



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies



مؤسسة الدراسات الفلسطينية
Institute for Palestine Studies

Annual Palestine Forum - 2023

28 - 30 January, 2023

Dr. Azmi Bishara opening lecture

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The Annual Palestine Forum: Considerations and Purposes

This forum, the need for which was given considerable thought, embodies three main considerations.

The first is the feasibility of holding it given the sheer abundance of research on Palestine, on its past and present as a country/homeland and as a society. Contributing to this cumulative corpus is no longer limited to Palestinian research institutes and universities, and its production in Western universities and its publication through academic presses and specialized periodicals are no longer the exception.

We are looking at a new phenomenon that is hard to define. Pessimists might argue that it is a sign that the Palestinian cause has been consigned to history. As such, research with a bias toward the indigenous people does not worry Western academic institutions. Rather they feel it enriches their diversity, especially in the context of their academic subcultures such as postcolonialism, critique of colonialism and gender studies, yet without projecting significant political orientations with regard to the foreign policy positions of their governments

It might also testify to a qualitative change owing to the ongoing liberalization of Western academia under threat from the populist right, as well as to a quantitative change thanks to the notable increase in the number of Palestinian academics specializing in the social sciences and humanities and keen to bring the tools and methods of academic research to bear on issues relevant to their people. These scholars have proliferated among universities and academic institutions across the world, including Middle Eastern Studies departments largely dominated by the official Israeli discourse when it comes to Palestine and the history of the Arab-Israeli Conflict.

Other possible explanations for the prolific research come to mind. But as we contemplated the forum, it seemed that this phenomenon was important in and of itself, and that the shift in academic discourse on Palestine in both the West and the East was of paramount significance. Even if it did not have direct political impacts, it would still affect political culture and public opinion via diverse intermediate links that filter into the consciousness of the “Middle East affairs” experts with which media outlets, educational institutions and even decision makers supplement themselves to obtain expertise free of Zionist clichés about Palestine and the Arabs. It thus contributes to undermining the hegemony of Zionist discourse over a portion of analysts and experts in the West.

Here, I would like to reiterate a point I have previously made about an academic discourse that combines scientific objectivity as methodology with moral partiality with no necessary conflict between the two at all. We can be objective in research methodology and normatively biased. For instance, to consider Israel a colonialist settler project generative of an apartheid system is an objective (or scientific) evaluation that simultaneously lays the theoretical groundwork for anti-apartheid policies. By contrast, to depict Israel as a state that emerged from a national liberation movement carried out in an uninhabited land is an assessment that is methodologically and factually unfounded, not to mention biased. There are countless examples of this sort that serve to variously depict Israel as a victim or a model democracy while overlooking its nature as an occupying power and settler project.

The second consideration is the institutional gap that exists at the level of the larger Palestinian public and that necessitates ways to fill this gap with frameworks that bring together Palestinians wherever they reside. Of course, there have been other attempts to organize gatherings for Palestinians; nor do we claim that research centers can fill the gap institutionally. However, they can contribute, for instance, by providing a regular meeting place for scholars to exchange ideas, not only by presenting research but also by consulting in the hallways and staying in contact throughout the year between rounds, a process that can be even more fruitful if registration and attendance remain open - to the extent that capacities permit - to all interested. The goal here is to initiate a bridge-building process between Palestinians and between them and Arab and non-Arab researchers and activists that transcends social media, in which both information and misinformation abound and facts are indistinguishable from tendentious rumors, in order to foster rational, orderly, and responsible dialogue. This dynamic can only be positive relative to the current situation.

The third and perhaps most important consideration is the need for Palestinian and Arab scholars to coordinate efforts to counter the incessant attempts to insert Zionist ideas into the way the general Arab public approaches the history of Palestine and the Palestinian struggle, and to distort the values of liberation and anti-colonialism in Arab culture. The process of inculcating such mindsets is accompanied by policies of normalizing relations with Israel in the absence of a just solution to the Palestinian cause. Indeed, part of the preparations needed to ensure the acceptance of these policies at the moral and cultural level involves projecting them onto historical narrative and distorting history. That the Palestine cause has been removed from primary and secondary education curricula in most Arab countries has facilitated the process. It has become easier than ever to distort awareness through the press and social media, especially given the unceasing Israeli activity in both.

Challenging the corruption of discourse is not to imply the return to the discourse of some Arab regimes before the 1967 defeat nor to negate the other or to monopolize victimhood at the expense of the suffering of others in the region. Rather, the purpose is to substantiate the Palestinian narrative with facts and prove the reality of the settler-occupation and apartheid through rational analysis, thereby anchoring and fortifying the moral position opposed to both. Researchers have a duty to respond to misrepresentation, not with escalation and emotive appeals, but through rational, moral discourse that can be addressed to Arabs and Jews, and East and West, and translated into any language.



We know that heads of state in the Arab region and in Palestine will not read research papers presented in such conferences and that these papers will not influence decision making. But they are not designed to; nor is this the goal of the forum. Influencing decision making takes place within the paradigm in which these leaders operate and which is informed by the perpetuation of power and, at best, the need to serve the interests of their states as they define those interests. Usually, the influence asserts itself through the calculations of profit and loss that decision makers use to decide whether to adhere to or renounce a given position. This is not the type of calculus that drives academic research on Palestinian affairs or for that matter this forum organized through the collaboration between the Arab Center and the Institute for Palestine Studies.

Palestine in the Arab Context: Official Political Action and Public Opinion

It took me a long time to decide what I wanted to say to you today. When I sat down to write my speech, it occurred to me that this hesitation was the product of my determination to offer you something new, in the nature of an academic lecture that claims to pose timely questions – albeit without supplying answers. But this is not a research paper. Moreover, sometimes the challenge is not to say something new, but instead to reaffirm the ideas and principles we must continue to uphold, because the occupation and settler regime wants us to tire of repeating them.

I am not suggesting, of course, that we repeat political slogans as platitudes, even with the “noble” intent of fixing them in people’s minds. Rather, I mean adhering to both stance and principle in the face of concerted attempts to eradicate them on pretexts of realism, pragmatism and lack of alternatives to the current situation. Such pretexts are, in fact, the cliches from which we must free ourselves. There is nothing pragmatic about the status quo. Nor is there a lack of alternatives to the reality of blatant oppression; they exist. Alternatives exist even in the consciousness of those determined to block them and to resist any act that produces realities..

The mentality that justifies silence on what is taking place in the Occupied Territories with the claim that decline of the Palestinian cause on the Arab and international agenda has become the status quo, is a mentality bent on transforming a status quo to which we are supposed to acquiesce into The Reality (with a capital T and R) and eliminating possible alternatives. This is where we are at today with the Palestinian cause which, this year, marks its 75th anniversary since the Nakba in 1948, when the majority of Palestinians were expelled from their homeland and a Jewish state was declared in the Land of Palestine.

By “repetition,” I am not referring to the formulas which heads of state regurgitate in their statements, even after their bilateral meetings, about Israel’s withdrawal from the Occupied Territories in 1967, the establishment of an independent State of Palestine whose capital is Jerusalem, and the return of refugees. Recall that, at a certain stage, this series of assertions was routinely reiterated after Arab summits and even at gatherings of Arab leaders in which Palestinians were not represented.

This was the refrain that required lip service, regardless of actions. After the prerequisites for realizing these principles were obscured, or the actual will to fulfil them had faded, the formulas became hollow and meaningless, spoken but not heard, shrugged off with a yawn. Eventually, for reasons that can be explained at length, they stopped being mentioned at all in the gatherings of Arab and Third World leaders, apart from in statements after meetings with the Palestinian leadership. And then, apart from a few exceptions, even formulas like the right of return for refugees were dropped.

On closer examination, we find that the problem is not with the repetition of the chants, but with the fact that they have been rendered substanceless because of the absence of the will to do what must be done to implement them. It is not the repetition, per se, but the contexts that have caused the formulas to become a threadbare cover for passivity.

This mere parroting or abandonment of now empty slogans reflects actual developments that tend to come under the heading of the marginalization of the Palestinian cause in the Arab agenda. There is not, in truth, a singular Arab agenda in terms of regional and international relations. If there were such an agenda in hearts and minds, and not just in statements crafted to avoid getting into issues to which their authors are reluctant to commit, Palestine would be item number one. The question of Palestine has been side-lined because, against the backdrop of the decline of the main Arab powers after the 1967 war, the series of crises that began with the invasion of Kuwait and continued after the invasion of Iraq, and the decline of the Arab nationalist approach to Palestine, each Arab regime has its own regional agenda, even if it might temporarily converge with the agendas of other regimes on this or that issue.

Marginalization is about more than just a lack of interest in the subject; it is about a substantial shift in position. There have been other cases of shifting views, even if these shifts have not yet become as outwardly apparent as the blatant normalization with Israel.

So what is the point of repetition if positions have changed? There is no real benefit. Still, at the very least, it suggests a need to cater to public opinion – or the public mood, if you will. The end of this repetition would indicate that decision makers no longer felt the need for this consideration because their policies keep public opinion preoccupied with matters of greater importance to people's daily lives, and because they lash out against those who meddle in politics or articulate positions on a given policy issue. This is not to say that public opinion has changed; we know from our research and many other manifestations – some of which you saw at the World Cup matches here in Qatar recently – that Arab public opinion on the Palestinian cause remains firm and unchanged, and that Palestine is as much of a constant as Arab identity, which continues to resist all attempts to set it in antithesis to local identities because these identities do not compete with Arab identity; they complement it.

On the other hand, when I speak of adherence to stances and principles, my point is to emphasize the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause and the need for the struggle for justice for the Palestinian people to persist. I am under no illusion that this will happen by holding academic conferences and



presenting research papers, now published even in Western journals, the significance of which I discussed earlier. Change can only be brought about through political action against the settler occupation regime and the apartheid system in Palestine.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of Arab regimes that have abandoned the Palestinian cause, not so much because they have spurned Palestine but because they have developed common interests with the Israeli regime. In the process, the gap has widened between those regimes and Arab public opinion. By common interests, I refer to those related to the desire to establish a joint lobby with Israel in the West, and in the United States above all, in order to shape Middle East policies, especially those related to “protecting security and stability in the region” against prospects of change and against unwelcome influences on such matters as human rights. A recent development in that alliance with Israel is that its members are drawing closer to regarding the Palestinian struggle against the occupation as a threat to security and stability in the region. This is what treating the Palestinian cause as a burden really means.

Those who have paid the price for Palestine’s sake do not consider the cause a burden. They are the ones who, despite the frustrations, complain the least and are the most devoted to Palestine.

One cannot overlook how regional threats have been used to justify allying with Israel. In truth, (non-Arab regional powers furnish justifications by conflating blatant interference in the sovereignty of Arab states and support for armed groups in these states (which these powers even flaunt as one of their strategies) with support for the Palestinian resistance and the centrality of the question of Palestine. Some, moreover, emphasize the Palestinian cause as a means to delegitimize other concerns which, they claim, divert attention from the central issue. This is a disservice to Palestine. It is not the same thing as focusing attention on the Palestinian cause because it is the last anti-colonial struggle; because the needs of the settler-colonization of Palestine have imposed countless political, economic, and cultural dictates on all Arabs; and because this cause has become a component of Arab identity. Conversely, in ignoring the Palestinian cause, Arab regimes provide grounds for other regional forces to fill the resultant void, especially since the Palestinian resistance movement needs the support it can get.

The Crisis of the Palestinian National Project

The rise of this regional situation coincides with the crisis of the Palestinian national liberation movement. The Palestinian Liberation Organization’s regional and international standing used to be a major obstacle against this kind of deterioration. This crisis was the product of two interrelated developments. The first was the renouncement of the framework, objectives, institutions, and discourse of the liberation movement since the mid-1990s, especially after the Second Intifada, in exchange for Israeli recognition and the start of a peace process that lacked a foundation of principles and agreed-upon objectives. This process worked to

transform the Palestinian cause into a conflict between two parties engaged in American-supervised negotiations, thereby neutralizing any expressions of international popular solidarity which was soon characterized as opportunistic outside meddling. The negotiations, or the so-called peace process, would undergo crises, but it remained the only game in town for the Palestinian leadership, who rejected any other strategy. As you know, there arose socioeconomic groups associated with this process which produced a socioeconomic structure in Palestine that cannot be overlooked. I have spoken about this before in various contexts. But I reiterate my respect for the futile, if courageous, attempts to escape this trap on the part of those who realized its nature too late. By trap here I am referring to the Oslo Accords and their implications.

Israel has, for all intents and purposes, nullified the remnants of the Oslo Accords with respect to territorial withdrawal and negotiating the so-called final status issues for a lasting solution (should anyone remember these terms). It currently plans to annex Area C, restricting Palestinian self-governance to the densely populated Areas A and B. This behavior was predictable, as it has been ongoing since 1948 and is based on annexing the most land with the fewest residents.

That Israel has disavowed even its interim commitments, sabotaged the entire negotiation process, and intensified settlement expansion to an extent that undermines the ((physical)) foundations for a potential Palestinian state, including depriving it of its capital, has given the Palestinian Authority opportunity after opportunity to transition from a party to a futile, illusory negotiating process into an institutionalized entity responsible for administering a society under occupation - or under blockade - and subordinate to a higher committee that unifies the Palestinian people. Clearly, the PLO must be rebuilt, following a Palestinian national conference, to give voice to new generations and unleash fresh capacities. After all, the PLO still enjoys international legitimacy and it remains the universally recognized legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian authority remains hesitant in light of the deteriorating situation, even though it repeatedly hinted at that option and even as Israel continues its assaults through its settlement expansion, other colonial activities, and its clashing with the PA itself. I believe that the entirety of the Palestinian people hope that the authority would announce an end to the security coordination with the occupation as a signifier of an end to this hesitation.

The second factor is the geopolitical rift between the Palestinian people in the territories occupied in 1967. This, in my view, is no less serious than the Oslo Accords themselves, even though it is a result thereof. In addition to its severely deleterious effects within the Palestinian context, its political impact in regional and international spaces of relevance to the Palestinian cause has been and remains destructive. Making matters worse is the short-sightedness of those who now devote the bulk of their energy to the struggle for power without a state and without sovereignty.

A generation of Palestinians who were in the first decade of their lives when the schism occurred are now adults. They had never seen the PLO at its prime or the efficacy of its institutions. They grew up



with two authorities, one in the West Bank and the other in Gaza, while Palestinian elsewhere follow the news from these two entities. Individuals and groups from this generation are engaged in the struggle, making sacrifices in the absence of a single Palestinian national project. Some parrot the refrain of a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders with its capital is Jerusalem and the right of return for refugees. They need a programme, even though they are aware of the contradiction between the two-state solution and the right of return in practice. But what harm is there in the contradiction, so long as the words remain a refrain, not an actual political project?

Meanwhile, Israel is reinforcing the occupation's settlement architecture in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, and Arab governments continue to pursue a new mode of gratuitous normalization with Israel (it transcends the establishment of relations to the forging of alliances), pretending that the Palestinian cause does not exist. Israel is inserted into regional issues and Arab conflicts, and some governments see relations with that state as an asset that is useful not only in Washington but also in the context of Arab and regional conflicts. More importantly, they are all well aware that normalization has boosted Israel's arrogance and that the Israeli right has drawn two key deductions that reaffirmed the assumptions it crows about in the Israeli media. One is that Arab governments are uninterested in the Palestinian cause and peace is possible without addressing it. Another is that if Israel persists long enough in imposing the status quo, the Arabs will capitulate to the language of force, and nothing will happen if Israel intensifies settlement expansion. This attitude is at the root of the extreme right's electoral successes in the time of normalization.

The Palestinian leadership, struggling to fend off the systemic Israeli drive to reduce them to hostages, are incapable of fighting back or even making use of their people's sacrifices as the number of casualties and fatalities mounts in the struggle against the establishment of settlements and incursions into villages and cities, or in defense of al-Aqsa Mosque and the Arab character of Jerusalem.

At this juncture, we are also witnessing the results of a gradual shift in American public opinion, especially among the youth, toward greater sensitivity to the moral dimension of the suffering of the Palestinian people under occupation and the immorality of the clearly discernible features of an apartheid regime. At the same time, the dynamics of the relationship between official Zionist ideology and the occupation is strengthening the Zionist religious right, facilitating its infiltration into the state apparatus while simultaneously arousing aversion among Israel's allies in Western liberal democracies. I will not dwell further on this topic, as I have already addressed the religious-secular rift in Israel and the conflict between the Israeli (religious and secularist) populist right and the judiciary. I will simply note, here, the sharp escalation in this conflict and the likelihood that it will cause a rift within Jewish communities outside of Israel, especially in the United States. Naturally, we need to bear in mind that to expect Israel to implode as a result of its internal contradictions is pure fantasy and wishful thinking.

What is to be done?

The continuous presence of the Palestinian people in Palestine and abroad, their preservation of their national identity, and their limitless capacity for sacrifice in resisting the occupation and in the ongoing clashes with occupation forces in the West Bank (which is an Intifada under new circumstances), combined with the solidarity of Arab public opinion with Palestine, the shifts in Western public opinion and the relentless rise of religious Zionism among ever broadening segments of Israeli society are all factors that ought to be exploited in the struggle against the occupation regime. However, this would require an inclusive Palestinian institution, one that formulates resistance strategies against that occupation regime. Failing that, it will be impossible to successfully take it on.

Again, this cannot be done in the framework of the current Palestinian schism which, as I have said, I hold just as responsible as the Oslo catastrophe. Nor can it be done in the framework of Palestinian authorities that organize their local, regional, and international priorities solely on the basis of considerations related to the scope of their authority and their daily obligations to those living under their authority (This is not to suggest they forfeit such responsibilities, which are only natural), and not on the basis of a comprehensive national strategy. This is an important distinction between ruling authorities under occupation or blockade versus an inclusive national liberation movement.

Rebuilding the PLO can be a starting point, but not if it proceeds from a factional power-sharing formula that immobilizes it and reduces it to a mere umbrella organization. Instead, it should be built on national, democratic foundations that take into account all factions, parties, and other sectors of Palestinian society. Furthermore, rebuilding the PLO cannot be a substitute for unity at the PA level. At the very least there should be a national unity government.

A battle as complicated as that of the Palestinian people cannot be waged without a comprehensive national strategy aimed at a unified goal. Solutions to conflict come through negotiation, but there are no negotiating frameworks capable of yielding viable solutions under the current power balances. What is possible is sustaining the struggle on all fronts to attain justice. On the other hand, to continue to oppose negotiations and PA frameworks, whether in the West Bank or Gaza, for the sake of opposing them, only gives rein to a spiral of unchecked one upmanship in the rhetorics and symbolism of the sacredness of the Palestinian cause. It also leads to the dismissal of struggles of other peoples as though they are competing for headlines; squabbling with other Arab peoples over who is the most oppressed and trading accusations of treason; anti-political and anti-politician populism; and the monopoly of national action by grassroots initiatives, which are positive in and of themselves but, as I have noted, risk becoming prey to a destructive dynamism in the absence of an inclusive framework for a Palestinian national liberation movement with a responsible national strategy and an inclusive democratic discourse that is also directed at Israelis.



At times, some reduce the Palestinian cause to the scale of their daily aspirations and needs, or their local conflicts, keeping them from the higher plane from where they can view the broader picture of liberating the Palestinian people and the Arab region from the last colonial question. Others magnify it to such an extent that it grows larger than the Palestinian and Arab peoples and is transformed into an idol, which makes it easier to use against the Palestinian people and their interests, and against Arab peoples.

There is no doubt that the Palestinian cause is larger than either the West Bank, Gaza, the Arabs of '48, or the refugees. This is important to bear in mind. But it is not larger than the Palestinian people, and it does not conflict with their daily concerns. It must fit a framework that represents the whole of the Palestinian people. On the other hand, its entanglement with the Arab question at the regional level (the use of the Palestinian question in the Arab context one moment, then abandoning it in service of domestic agendas or foreign deals, etc.) and with the Jewish question at the global level (i.e., Israel's international representation of the Jewish question and monopolization of the role of victim, the Zionist lobbies, etc.) makes it large enough to be hard to control and keep trained on the interests of the Palestinian people. This entanglement may be transformed from a weakness into a strength only through an organized Palestinian force active at both levels. Failing that, the struggle of the Palestinian people will remain prey to the complexities at both: at the Arab level where regional axes are forged at its expense or in which the Palestinian cause is instrumentalized independently from the interests of the Palestinian and Arab peoples; and at the international level in the absence of a model capable of enlisting and benefitting from expressions of grassroots and official solidarity abroad. Without such a model, the Palestinian national cause will lose its standing, just as its humanitarian character is being obscured, creating the space for such phenomena as criminalizing the boycott of Israel and conflating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism.

So this, I believe, is where we begin. Thank you.