

The Palestinian Question in Europe Conference Summary Report

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Introduction

- **On 23 November 2019, EuroPal Forum and Middle East Monitor co-hosted a conference at the Holiday Inn Bloomsbury in London on the relations between Europe and Palestine. A first of its kind, the conference brought together individuals at the forefront of discourse on Palestine in order to discuss themes addressing the Palestinian cause and Europe.**
- **The rationale behind holding a conference of this nature stemmed from the idea that those working for Palestine in Europe have increasingly lacked mechanisms of control or assessment in a methodical and administrative manner. To bridge this gap, the conference was designed to provide an academic forum through which to assess the work being done to challenge Israel's policies as well as to survey the nature of support for Palestine at the political, diplomatic, trade union and public level. The core objective of the conference was — through this platform for scientific understanding of Europe's relations vis-à-vis Palestine — to foster tangible recommendations and action points that can be utilised and put into operation by a number of actors working in different areas on the case of Palestine.**

Opening Remarks

The Chairman of EuroPal Forum, British-Palestinian journalist Zaher Birawi, welcomed those present and put the conference in context. He noted that the efficacy in creating a forum in which the relations between Europe and Palestine are analysed holistically comes against the backdrop of Europe becoming a space, over the past 30 or 40 years, “in which Palestinian solidarity organisations are able to mobilise more effectively and expose Israel's actions at the official and popular levels relative to other regions and countries.”



In this light, Birawi noted the importance of bringing together a range of academics and researchers engaged in scholarship relating to the question of Palestine and Europe. This, he said, will create an environment in which the information gap on the relations between Palestine and Europe — that is often an existential challenge for politicians, researchers and NGOs — is bridged.

Panel One: The European Union's relationship with Palestine and Israel

The first panel of the day, chaired by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign's Professor Kamel Hawwash, looked at how the European Union views the major issues of the conflict in the post-Oslo context, and whether the EU has been an effective actor in achieving solutions and tangible change. It also looked at the prospects for EU agency (including vis-à-vis the peace process) henceforth, with emphasis on the labelling of settlement products as a case study. As part of the discussion, the dynamics of the EU-Israel-Palestine trade relationship were also examined.

Dr Dimitris Bouris, Professor of EU Security and European External Relations at the University of Amsterdam, outlined the European Union's position on the major issues of the conflict following which he discussed its role as a state-builder in the case of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Summarising the EU's position in relation to the major issues of the conflict, Bouris noted that although it has taken more than 40 years of lobbying and advocacy, the EU does have a common position on the major final status issues, including borders, Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees. That position, which is informed by a number of formal declarations and community statements (such as the 1980 Venice Declaration), broadly recognises international law as a framework through which EU policy is informed.

In this context, however, the EU's ability to change the facts on the ground through its state building work in Palestine has been limited. According to Bouris, this is because the EU is: a) severely restricted in its ability to work with key representatives of the Palestinian people, such as Hamas (which it has placed on its list of designated terrorist groups); b) limited in the effectiveness of its post-roadmap initiatives due to the absence of an executive mandate; and c) hampered by Israel's control of developments of the ground and its ability, as such, to restrict EU agency and monitoring ability. Collectively, therefore, post-roadmap initiatives designed to create positive conditions for the establishment of a future Palestinian state have largely failed and, paradoxically, have "reinforced the status quo". Dr Bouris acknowledged, in this context, that part of the failure in mitigating against these challenges has been the EU's approach to state building as being rooted in the liberal peacebuilding approach (which does not recognise power asymmetries), as well as the EU's reluctance to attach any political conditions to its technical assistance programmes.

Hugh Lovatt, Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, then discussed the effectiveness of EU policies towards Israel and Palestine with the labelling of settlement products as a specific case study. In this regard, he started by noting that the EU has been an important actor for the Palestine case because it is one of the only blocs that has upheld its positions on the conflict rigorously despite numerous attempts to co-opt and coerce it. That being said, however, he pointed out that EU policy has clearly created an exception for Israel insofar as the bloc has shielded the state from the accountability mechanisms that it enforces against other examples of occupation and annexation, such as Crimea.

With regard to differentiation and the settlement case, Lovatt noted that the EU — though ratifying legislation which prohibited trade with settlement enterprises — did not use necessarily robust language to ensure that phrases and borders were clearly defined. This precipitated an effort by Israel to reinterpret the meaning of Council resolutions and subsequently ensure



continuity in the trade of goods and services from settlement enterprises and the EU. Israel’s ability to challenge the EU’s differentiation policy was also made more successful, according to Lovatt, through the state’s weaponisation of anti-Semitism and allegations of “economic terrorism” as tools to pressure the EU and its member states into inaction. He said that part of the forcefulness of this pushback is due to the fact that from a normative point of view there is a degree of power in labelling settlement products in a climate in which the settler movement in Israel seeks to conflate Israel and its settlements both domestically and internationally.

Interestingly, Lovett pointed out that in the case of Israel and specifically the labelling of settlement products, although the EU has had some successes to date (notably the recent ruling of the European Court of Justice on the labelling of settlements and the 2016 UN Security Council Resolution 2334), member states within the EU who have their own bilateral relations with Israel are much further behind the bloc policy as a whole. This enables EU member states to subvert differentiation and the various legislative measures to this end. In conclusion, Hugh Lovett said that although the EU has done more than other actors to pursue a common progressive policy vis-à-vis the Palestinian case, it is clear that there is a marked difference between its discourse and the extent of its practice.

The final speaker in the first session was Dr Sharri Plonski, a lecturer in International Politics at Queen Mary University of London, who spoke about the ways in which transport, corridor and logistics infrastructure connects Israel to Europe (and beyond) and bypasses (and thus erases) Palestine in the process. In this regard, she explained that the new Ha’emak railway line, which was relaunched by Israel in 2016, is emphasised by the state as relevant to its history and connection to the Middle East. This line, which according to Plonski is a modern equivalent of the Hijaz (Palestine) railway which was built by the Ottomans in 1905, is used to connect Israel to Europe more than to the Middle East.



The railway thus plays into Israel’s attempt to fit in with Europe and its identity as a “villa in the jungle” and a European colonial entity surrounded by perceived “savages” and “foreigners”. In this light, it is part of a series of attempts to get Israel closer to Europe. Other examples cited include Israel’s participation in the Eurovision Song Contest and sports leagues and tournaments.

Looking specifically at the railway, however, in bypassing regulatory blockages and manipulating global supply chains, it “expands Israel’s capacity to channel economic traffic through its borders and link its own internal markets with global [trade] flows”. This, according to Dr Plonski, is happening at a time when Israel is seeking to find innovative ways to link infrastructure networks and trade flows globally amidst the challenges of doing so, such as the labelling of settlement products. This effort, she said, is happening at a time when other states are engaged in similar work to develop infrastructure and corridors, such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

Panel Two: Palestine and Israel in a changing EU

The second panel of the day was chaired by the President of the Board of Al Shabaka, Nadia Hijab, and looked at the relationship between changing developments within the European Union and the Palestine question. Specifically, the panel examined the issue of the efficacy of law as a tool to assist in progress on the Palestine question, as well as the impact of Brexit and US-EU relations on Palestinian advocacy.

The first speaker was Professor Neve Gordon, a Marie Curie Fellow and Professor of International Law at Queen Mary University of London, who spoke about why the law is not the solution in the case of Israel-Palestine. He began by pointing out that EU measures such as Horizon 2020 and the ECJ’s ruling on the labelling of settlement products have been hailed as a great success by a number of individuals (including Palestinian Authority officials) as they are seen as positive examples of the enforcement of international justice and accountability mechanisms.

However, he explained that the underlying assumption informing these decisions is that there is a “good” Israel and a “bad” Israel. This liberal Zionist assumption, though, fails to understand the fact that the colonial project did not begin in 1967, but much earlier, in 1882; the expansion of Israel is thus a natural consequence of Zionism, and dispossession — the spread of Jewish settlements and displacement of the indigenous population — is a core feature of the ideology.

In this context, Prof. Gordon argued that the real issue is not how to pursue differentiation through the law but how to challenge the current, dominant paradigm entirely, and the way that the Palestinian issue is understood. In this context, one strategy noted by him is to petition the EU to reverse the current paradigm and its emphasis on the two-state solution, which informs much of EU thinking on the conflict. While this is difficult due to the EU using the Palestinian Authority as a justification for not overcoming the paradigm, change can be achieved through a change in thinking in both Palestine and Europe that challenges the status quo and creates new paradigms that seek to problematise what is an already non-existent Green Line.

Dr Catherine Charrett, Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Westminster, then looked at the dynamics of the relationship between the EU and Hamas. She noted her experience of listening to European politicians and officials conclude that having a “constructive movement forward [requires] engagement with Hamas”, and yet, paradoxically, Hamas was placed on the EU’s list of designated terrorist groups. This reality and clear paradox, she said, was a “significant turning point in the strength of Palestinian governance.”



In this context, Dr Charrett said that EU policy — through actively deconstructing and fragmenting Palestinian governance yet acknowledging that “Hamas are not terrorists” — has created a warped status quo in which despite Hamas being set conditions by the Middle East Quartet, there was never any conversation or system within the European Union to measure whether it was meeting these conditions. What is more, she noted that this was designed to “delegitimise the resistance and to keep Gaza as a hostile territory.”

The argument that it was in Europe’s strategic interest not to meet with Hamas does not make sense, she suggested, because an argument is usually substantiated with a rationale, and yet European leaders and officials openly acknowledge that the “no contact policy” is clearly bad politics.

The final speaker on the panel, Dr Atef Alshaer, is a Lecturer in Arabic literature and Middle Eastern politics at the University of Westminster. He looked at the impact of Brexit and US-EU relations on the question of Palestine, and noted that nationalism is a major factor in gaining support for Israel, with nationalist movements and Israel converging on a number of shared objectives. This relationship has the secondary effect of fostering the weaponisation of “anti-Semitism” against anything which is pro-Palestinian, which stifles the ability to voice such sentiments.

What is more, Dr Alshaer also said that the name alone – Palestine – is becoming more and more problematic insofar as Israel has attempted to market itself as a model for the world, particularly for the West, which has rendered Palestine as a more sensitive issue than it has been in previous decades.

Finally, he shared Professor Gordon’s outlook and argued that in this context the Palestinians need to evolve their discourse and reject the use of law as a primary means through which to conduct national liberation efforts. Instead, he said that there needs to be a fundamental shift in narratives.

Panel Three: Assessing pro-Israel strategy in Europe alongside advocacy campaigns for Palestinian human rights

The final panel of the day, chaired by Amelia Smith of Middle East Monitor, looked at the efficacy of the pro-Palestinian lobby alongside the pro-Israel lobby, with part of the discussion focusing on the interrogation of definitions of anti-Semitism and efforts to silence free speech on Israel.

Antony Lerman, Senior Fellow at the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue, started by looking at the anti-Semitism issue in Britain. He outlined the issue of anti-Semitism within the Labour Party and in relation to any criticism of Israel or its policies. He noted that there has been a weaponisation of the term with the express objective of trying to defame actors working on the Palestine case.

In this context, Lerman noted that the Israeli government, through its Ministry of Strategic Affairs, has been instrumental in the exploitation of “anti-Semitism” to the extent that the term now includes criticism of Israel. This has resulted in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS) being banned in various places, pro-Palestine figures and activists being demonised, and the criminalisation of criticism of Israel as “anti-Semitism”, such as in France.

Lerman concluded by saying that “Jews and Palestinians are dual victims of this exploitation process.” The human rights of both groups are being comprised by the weaponisation of anti-Semitism.

Professor Ilan Pappé from the College of Social Sciences and International Studies at the University of Exeter then discussed the anti-Semitism issue in the European context. He explained that Britain is a crucial actor in Europe on this particular topic, and the efforts to challenge the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism are more likely to be successful in Britain than in Europe. This, he argued, is because Israel is able to use intimidation and Europe’s guilt complex more effectively to secure the support of the political elites across the continent than it can in Britain post-Jeremy Corbyn.

Paradoxically, and against Israel’s designs, the major thrust by the pro-Israel Lobby in Britain is now towards politicians as opposed to civil society, which constitutes a break in Israel’s designs and model for the continent. Hitherto, Israel’s efforts have been focused on civil society as its leaders thought, “Rightly so,” said Prof. Pappé, that most European politicians “were [already] in their pockets.”

Because civil society in Europe started to shift after the First Intifada, Israel began to invest a lot of effort in blocking expressions of solidarity with the Palestinians. Israel knew that it was losing the narrative war, he explained, so it began to focus on creating a legal framework, such as the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, which serves to stifle the agency of those in the Palestine solidarity movement and their ability to express themselves.

Pappé suggested that we can do three things to counter the challenges faced by those advocating for Palestinian rights: 1) to refute the idea that Judaism is nationalism and not a religion; 2) to explore the comparisons between Nazi behaviour and oppression of the Jewish communities in Europe and what Israel is doing to the Palestinians; 3) start a full and open discussion about the ways in which Holocaust memory is being used to justify the oppression of the Palestinians. He



concluded by saying that we have to do this because the IHRA is at the heart of European engagement between Israel and Palestine.

Associate Editor of the *Electronic Intifada*, David Cronin, looked at the actions and influence of the pro-Israel lobby and the groups associated with it, such as the European Jewish Association. He noted that the Brussels bureaucracy has been enabling a crackdown on dissent regarding the Palestine solidarity movement. This has culminated in a “dirty war” against BDS that has been supported, he said, by “agents of Israel” such as Katharina Von Schnurbein, the first European Commission Coordinator on combatting Anti-Semitism. According to Cronin, such people problematise the situation by reproducing unsubstantiated claims that BDS can have “discriminatory repercussions for Jewish students in Europe”.

He added that the “dirty war has become even dirtier” with Israeli Minister for Strategic Affairs Gilad Erdan visiting Brussels to launch a report attacking BDS activists. He explained that groups such as the European Jewish Association, which organises platforms for individuals like Erdan, are at the forefront of delegitimising Palestinian rights campaigns through intense lobbying efforts backed by substantial financial support. “The real purpose of the IHRA official definition is not to protect Jews from persecution,” he argued, “[but to] protect Israel from accountability.”

The final speaker of the day was Ben Jamal, the Director of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, who looked at the current challenges when campaigning for Palestinian rights in Europe. He reviewed the situation in Palestine and said that campaigning in Europe has to reflect the demands on the ground in Palestine. The current conditions there, he pointed out, are exacerbated by the alliance between Israel and US President Donald Trump



supported by Gulf Cooperation Council member states, as well as far-right movements across the world. This is manifested in the “Deal of the Century”; Israel’s de facto annexation of the Jordan Valley; the expansion of Israeli settlements at the fastest rate since Oslo; the US government changing its policy regarding the illegality of the settlements; the tightening of the siege on Gaza; and Israel’s Nation-State Law. All, said Jamal, are examples which highlight the worsening situation on the ground in Palestine. At the heart of these developments, he said, is the assumption that the Palestinians “are not a nation with a collective identity”.

In this environment, Ben Jamal concluded that the solidarity movement must: a) continue action against the exploitation of the term “anti-Semitism”; b) maintain activism; and c) integrate the pro-Palestinian movement into the broader international anti-racism movement and campaign. He stressed that an “intersectional alliance” and “intersectional efforts” are needed to create the “synergy” which will enable the solidarity movement to help overcome the obstacles being placed in its path by Israel’s desperate measures to stifle its agency.