



## **The Palestinian Question: An Enduring Crisis**

*By: Abdel Rahman Taha*

*Abdel Rahman Taha is an International Affairs Master's student at the George H.W. Bush School of Government and Public Service studying Grand Strategy and the Middle East.*

For decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a major challenge facing US policy in the Middle East. Failure to solve the conflict and the rise of common threats facing US allies in the region, such as Iran and Islamist movements, led to its decline as a priority, creating the impression that the conflict can be crushed or bypassed. This was clearest under the Trump administration, who sought to crush the issue by imposing a peace plan or bypass it by sponsoring an alliance between Israel and Arab states without involving the Palestinians in either of them. However, the current crisis shows that this approach was unsuccessful as the Palestinian cause remains important in Middle East politics and the abandonment of Palestinian communities strengthens the position of Iran and its allies.

Seeking a settlement, previous US administrations [showed](#) great flexibility towards Israel, often at the expense of international law. For instance, UN Security Council resolutions, including [Resolution 2334](#) of 2016, consider Israel's acquisition of Palestinian territory by force in 1967, including East Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank, as well as establishing settlements on them to be "flagrant violations under international law." Further, UN General Assembly [Resolution 194](#) grants Palestinian refugees who fled their homes in 1948 the right to return to their places of origins. Despite these provisions, President George W. Bush considered Israeli settlements in the West Bank to be a reality that would be "unrealistic" to change. Later, President Obama supported the recognition of Israel as a "Jewish state," which would end the Palestinian claim to a right of return and allow for legal discrimination against Arab citizens in Israel. The Obama administration also [increased](#) US military assistance to Israel to a record \$3.8 billion annually, despite unprecedented [settlement](#) expansion in the West Bank.

What made Trump's policy unique, however, was its complete negligence of Palestinians. First, Trump's team was one-sided. His Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, was a [prominent](#) supporter of Israeli settlements in the West Bank while his Ambassador to the UN [considered](#) the right of return to be "off the table." Moreover, his national security advisor, John Bolton, [threatened](#) to prosecute and impose sanctions on the International Criminal Court's officials if they investigated Israeli actions. Second, Trump cut US support to the Palestinians, including funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides welfare programs to Palestinian refugees, and [suspended](#) USAID operations in Gaza and the West Bank. Third, his administration [excommunicated](#) the Palestinian Authority, despite its [security](#) cooperation with Israel, by closing its office in Washington for demanding an ICC investigation on Israel. Fourth, Trump officially [recognized](#) Jerusalem as the capital of Israel instead of Tel Aviv, thus supporting the annexation of the Eastern part, while the State Department [dropped](#) the use of "occupied" in its official references to the West Bank and Gaza. Most significantly, Trump's Middle East plan consisted of a [deal](#) with Israel to [recognize](#) the Israeli settlements in the West Bank as part of Israel, in return for a Palestinian state in and



around Gaza. The proposed Palestinian state would have no army, allow Israeli security control, recognize Israel as a “Jewish state,” and renounce the “right of return.” The second part of the plan was sponsoring the Abraham accords to normalize relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, with other Arab countries to follow. Unsurprisingly, neither the deal nor the accords involved Palestinian representatives or gained Palestinian [support](#).

Meanwhile, worrisome developments occurred in Israel and the occupied territories. In 2018, Israel [passed](#) a law declaring itself a “nation-state of the Jewish people.” In 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [vowed](#) to annex sensitive areas of the West Bank, in “coordination” with President Trump. In Gaza, which Israel [blockades](#) through a surrounding fence and [controls](#) the population registry, movement in and out of the area and fishing activities in the sea, while armed militias including Hamas control the interior, socioeconomic conditions became [unbearable](#). Even within Israel, hostility towards the Arab minority [grew](#) further. The deteriorating situation of Palestinians, and the ever-increasing inequality with their Jewish counterparts prompted UN [experts](#), prominent [international](#) and [Israeli](#) human rights groups, Israeli [media](#) and American [think-tanks](#) to accuse Israel of “apartheid.”

Therefore, any analysis of the current crisis must consider that the US has increasingly alienated the Palestinians and that Palestinians’ conditions have been deteriorating. That being said, the current crisis reveals three insights about the situation. First, the assumption that the Palestinian question is no longer relevant- and therefore can be crushed or sidelined- is wrong. Major crises can erupt at any point, and although Arab governments, particularly those who established relations with Israel, have been [less](#) vocal than usual, the Arab public has not. [News](#) of eviction [attempts](#) of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, footage of subsequent [violence](#) including the police [raiding](#) Al Aqsa mosque during Ramadan, and [statistics](#) on the casualty toll have [resonated](#) with the public across the MENA region. This in turn [spurred](#) public anger and popular [solidarity](#) with the Palestinian communities unseen in years. Second, perhaps due to international negligence and common struggles, Palestinians in the different areas are more connected than in any previous crisis, making it difficult to address the problems of one area in isolation from the others. Third, and most important for US policy, the complete abandonment of the Palestinian side was not only morally and legally questionable, but also a strategic mistake. The absence of neutral or allying international actors under the ongoing circumstances created a vacuum that Hamas could fill by presenting itself as the protector of the Palestinian cause, garnering more popular support than they have received in years. This can also extend to Iran’s axis in the region whose main claim revolves around supporting the Palestinian cause.

American bias towards Israel, particularly regarding the settlements, has hurt the US reputation in the region [before](#). A complete loss of neutrality will not benefit the US and will likely mean more popular support for Hamas and other Iranian allies and proxies. The Biden Administration can restore faith in the US as a peace broker. However, this would require not only revoking Trump’s policies, but also reengaging the Palestinian side, withdrawing support for violations against Palestinians, particularly Security Council backing, and using American leverage, particularly military assistance, to reaffirm a stricter position on the annexation issue as



**Albritton Center  
for Grand Strategy**

THE BUSH SCHOOL • TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

some Congressional [Democrats](#) have suggested. Finally, the US should show a serious interest in solving the human rights problems facing the Palestinians, including the blockade on Gaza.