



The Future of Palestine

Consultations in Ramallah and Hebron

6-7 April 2014

Report¹

Pugwash held a series of consultations in Ramallah and Hebron, addressing questions related to the future of Palestine and current policy options, with a focus on better understanding the priorities of Palestinian political and business leaders and other experts. The visit included a series of private meetings with eminent Palestinian political leaders, and a small roundtable discussion with a mix of decision-makers, political leaders, business entrepreneurs, and leaders from the NGO and civil rights communities.

Summary

- Failure at the peace table has undermined many Palestinians of all parties who want a peaceful, non-violent resolution to the issues.
- There is a strong feeling among Palestinians that Israel did not negotiate in good faith, and that it has been using negotiations to buy time while allowing settlements to expand, further weakening Palestinian security and in violation of international law.
- The conditions in Gaza, Hebron, East Jerusalem, and throughout Palestine are considered to be unsustainable. Freedom of movement is restricted and basic civil liberties are being denied. Human rights issues – such as Israel's policy of administrative detention, control of water resources, and the lack of access to medical resources – demand international attention.
- Palestinians fear Israel's actions are reminiscent of those of 1948, when Israel took control of more land than agreed.
- Palestinian unity is seen as a priority among Palestinians of different parties.
- The BDS movement, in which the international community is encouraged to pressure Israel toward peace through boycotting of Israeli goods (at a minimum from those produced in the occupied territories, but according to some this should extend to a boycott of Israel more widely, including academic and other institutions) is an increasingly popular form of non-violent protest that, according to many Palestinians, should be taken up in the West.

¹ The rapporteurs for this report were Poul-Erik Christiansen, Projects Assistant, and Sandra Ionno Butcher, Executive Director, Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. Please note that the views presented here represent a range of opinions expressed in the meeting, and they do not necessarily reflect the personal views of the rapporteurs, nor of the Pugwash Conferences as an organization. A large majority of the participants was from Palestine, and this is reflected in the views contained in this report. The meetings were held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules to enable an open exchange of perspectives and exploration of creative possibilities for ways forward. Thus, the substance of the discussions can be reported out, but no item discussed can be attributed to any one individual. There was no attempt to seek consensus, and in fact the sharing of diverse views was encouraged.

- The US is no longer seen as an unbiased international partner, and other international forums and partners are needed to promote a peaceful resolution of this crisis.
- A two-state solution is still the priority of the vast majority of Palestinians, and is considered to be in Israel's best strategic interests as well. A one-state solution would provide more challenges for Israel's democracy.

Sovereignty and the occupation

Palestinians are concerned that their sovereignty is under attack by the Israelis. Palestinians point to Israel's continuing allocation of further land (via settlements) and resources as evidence that Israel is seeking to capitalize on the delays and roadblocks provided by its obstructive stance in negotiations. Moderate Palestinian leadership is paying a heavy price for this.

By one account, settlements have grown 132% since the recent negotiations started. Many raised concerns that the current settlement expansion plans are reminiscent of 1948, and that Israel is "changing facts on the ground". Palestinian lands are being "besieged" by the placement of these settlements and many Palestinians point to the hypocrisy of the escalation in the number of settlements that are being allowed. This amounts to a "camouflaged land annexation" and there was a feeling that, as expressed by one participant, Israel is trying to "de-Palestinian-ize" the lands.

It was said these decisions are being based on "hydrology and not ideology." Someone pointed out that Israel controls 80 percent of the water and has further plans for desalination plants – this left some concerns that "Israel is converting us from citizens to customers". One participant noted that under international law, water was already included in the division of territory, yet "each water reserve in Palestinian territory now has a settlement on top of it." There is a perceived risk that water will therefore go with the settlements rather than according to an equitable and legal framework. In looking forward, one person noted that "we would like Israel as good neighbors, not occupiers."

There was a feeling of inequality insofar as many commodities are priced differently for Palestinians as supposed to Israelis. One participant suggested that Israel was already in control of the skies, air traffic control, surveillance, cyber space, and that "this was for as long as it takes". Furthermore, it controls the major roads connected to the river Jordan, the mountain tops, road intersections, hill tops and all of the Jerusalem area. Extrajudicial killings by the Israeli army continue in Area A, where more than 50 have been killed recently, and prisoner releases (including 76 who have been held for over 20 years) thinly disguise the continuing number of arrests (around 700 in the same timeframe).

Many participants pointed to this series of actions as a system of apartheid – some mentioned that in other segregated societies there was never even a system of apartheid roadways, as is the case in the West Bank now.

Gaza

The siege of Gaza has reached new and intolerable levels: as it stands there are 1.8m people “in a big jail”, with no water, garbage and sewage services. The “basic rights of people are being dismissed”, as one participant noted. It was suggested that Egypt shares blame for the current situation in Gaza: the closing of the border and tunnels at the Sinai, whether motivated primarily by internal Egyptian politics or not, has had a profound negative effect on the residents of Gaza. One participant asked why Egypt can allow “3,000 pilgrims in full health to pass but block sick people to access a hospital?”, pointing out that “all 3,000 of these pilgrims could be terrorists”. Someone said, “If things continue like this, the people of Gaza won’t throw flowers...the people here won’t throw flowers.”

The Gaza leaders were urged by some to “give peace a chance and allow negotiations to succeed.” This would require decreasing the tone of propaganda, and modifying the means and ways of pursuing the public interest of Palestine. One person said, “No one benefits” when rockets from Gaza land in the Negev, and that such actions “bring hardship to the Palestinian people.” It was noted, however, that Israeli restrictions have made it difficult for people in Ramallah to communicate with leaders in Gaza, and this is not helping those people trying to promote a positive, peaceful resolution. It was also noted that Israel does not properly recognize or support Palestinian pursuit of peaceful means.

Palestinian unity²

Elections are seen by some as the only road to solving the problems. Palestinian unity is the key to a stronger negotiating position, though some expressed concerns that “unity should not be used to diminish human values” such as human rights, freedom, and democracy. It was noted that Abbas and some Palestinian leaders were at one time pushing for elections without Gaza. Western powers were pushing for elections since Abbas was elected nine years ago. Someone said that pressure “was not always with good intentions.” Such elections without including Gaza would “lack legitimacy” and so some Palestinians objected. Even prospects of running a unified list with Gaza and West Bank, without a unity agreement, would leave open the possibility that Hamas would also run a unified list and there would be conflicting results. One person said, “We are struggling to liberate both sides.” It was believed that Israel would only agree to elections limited to the West Bank, since the separation of the West Bank and Gaza appears to be its intention.

The strategy of “demonizing Islamists” is not going to work, as they are part of the grassroots. Someone said, “decapitating” them won’t work. Hamas won the elections, but the Palestinian Legislative Council was totally marginalized. Abu Mazen needs to give an order to open the PLC and “not one minister” is being questioned as to why the PLC has not been convened. It was hoped that new elections could pave the way toward progress.

² A reminder to the reader that the meeting happened before the unity government announcement.

Impact of the Failure of Negotiations

Palestinians believe that Israel has been using negotiations as a delaying tactic, while settlements expand. Israel “can’t compromise a compromise.” The 1967 borders were already a compromise. Palestinians “won’t accept a Bantustan as a compromise for a state.”

One person called Kerry’s economic plan “a fiasco” in that it is trying to link settlements with water treatment and using donor money to legitimize settlements. This will only result in helping to perpetuate the occupation.

Economic independence is considered vital. “Palestinians are proud of the middle class, it’s a buffer zone. If we lose we will become slaves to the occupation, and victim to those sharks.”

Most Palestinians consider the recent US role to be extremely disappointing. The shifting goal of negotiations from a possible agreement, to a general framework, to negotiations about a framework, to negotiations about extending negotiations has left Palestinians with the belief that nothing serious could come from the Kerry initiative. The peace process has become a “substitute to peace,” and this is not acceptable;

It was considered that Kerry has two problems: a) he underestimated Israel’s ability to drag him into a vicious cycle, and b) he cannot be a broker while not able to pressure Israel. As a result, most Palestinians believe it is time for a third party or an international forum to get involved. One person asked why the Syrian and Iranian issues got attention from the EU and UN, while Palestine is being “kept in Kerry’s pocket”? (Others pointed out that in both the Syrian and Iranian cases these larger international fora were not particularly helpful.)

One American participant paraphrased Lyndon Johnson, “If the least among us don’t have the rights of the rest of us, how can we claim to be the democracy we claim to be.” The flagrant violation of Western values is the lack of freedom of movement in the West Bank and especially Gaza. Some see this as an important way to present these issues to a Western – especially American – audience.

The issue of prisoner release became important in the negotiations. Many believe that Israel’s refusal to release the agreed prisoners is a sign of bad faith – especially the pre-Oslo prisoners that were part of signed agreements.

Equating the issue of Pollard’s release with that of these early Palestinian “freedom fighters” is “an insult” one person said. “Abu Mazen cannot sell this deal.” Others believed it should not be viewed that way, that Israel will decide who to release, this is not “an exchange.”

Palestinians are not sure a two state solution will work, but they won’t give it up because they “don’t want to be blamed for killing that option.” If that option vanishes it is ‘not end of world.’

Options for ways forward

Though discouraged by recent events, participants nevertheless focused on future options. As one leading figure said, “Please continue to be optimistic. The rest is not in our hands.”

Options in the short- and medium-term include:

- Going to other UN bodies and other international agencies, including the International Criminal Court, was considered a timely option. This might include an application to the UN to get Israel to stop administrative detentions.
- To change the balance power through popular nonviolent resistance, some are calling for a boycott (BDS).
- The EU could consider implementing the European Union Border Assistance Mission³ in Rafah. The EU has not been present there for six years.
- Pugwash was encouraged to bring international policy makers to Gaza and to Palestine. There is a concern among some that focusing only on Gaza might lead to a fragmentation of the issue, but there is recognition that the situation there is intolerable. Some are concerned that if discussions are focused on Gaza Israel will divert the discussion into “how many milligrams of cheese,” how much steel and concrete are allowed into Gaza. Israel has “an easy chip” when it comes to Gaza since Hamas is still considered a terrorist organization. However, structured properly, a visit of current and former policy makers to Gaza, including some from Ramallah, could help promote discussions on the future of Palestine. Alternatively, a meeting on the Future of Palestine could be held in an alternate location, involving people from Gaza and Ramallah.
- International solidarity could be further fostered. They don’t believe a solution is possible unless the balance of power shifts. This will only happen when more solidarity is shown internationally. However, many Palestinians consider civil society organizations that “want us to go to bed together” via various people-to-people projects to be distracting from key issues. One person said “They are doing more harm than good to themselves and to the Palestinian cause.”
- Kerry could say the US will leave the Middle East or could use some of its considerable influence on Israel to pressure Israel to be more forthcoming at the negotiating table. This was considered disappointingly unlikely. One person said Obama’s Nobel Prize should be revoked.
- The Palestinian narrative in the USA needs to change. The Palestinian perspective has little visibility. Rather the story is often framed in terms of the US/Israel struggle versus Islamic extremism, and the Israelis feed this narrative.
- As a start, Pugwash was encouraged to try to bring policy makers to Palestine, and also to hold events elsewhere with prominent Palestinians – including in Washington, DC.

³ <http://www.eubam-rafah.eu/node/2296>

Addendum by Paolo Cotta-Ramusino and Sandra Ionno Butcher

At the time this report was going to press (24 June 2014), following the kidnapping of three Israeli teenage settlers, Israeli forces have mobilized throughout the West Bank and have placed further restrictions on Gaza, Hebron and other cities. The response has focused heavily on the Hamas leadership in the West Bank. This puts further pressure on the recent unity deal, and seems destined to push the entire peace process back even further than it was at the time of our meetings in Ramallah and Hebron. While we hope for the speedy and safe release of these teenagers, the Israeli response is tragic, as it may well further suffocate those voices for peace that exist on all sides. Dr. Aziz Dweik, Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, and one of those people with whom we met while in Palestine, has again been arrested by Israeli authorities. Israel should end administrative detention and collective punishment in the name of the democracy it seeks to be.