (both in action and as a formal policy) and to recognize Israel. This is, after all, the reason Hamas is kept out of the political process. At the same time, Israel was never asked to formally recognize the Palestinians' right to this land, nor has its government ever voted in favor of the two-state solution nor demanded that a settlement freeze last more than a brief moment."

in principle rather than ameliorating the conditions of the Palestinian people. Finally, Hamas has frequently misportrayed the Palestinian cause – one where Palestinians are legitimately demanding their own state, or at least the securing of a basic set of rights (notably full citizenship) – as an inter-Palestinian quarrel between Hamas and Fatah (both rejected by many Palestinians),⁸ or a Gaza–Egypt dispute over the Rafah crossing.

Hamas’s responsibilities, however, cannot be detached from its own history and from the role played by Israel, the PNA and a number of Arab states. Contrary to many jihadist organizations that have arisen in recent years (such as the self-proclaimed “Islamic State”), devoid of deep roots in local societies and based on obsolete ideologies, Palestinian factions are firmly anchored in the history of their land. They are the product of several misguided decisions, but also, if not especially, of a century of suffering, oppression and a long-standing quest for self-determination.

2. BEYOND GAZA: THE ONGOING CONFLICT AND ITS REGIONAL DIMENSION

About 2,000 miles separate Sana’a from Gaza. Yet, since the very beginning of the mass demonstrations of the “Great March of Return”, the Yemeni city has witnessed sizeable rallies in support of the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip.

Yemen is a war-torn country presently engulfed in the world’s worst humanitarian disaster. This makes the demonstrations there even more remarkable, though they are hardly exceptional. Indeed, recent rallies in support of Gaza have also taken place in Indonesia, Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco and South Africa as well as in many European capitals, from London to Paris and Brussels. Looking further back, tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets in September 2000 to support the Palestinians during the Second Intifada. Eleven years later, during the early “Arab uprisings”, the alleged “betrayal of the Palestinian cause” was an allegation levelled at several Arab leaders, particularly Hosni Mubarak.

These trends point to the continued relevance of the Palestinian cause among broad cross-sections of the populations in many Arab and Muslim countries. At the same time, however, opinion polls conducted in the Arab world since 2011 have repeatedly demonstrated how the priorities of many people revolve around internal socio-economic rights and security.⁹ Such results are understandable given the many crises presently gripping the region, and have generally contributed to inward-looking tendencies and some degree of fragmentation, as each society focuses on its immediate needs.

It would be a mistake to see these trends as an indication that Palestine no longer enjoys widespread support or that Arab leaders will feel less compelled to take up the Palestinian cause in public, particularly in the wake of outbreaks of violence. The recent examples of the Jerusalem protests in July 2017, or of the ongoing “Great March of Return”, are cases in point.

⁸ See, for instance, the official statement issued by several Palestinian youth and community organizations on 30 April 2018 [No Legitimacy without Representation! 2018].

⁹ See, for instance, Arab Barometer reports (waves III-IV) for a collection of recent opinion polls in the Arab world (2012-2014, 2016-2017), <http://www.arabbarometer.org/instruments-and-data-files>; Abbott and Sapsford (2016) and Dessi (2017).

Ultimately, there is no debating the fundamental impact that the Israeli–Palestinian dispute has had on the Middle East. This is true in both historical and contemporary terms. With regards to the regional order since the end of the Second World War, the festering Arab–Israeli conflict has had a significant impact on those processes of state formation and reformation. Monarchies fell, coups were planned, rallying pan-Arab and pan-Islamic ideologies formed not least as a result of developments tied to the Arab–Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian conflicts and the failures of old Arab elites. This has led to a deepening of intra-regional faultlines, exposing the region to widespread foreign meddling and the prioritization of security and war-making capacity over social policy in many Arab states. The legitimacy of ruling elites thus became increasingly reliant on external drivers and developments, sustained by rallying calls that exploited Arab causes and solidarity for the political interests of elites, whose overriding concern remains regime consolidation and survival.

The extent to which Arab elites have traditionally exploited the Palestinian cause represents another key legacy of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. These trends continue today, reaching unprecedented levels, with mounting pressure being brought to bear on the Palestinians by a coalition of Arab states composed of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt. While in the past these (and other) regimes had tended to exploit the Palestinian cause as a means to channel domestic discontent, extract concessions from the USA and solidify their legitimacy through criticism of Israel, today these same regimes have muted their criticism and switched to tacit cooperation and coordination with Israel and the USA against Iran. Promising their citizens security and economic development, these states, are increasingly seeking to direct domestic grievances and security threats towards a “new” external enemy, Iran, while extracting support and assistance from Israel and the USA as a means to preserve regime stability and control.

In this context, the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict represents a mere irritant in the broader relations between these states and the Trump administration. The issue distracts from their emerging cooperation against Iran and the USA’s willingness to turn a blind eye to a resurgence of authoritarianism in a number of Arab states. Palestine, however, still represents a potential source of domestic threats to ruling elites in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, and these regimes are aware of the potent rallying cry this cause continues to enjoy among their populaces.

Leaders in these countries thus need to tread carefully when it comes to Israel and Palestine. They wish to see a quick resolution to the intractable conflict or, failing that, a continuation of the decades-old policy of conflict management to avoid outbreaks of violence that only increase popular animosity towards Israel and its allies. These Arab states have closely cooperated with the Trump administration on the latter’s so-called “ultimate deal” for Israeli–Palestinian peace. Precise details about the deal are sketchy, but numerous accounts have noted that it is likely to contain important changes compared to previous approaches, including no right of (or negotiations about the) return for Palestinian refugees, some form of limited and selective autonomy instead of independence, and a Palestinian capital in Abu Dis, not Jerusalem.¹⁰

¹⁰ Uncorroborated reports on details contained in Trump’s “ultimate deal” were leaked in May 2018 to a right-wing website, DEBKAFfile. See “Trump ME Peace Plan: Half West Bank for Palestinians, Abu Dis as Capital”, in *DEBKAFfile*, 20 May 2018, <https://www.debka.com/?p=162636>. Also see Plitnick (2018) and Anziska (2017).

In cooperating with the USA, these Arab states have gone further than any previous regional leaders in side-lining traditional Palestinian causes, even tacitly endorsing the US/Israeli unilateral action on the key final status issue of Jerusalem (Nakhoul et al. 2017, Kirkpatrick 2018). Reports that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman told a group of US-based Jewish groups that the Palestinians should accept Trump's plan or "shut up and stop complaining", is reflective of these developments.¹¹

From the standpoint of the White House, the objective is as simple as it is misguided and likely untenable: that of restoring the old, pro-Western authoritarian status quo in the region, one that remains dependent on US aid and military support but is more willing to assume increased military, political and economic burdens in the Middle East to serve as cover for a retrenching USA. As was noted by a former general in the Israeli armed forces in 2015 during a meeting with Michael Oren, a deputy minister in Netanyahu's government and former Israeli ambassador to the USA, "Why won't Americans face the truth? To defend Western freedom, they must preserve Middle East tyranny" (Oren 2015: 302). It should be noted that this rhetoric has become increasingly common since the Arab uprisings. Yet there are some distinctions to be drawn.

While the Obama administration had struggled to encourage a reformulation of regional alignments based on some form of a balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran that could allow for diminished US responsibilities in the Middle East, its successor has turned this approach on its head. Overturning Obama's reluctance to overtly take sides in the post-Arab uprisings Middle East, Trump has fully embraced Israel and Saudi Arabia, granting both actors ample leeway in their foreign and domestic policy. Trump's approach is based on an outsourcing of US Middle East policy to two of the most conservative and status-quo oriented powers in the region, that is, Israel and Saudi Arabia, for short-term political and economic gain (Entous 2018). Out of geostrategic necessity with regards to NATO, the conflict in Syria and US military basing rights in the Persian Gulf, Washington is also seeking to manage its traditional alliances with Qatar and Turkey, although there is little doubt that Saudi Arabia and Israel stand out as the primary power nodes in Trump's strategic approach to the post-Arab uprisings.¹² Such a strategy runs the serious risk of further inflaming regional animosities and potentially even heralding new outbreaks of violence and confrontation that – in a phase in which Washington's national interests are continuing to shift toward Asia – will probably result in a further deepening of US military commitments and responsibilities in the Middle East (see Riedel 2018 and Crooke 2017).

In this framework, the Palestinian issue represents an impediment to stabilizing the US–Saudi–Israeli nexus and one that can be exploited by actors opposing it, whether they be in Tehran, Damascus, Beirut or even Ankara. It is for this reason that the Trump administration cannot completely disengage from the Palestinian question and it is for the same reason that a number of Arab states that are presently cooperating with Israel cannot move towards full normalization

11 "MBS: Palestinians Should 'Accept Trump Proposals or Shut Up'", in *Al Jazeera*, 30 April 2018, <http://aje.io/qxubr>.

12 In this respect, it may be indicative that Qatar has made a significant effort to repair its public image in the US following the Saudi-led blockade imposed on the country since June 2017 through, for example, high-level contacts and invitations to key pro-Israel figures in the US political establishment. Similar efforts have also been undertaken by Saudi Arabia and in particular the new Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. See Frantzman (2018) and "Qatar Buying American Influence Through Pro-Israel Lobby and Businessmen", in *The Arab American News*, 22 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2KcDWBh>.

while sidestepping the issue of Palestine. Keeping up the promise of an “ultimate deal” (or “deal of the century”) while exerting pressure on Arab states to bring about a capitulation of the Palestinian leadership is therefore understood as a necessity in order to advance broader strategic goals in the region.

With the battle lines drawn and tensions between competing centres of power mounting in the hotbeds of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, the relevant actors are seeking means to weaken their rivals, driving a wedge between allies or stirring unrest behind enemy lines. In this, all players are grudgingly coming to terms with the continued centrality of the Palestinian question, important for their respective survival interests as well as in the struggle for leadership and influence in the post-Arab uprisings Middle East.

Ultimately, no Arab-Muslim leadership will be able to consolidate its long-term legitimacy and control while ignoring or downplaying the Palestinian cause, particularly in light of the there being other actors – Iran, Hezbollah, Turkey, even Russia, as well as the Palestinians themselves – that will seek to return Palestine to centre stage, or to exploit the issue as a tool to weaken and drive a wedge between competing powers. The relevance of Palestine has also been highlighted by the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar which started in June 2017, with Qatar’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas in Gaza among the reasons that led to the ongoing diplomatic crisis.¹³

As a result, Arab leaders are aware that there are limits to their normalization efforts vis-à-vis Israel in the absence of diplomatic progress on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. While the Trump administration’s approach is that of seeking gradual Israeli–Arab normalization *before* a diplomatic agreement is reached on Palestine, the unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital on 6 December 2017 has complicated these efforts (see Kamel 2017), causing some concern among Washington’s Arab allies, particularly in Cairo and Amman.

CONCLUSION: WHOSE STABILITY?

For decades, the unresolved Arab–Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian conflict was recognized as a major – if not *the* major – faultline within the region and between the region and the outside world. Seventy years since the formation of the State of Israel, and fifty-one years since the 1967 War that heralded the beginnings of Israel’s control of what the International Court of Justice, the UN, the EU, the US State Department and virtually all relevant international organizations refer to as the “occupied Palestinian territories” or “occupied territories”, the unresolved conflict retains much of its centrality.

This stems not so much from concerted efforts to resolve the issue or out of a sense of solidarity with the Palestinian people and their rights. Rather, the conflict is important for broader regional and international equilibria, a dimension that will continue over the coming years, and yet is not likely to result in sustainable and long-term solutions. A continuation of band-aid approaches

¹³ While not explicitly included in the list of thirteen demands imposed on Qatar by the Saudi-led Arab group, multiple media sources and officials at the time specifically made reference to Qatar’s relations with Hamas as among the motivations that led to the blockade. See Khoury (2017) and “Saudi FM: Qatar Must Stop Supporting Hamas, Brotherhood”, in *Al Jazeera*, 7 June 2017, <http://aje.io/yq6q>.

that aim to buy time while not addressing the root causes of the problem can in fact be expected, starting with the worsening humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. Ultimately, such approaches will only result in a postponement of the impending crisis, ensuring that the conflict will remain a central and defining element, or irritant, for the regional ecosystem for the foreseeable future, and the subject of continued competition among regional and international actors alike.

With the Middle East reeling from multiple crises, a growing chorus of opinion has argued that the Arab–Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian conflict no longer represents the fulcrum of instability and radicalization in the region. Overshadowed by the human suffering in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, the appearance of the “Islamic state”, and the mounting regional animosities between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt (and Israel) on the other, the issue has indeed been side-lined by broader regional and international developments since 2011 (see, for instance, Dessì 2012, 2013).

Yet, what it is often defined as the “longest conflict since the end of the Second World War” will still make its familiar, often tragic, return to centre stage in the region as a result of protests, killings and concerns over an impending humanitarian disaster or economic meltdown. All of these factors are now materializing in quick succession, and it is thus no coincidence that a flurry of activity has been taking place with respect to the Gaza Strip and the broader Palestinian question. In the wake of the Trump administration’s unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and the heavy toll paid by many (mainly civilians) during demonstrations in Gaza, international actors are again looking at Palestine with a mixed sense of urgency and helplessness.

The dire humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and the significant budget shortfalls facing the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) since the Trump administration’s decision to slash US funding and wage what amounts to diplomatic warfare against the UN agency and the Palestinians have both heightened and driven these concerns (Lynch and Gramer 2018). The EU and the USA have both sponsored donor conferences to help alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and, most recently, the USA has announced (new) efforts to raise 1 billion dollars in funds from Arab Gulf states for development projects in the Strip. Multiple plans have been presented, including those for desalination plants and new electricity stations, solar plants, a port and gas pipelines that are key to any socio-economic revival of Gaza. Such ideas are not new and ultimately cannot hope to address the immediate humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. More short-term and people centred initiatives are needed, including increased export permits, expanded fishing rights and a loosening of worker visas for vetted Gaza residents wishing to work in Israel (Beilin 2018).

A renewed focus on the Gaza Strip does not stem solely from the outbreak of protests or the “Great March of Return”. It rather revolves around familiar concerns that worsening living conditions and the complete lack of political horizon will lead to yet another outbreak of hostilities, in what would be the ninth Israeli military “operation” in Gaza since 2004 (Young 2018). Concern has increased recently, with renewed rocket fire and Israeli bombing raids in Gaza in June and early August 2018, albeit such tensions have since subsided somewhat with reports of continued contacts – mediated by Qatar – between Hamas and Israel for the establishment of a long-term truce (Dorsey 2018).

However, there may be more to this growing focus on Gaza. There are increasing signs that Trump's "ultimate deal" will have a significant dimension for the Gaza Strip, even perhaps granting it precedence over the West Bank and thereby potentially further solidifying internal divisions between the two main Palestinian factions (Khoury and Tibon 2018). Uncorroborated reports have pointed to a plan that would see Egypt cooperate in the construction of energy infrastructure projects in the Egyptian Sinai bordering the Strip to help with the economic recovery of the area (Plitnick 2018). Rejected by the PNA on the grounds that it would deepen the division between the West Bank and Gaza, even Egypt has recently come out to clarify that such development projects cannot be a substitute for a diplomatic deal to end the conflict (Bar'el 2018).

This latter point should serve as an indication of the constraints facing Egypt when it comes to the issue of Palestine and of the emergence of divisions within the anti-Iran Arab nexus on this topic. Indeed, and particularly for Egypt and Jordan, there is much concern regarding the fallout from Trump's "ultimate deal", particularly if it contains such explosive concessions regarding Jerusalem, the right of return and "status"¹⁴ of Palestinian refugees, and potentially even a weakening of Jordan's sole responsibility as the custodian of Jerusalem's holy sites (Entous 2018).

Moreover, there have been recent reports of some tension between Egypt and Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia and Jordan regarding the future status of East Jerusalem, with both Arab states (Egypt and Jordan) reiterating their insistence that it be recognized as the future capital of a Palestinian state (Entous 2018). While some of this is likely to be tactical, a means to not excessively alienate public opinion at a time of domestic duress, the mere fact that such statements are being made reinforces the point about the continued significance (and potential threat) that the Israeli-Palestinian question poses to Arab regimes and elites.

While immediate efforts are now being directed towards Gaza's worsening humanitarian situation, and with speculation growing about the contents of the Trump administration's "ultimate deal", the next months are likely to witness a flurry of diplomatic activity, or rhetoric, regarding the Gaza Strip and the wider Palestinian issue. Much of this reflects the delicacy of the situation and its continued significance for regional equilibrium and the ongoing struggle for legitimacy and influence between competing regional and international centres of power.

The conflict will therefore remain a major object of competition between opposing camps and alliances in the region and beyond. While some push for stabilization and conflict management, others will find benefit in fomenting crises and confrontations. Given that a direct conflict between regional powers is unlikely in the immediate future, recent developments can be expected to continue along familiar lines of skirmishes and proxy warfare, with opposing camps channelling their efforts to weaken rivals in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Palestine instead of vying for an all-out confrontation. It is for this reason, and in an effort to further strengthening the emerging US-Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian and Israeli axis, that the main focus is presently returning to Gaza and

14 Nathan Thrall (2018) pointed out that "There is a myth propagated by some of Israel's supporters that Palestinians are the only people who pass on refugee status to their children. On this basis, the Trump administration and its allies in Congress have sought to cut UN assistance to millions of Palestinian refugees born after the 1948 war. In fact, granting refugee status to stateless descendants is standard practice throughout the world. The majority of registered Afghan refugees, for example, are second- and third-generation, born outside the country, as are most who have returned to Afghanistan in recent years."

the issue of Palestine.

Ordinary Palestinians will, once more, likely emerge as the losers in these regional and international machinations, sacrificed on the altar of the short-term interests of authoritarian regimes, while continuing to be exploited and pressured from all sides in the ongoing battle to redefine the regional order in the Middle East. Weak, divided and repressed, Palestinians do still retain agency – and moral leverage – which could be employed to change the current trajectory of the conflict. Regional and international actors will ignore these players at their own peril.

Looking beyond the two main groups of Hamas and Fatah, other political movements and a galaxy of local NGOs, activists and grassroots actors are active in Palestine. These deserve attention and support by international actors, particularly those still interested in supporting diplomacy and the goal of a two-state framework in Israel/Palestine.¹⁵ Increasingly repressed by both Israel and the PNA's security forces, new generations of Palestinians will not abandon their struggle, nor will they be enticed into complying with "external agendas".

Ultimately, there can be no shortcuts in addressing the festering Arab–Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Purely economic approaches to Gaza will not be enough; the same goes for the traditional security-first approach applied to Israel. A political horizon, including a clear roadmap for intra-Palestinian reconciliation, an end to the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip and binding assurances by Israel and Egypt for long-term access of humanitarian aid and reconstruction materials, as well as the potential for gas exploration and development tenders off the coast of Gaza, are the minimum requirements to begin addressing, and hopefully finally resolving, the Strip's dire socio-economic standing. Israeli security needs, on the other hand, must be addressed and provided for through appropriate international mechanisms, including the potential revival and expansion of EUBAM Rafah, and other assurances.

Yet, the starting point must remain that of approaching the Occupied Palestinian Territories as a single unit, including the Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem, avoiding measures that may further the internal Palestinian divide under the guise of humanitarian relief and short-term stabilization. The West Bank and Gaza Strip are integral parts ("one territorial unit", according to the Oslo Accords) of a future Palestinian state. Engaging the PNA and seeking to soften the requirements for intra-Palestinian reconciliation, while laying the groundwork for the revival of the PLO and the Palestine National Congress (PNC) through the holding of new elections and the inclusion of Hamas in the PLO, are fundamental stepping stones towards a revival of Palestinian politics and the emergence of a new, more legitimate Palestinian leadership.

While cynics, or "realists", might point out that a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian dispute will not magically resolve the Middle East's many crises, beginning (or continuing) to address the conflict through appropriate historical and contemporary contexts is a fundamental precondition for the emergence of a more stable and prosperous Middle East.

¹⁵ See, for instance, No Legitimacy without Representation! [2018].

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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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