



United Nations Forum on the Question of Palestine

“The Question of Palestine: Threats of Annexation and the Prospects for Peace”

UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People

4 June 2020

CHAIR SUMMARY

The UN Forum on the Question of Palestine **“The Question of Palestine: Threats of Annexation and the Prospects for Peace”** was convened virtually, on 4 June 2020, under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP).

The 90-minute event, livestreamed on UNTV, consisted of a panel discussion between three prominent speakers – Ms. Hanan Ashrawi, Member of the PLO Executive Committee and former member of the Palestinian team in the Middle East Peace Process; Mr. Yossi Beilin, Former Israeli Cabinet Minister and participant in the 1993 Oslo Accord negotiations; Mr. James Zogby, Founder and President of the Arab American Institute – who outlined prevailing challenges, offered analysis on current political conditions, and formulated recommendations to overcome the current political impasse for salvaging peace prospects. Through outreach to international audiences – Member States, civil society and media – about the imminent threat posed by Israel’s annexation plans, the Forum helped raise awareness of these illegal plans and their dangerous repercussions if implemented, mobilized these audiences with the aim of preventing Israeli annexation of areas in the occupied West Bank, and identified possible options for a way forward. All Member States and Observers, United Nations organizations, intergovernmental and civil society organizations were invited to attend.

Speakers stressed that decades-long impunity for annexation measures and settlement activities had led to the current situation, with Israel able to exploit international inaction and the paralysis of the UN Security Council. Views were shared that negotiations between unequal parties and under control of the United States, now partner to Israeli annexation, would be counterproductive, so was reliance on the Middle East Quartet also dominated by the United States. Enforcement of accountability – including the application of sanctions, for example through regional blocks (e.g. the European Union) – was necessary to solve the conflict. Others argued that an expectation of sanctions would be unrealistic; instead, Member States should raise voices through visible actions to bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back onto the international agenda and offer Israel the resumption of negotiations as an alternative to annexation.

At the opening, the moderator of the event, **Vice-Chair of the Committee Ambassador Neville Gertze (Namibia)**, shared a brief history of the Committee and its mandate and highlighted how, in current challenging times, the Committee would use innovative ways to ensure it continued to support the Palestinian people.

Ms. Ashrawi stated that the theme of the event “Threats of Annexation and the Prospects for Peace” was too sanguine, considering that annexation had been an ongoing process since 1967, with the establishment of Israeli settlements, and East Jerusalem having been annexed in 1980. Annexation had been a unilateral process of *de facto* actions, and the essence of Israel’s colonial settler project. Today, the process had evolved to the point that the new Israeli government was willing to openly legislate it. As for the peace, one could not talk about its prospects when one side – Palestine – had been systematically dismantled and lacked international protection and the other side – Israel – was not held accountable for violating UN resolutions and international law. In this context, the date announced by the Government of Israel to start the annexation process, 1 July, was an arbitrary one; the sudden public interest for this recent announcement even shifted the focus on the issue of annexation as if it was only to begin, while the reality of a long-ongoing annexation on the ground continued to be ignored.

Ms. Ashrawi stated that the United States, under its current administration, had become Israel’s “partner in crime”: it had recognized Israel’s illegal annexation of Jerusalem, defunded all projects and programmes in Palestine, defunded and delegitimized UNRWA while attempting to redefine the question of refugees ignoring UN resolutions, and closed the PLO Representative Office in Washington, D.C. and the US Consulate in East Jerusalem. It had ceased the usage of the term “occupation” and, in its Peace Plan, referred to settlements as “neighbourhoods” or “Jewish communities”. All this provided Israel with a “license to steal” and would ultimately result in a total demise of any solution – be it a two-State or one-State solution. Thus, at the present Palestine was dealing with two occupying powers.

With the current Israeli government having emerged in a global context of hyper-nationalism and identity politics based on populism, xenophobia and racism, Mr. Netanyahu had dismantled his domestic and international opposition, through co-opting some factions into his new government and exploiting the COVID-19 restrictions in Israel; through the reticence and timidity of the European Union (EU), which continued to refrain from taking concrete actions to curb Israeli violations; and through the United Nation’s inability to implement its own resolutions or follow through with its own promises, whether in protecting the Palestinian people or in holding Israel accountable and bringing sanctions to make Israel face the consequences of its actions.

The unilateral Israeli imposition of its own laws and sovereignty over parts of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was aimed to re-invent the occupation through the US peace proposal, with Israel repositioning itself as a major military, economic and intelligence power in the region and establishing the Palestinian question as a domestic issue. If successful, this plan would legitimise contempt for international law and justice, signal the triumph of nationalism over multilateralism and send the message that Member States could defy the will of the international community and claim exceptionalism.

Mr. Beilin underlined that the common denominator between the Israeli peace camp and Palestinians was the rejection of annexation. In this context he underlined the importance of the inclusion in the discussion of the Israeli pro-annexation camp, to explain itself. While the Israeli and Palestinian peoples would always hold different narratives on historical events, they would also always remain interdependent. He stressed the importance to stop any annexation moves by 1 July, because while practical Israeli steps would not be irreversible, once implemented their retraction would be very difficult. The US proposal was facetious and disastrous at the same time. For example, it would grant Israel the right not only to refuse to accept Palestinian refugees inside its territory but also to decide whether any could enter the future State of Palestine, and if so, how many.

At this stage, a realistic, practicable alternative was needed: a deal to resume negotiations between the two sides for one year with possible extension, with no preconditions and including a moratorium on unilateral steps during this period. That would defer annexation, at least by one year. This deal should take into consideration relevant UN resolutions, previous attempts to achieve a permanent agreement, existing plans including, the Arab Peace Initiative and the current US proposal. The inclusion of the latter as a reference point could obtain US buy-in.

The Arab joint effort, particularly the Arab League's recent resolutions, and Arab leaders' opinion shift vis-à-vis the US proposal may have led to "second thoughts" in Washington, D.C., with regards to its implementation. To this one could add the practical unfeasibility of the US proposal on the ground, e.g. it would triple the length of Israel's borders with a corresponding increase in financial and human resources to ensure its security.

Mr. Zogby connected the current US proposal to previous such endeavours, calling it no different than the 1920 San Remo Resolution when after World War I the victors had arrogated to themselves the power to ignore the needs, rights, and aspirations of the indigenous people of the Arab world and carve up that region to serve their own interests. Now, the US administration was ignoring the needs and aspirations of the Palestinians on the ground. The latter were right in refusing to participate in this process, as they were "like a patient forced to undergo an amputation and being asked to hold the scalpel while the doctor begins to cut."

He also stressed that the Israeli settlement enterprise had been ongoing for more than 50 years with settlements placed in strategic locations and with roads connecting them to Israel, dividing the West Bank. In the years after the Oslo Accords, the number of settlers had increased; today there were 650,000 Israeli settlers in the Palestinian territory, constituting an existing reality that could no longer be reversed. Successive Israeli and US governments had laid the foundations of the current situation and thus the Netanyahu and Trump administrations should not be blamed alone. And given Israel's apparent impunity and lack of accountability, it would now be impossible to form an Israeli government that would oppose annexation. For example, recently the Israeli opposition could not form a government because it was reluctant to include Palestinian Israelis for fear to be branded a "minority government".

In the United States, even liberal voices opposed to annexation fell short in this discussion. Continued reference to a support for the two-State solution had become a "two-State absolutism" since liberals supported a reality in which their refusal to condemn the policies of

one of the two States – Israel – enabled it to continue denying the other State – Palestine – to come into existence. Therefore, sanctions and accountability were essential for a solution. The time for dialogue had long passed: Israel would need to feel that it faced paying a price, including economic penalties, for annexation.

The ensuing discussions focused on the impact of sanctions in stopping Israeli violations. Representatives of other Member States, including Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Tunisia, made remarks on their support for the Palestinian people and condemnation of Israeli annexations plans and posed questions on concrete actions the international community could undertake to further support the Palestinian cause, the viability and potential of the Middle East Quartet in the current situation, and the potential shift in US policy vis-à-vis Israel after the November elections. In line with the multilateral approach advocated by participating Member States, questions from civil society representatives from the United States and abroad touched on the efficiency of grassroot organizations in lobbying for EU-imposed sanctions against Israel in lieu of advocating for the return to likely unfruitful negotiations and in supporting the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory and how to work in concert action with Member States and regional organizations.

Ms. Ashrawi stressed that negotiations between unequal parties and under control of the United States, now partner to Israeli annexation, would be counterproductive as they would only provide Israel with more time to continue its occupation, as the experience since 1991 had shown. Instead, now was the time to focus on accountability and sanctions, including through engaging the ICC and encouraging Member States to take preventive actions.

Mr. Beilin, while not dismissing that negotiations had provided an umbrella for unilateral decisions, argued that they could also be helped by the establishment of monitoring mechanisms, which had not been done before. He emphasised a need for realism to prevail to find workable solution as sanctions were unlikely to be implemented – especially by the EU – and, even if they were, it would be too late to prevent annexation steps on 1 July.

Mr. Zogby reiterated the argument for sanctions and accountability. For decades, the United States and the EU had stood by, and supported Israel while it created the current situation; despite resolutions and declarations, Israel never “paid the price for its behaviour.” He regretted that vis-à-vis Israel the international community had tried everything except sanctions and underscored their effectiveness – e.g. against Iran, Russia, South Africa – which was why the United States was using them as a central tool of its foreign policy. Sanctions created accountability and accountability reinforced justice and equal rights.

The Observer of the Committee Ambassador Riyad Mansour (State of Palestine) recalled collective Member State action, e.g. the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016) and related efforts on differentiation, including *inter alia* the EU moving towards labelling Israeli settlement products. Also, international stances thwarted attempts by the US administration to replace the global consensus and the Arab Peace Initiative with its own peace plan. Members of the Quartet may yet induce the US administration to pressure Israel from implementing annexation. If that would not come to pass, Palestine had additional options for action, including in the UN Security Council and General Assembly.

In their closing remarks, speakers highlighted that in the United States, the Israel-Palestine conflict had become a partisan issue, with over 50 per cent of Democratic voters supporting economic sanctions on Israel and cuts in military aid should it continue its violations of international law. As a result, a possible Democratic administration in 2021 could implement drastic changes to current policies.

However, a strategic Palestinian response towards annexation would be critical, including through non-violent protests and engaging the International Criminal Court (ICC). The credibility of the Middle East Quartet, perceived as under US control, could also be regained through a unified sanctions programme. UN resolutions continued to be crucial, particularly by the General Assembly that could refer to the ICJ, which had the power to address Israel's accountability.

The European Union was also called to act upon Israel's violation of bilateral agreements with the bloc, ending impunity of breaches of international law and norms.

Finally, bringing the Israel-Palestine issue back on the international agenda was flagged as an utmost priority. For example, no Israeli government could ignore visits of regional leaders who would talk to both sides and declare their views. Voices of African leaders and visits to the region would also have a considerable impact. Similarly, if the Quartet was unable to speak with one voice, three of its members could issue joint statements. It was critical to show that the world had not given up and that the issue was still relevant.

The Vice-Chair closed the event.

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****Note: This Summary attempts to provide an overall picture of the deliberations of the virtual Event. A video of the Event can be found on the webpage of the CEIRPP, www.un.unispal.org as well as in its official Facebook page and YouTube account.*

****Note: The views and opinions expressed in this summary are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.*