Palestine Consultations

On 3 and 4 March 2019 a small team from Pugwash held a number of consultations and meetings in Ramallah and Jerusalem on the situation in Palestine. The impetus was to better understand the challenges of day-to-day life for Palestinians living in the West Bank, particularly what may have changed since the election of Trump in the United States, and gauge what priorities were held by Palestinians for the future.

Overall, there was a comprehensive feeling amongst Palestinians that a one-state solution has been imposed as a de facto reality, and that this one state is an apartheid state that discriminates against Palestinian human rights, dignity of life, and undermines hopes for viable economic and social improvement in the lives of all those in the West Bank and Gaza.

The following points are a summary of the opinions expressed by a range of Palestinian civil society actors.¹

1. Security is the critical problem for daily life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

- From gaining employment to accessing healthcare, there are a range of barriers caused by living under occupation which impact Palestinians. For example, many are denied permits to move easily and take advantage of job opportunities, and the vast arrangement of security and checkpoints imposed by Israel impedes free movement.
- There continues to be severe limitations on movement of goods which stifle productivity.
- The rise in unemployment in Palestinian society has led to increasing rates of criminality, particularly amongst youth who are left with diminishing economic opportunities.
- Jewish settler violence has increased, affecting young people and women in particular, who are reluctant to travel for fear of attack. Many Palestinians feel a lack of protection of their basic security and rights.
- There are also pressures on Palestinian society from Israeli housing policy: in addition to problems of being issued building permits, there has been an increase in demolitions of Palestinian-owned

¹ This report was prepared by a rapporteur, Poul Erik Christiansen, Projects Manager at the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, to capture the discussions. 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; however, a large majority of the participants was from Palestine, and this is reflected in the views contained in this report. The meeting was 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.
buildings, with a perception that many are justified with fabricated Israeli deeds or as part of collective punishment related to crimes committed by one family member.

- All of these issues together were said to present a looming danger of ‘some kind of explosion’ within Palestinian society.

2. **Palestinian political inertia is affecting aspirations to statehood**

- There is a lack of government authority throughout the OPT and Palestinians are ‘more divided than ever.’ However, many perceived that the impasse between Fatah and Hamas is no longer the main political issue: many saw a desperate need for political plurality, with new parties and new leaders required, and for this the Legislative Council needs to be reanimated with new assemblies permitted by the Palestinian leadership.

- Despite the government resigning *en masse* in January 2019, they are still ‘stuck to their seats’ with no plan for either elections or a succession. The leadership crisis continues, with no clear heir(s) to Mahmoud Abbas.

- Fresh elections are urgently needed in Palestinian society and there was a clear demand that new faces to represent communities should be allowed to stand. Importantly, it was noted than the results of any free and fair election which may take place must be respected by the international community, at the risk that Palestinians feel further disenfranchised.

- Palestinian unity and the social fabric are growing in two different cultures between Gaza and the West Bank – Europeans in particular are naïve in focusing on reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas while the divides between the two societies are growing.

3. **Palestine in the regional and global context**

- There was a sense among Palestinians that Israel at large has identified this time as a crucial opportunity to ‘get it done’ in terms of colonizing Palestinian territory. There was a clear feeling that both settlers and the Israeli government do not fear censure or reprisal by the current US government but rather have been ‘given a green light’ to dramatically increase settlement-building and demolition of Palestinian homes.

- In respect of the Trump administration’s ‘peace plan’ there was a great deal of skepticism that it would in any way take into consideration the concerns of Palestinians, rather revealing the close ties and alignment to the Israeli establishment.

- European governments were seen as engaging in ‘political hypocrisy’: they are strong on rhetoric in favor of the Palestinians but this has not been translated into actions that produce any meaningful change either on the ground or in terms of Israeli policy.

- The Arab world is less engaged on Palestine than previously, with each state having its own domestic problems as a priority. In particular, Jordan was seen as weak and plagued by economic crisis.
• There was concern that Israeli youth are actually ignorant of the conditions of Palestinians, although it was pointed out that there was perhaps a large element of not wanting to know the details.

4. Future policy development
• At a global level, the Palestinian narrative is in the shadow of the Israeli narrative. In large part this is because of the amount of money put into propaganda by Israel – a key direction for Palestinians must be to overcome this narrative battle of ‘two sides in conflict’ and instead highlight to the world the massive power disparity and illegal occupation.
• The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS) is perceived as being largely successful in raising awareness of the Palestinian cause. The BDS was identified not as a platform for challenging Israel but rather as one tool for changing the balance of power in favour of Palestinians. Specifically, it was seen as allowing people across the world to translate their efforts or solidarity into material effects for the Palestinian cause through producing a form of ‘cost’ to Israel and Jewish communities.
• Based on the past 25 years of efforts, it was asserted that international civil society has become a more important target than governments if progress is to be made.
• In this light, action in ‘third states’ – those not directly implicated in the peace process – was identified as crucial: all states have obligations under international law to uphold the provisions of the Geneva Conventions and hold an occupying force accountable, and the governments of these states must be reminded of this.
• Ultimately, many Palestinians continue to believe that the defining measures to change their situation are an end to the illegal occupation of their territories and upholding the international legal right to self-determination of the Palestinian people on their land.

In general, all Palestinians with whom Pugwash engaged were strongly resentful of Israeli attitudes toward Palestine and were keen for interactions with the international community. Pugwash and all of its members across the world were urged to contribute to engaging policymakers and politicians in Europe and elsewhere to raise the issue of Palestinian statehood and the rights of its people.