

3 April 2018, Legacy Hotel, Jerusalem

Topic: Israel Today: The Rise of the Right and its Implications

Speaker(s): Ayman Odeh, Member of the Knesset, Head of the Joint List; Anton Shalhat, Author, Researcher and Director of the Israel Unit at MADAR Center, Ramallah.

1) Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi:

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Chairman of PASSIA, welcomed the speakers and attendees, emphasizing the importance of maintaining communication between members of the civil society and institutions in Jerusalem through holding such periodical meetings. He said that engaging intellectuals with the needs and challenges of the society are a very different thing from employees "only" waiting for instructions and salaries.

Dr. Abdul Hadi said that today's meeting was taking place in the midst of two events: the mourning of the martyrs from the March of Return in Gaza last Friday and the Easter holidays. He stressed that Palestinians believe in the Islamic and Christian faiths and stand by their shared identity, notwithstanding the unending conflict with the Zionist movement, the parting of their leaders, their internal disunity, and the daily loss of their people.

He then went on to say that today's roundtable discussion on "the Rise of the Right and its Implications" needs to consider and analyze the larger context in which policies and events are presently unfolding:

The international scene: US President Donald Trump and Vice-President Mike Pence still ignore and deny the history of the Palestinian cause, the roots of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the legitimate decisions of international law and bodies, especially with regard to Jerusalem. They triggered a storm by recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, although international rejection of this announcement was nearly unanimous and came with a call for the adherence to international law as well as the reaffirmation of Jerusalem as an occupied city.

The regional scene: Conflicts and discord in the Arab world continue and have sadly escalated in recent months with no end in sight. This includes the deplorable preemptive war between Saudi Arabia and Iran over Yemen, as much as the unprecedented bloodshed, destruction, and millions of deaths, casualties, and refugees in Syria. While Libya and Iraq still lick their wounds and search for a better future, some Arab leaders more or less secretly normalize with Israel, albeit the public in those countries still stands with the Palestinians and their just cause.

The Palestinian scene: After five decades of Israeli occupation, attempts to manipulate and neglect the Palestinian narrative, misrepresent religious places, and enforce laws aiming at further Israelizing Palestine's Arab character and legalizing the occupation continue unabated. Not only is the Judaization of Jerusalem being driven forward, Palestinians everywhere are subjected to Israel's siege and closure policy while witnessing the marginalization of the PLO and the sinking of the PA in administrative and services tasks.

Finally, the question is:

Within the borders of historical Palestine, the Palestinian and the Jewish populations are now largely the same, standing at approximately 6.5 million people each. In the absence of any prospects for reaching a political solution in the foreseeable future, the big question is: Where will Zionism take us with its ever-expanding racist and colonial ideology and an increasingly apartheid-like agenda, which is not only supported by the West since more than a century but nowadays also openly by most of the Arab states?

How do we break through the crisis of leadership in the absence of a clear vision and will in order to formulate our national agenda on our land?

2) Ayman Odeh:

Ayman Odeh began the discussion by calling for the tables to be turned on President Trump due to his “deal” which recognizes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moves the United States Embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem. In addition, Odeh voiced concerns that “Israel has worked and is still working in a planned and systematic way towards eliminating any possibility of achieving a two-state solution.”

Referring to an article by Professor Zeev Sternhell, a prominent Peace Now activist, Hebrew University lecturer, and one of the world's leading experts on fascism, in which he argued that Israel has surpassed fascism and is moving on to Nazism, Mr. Odeh warned that the Israeli's political narrative has shifted to the right and the extreme right factions and ideas within it are having a growing influence. He explained that after reading Sternhell's article he became anxious and went to visit him in his home to discuss the points Sternhell presented and to gain a greater understanding of what he meant. Sternhell drew a lot of astonishing comparisons between Nazi laws that were introduced in Germany in the 1920s and present-day Israeli legislation as well as proclamations of German and Israeli politicians respectively. Odeh said that, uneasy as he felt about this, Palestinians have nevertheless achieved success, mentioning, for example, that 23% of the total and 35% of the female students at the Technion in Haifa are Arabs, that there were 46 Palestinian lecturers in 1996, whereas today 471 Palestinian lecturers teach at the Technion and Weizmann Institute, that 31% of the doctors at the Rambam Hospital are Arabs, and that the number of Palestinians in the ‘high-tech’ sector has increased from 400 to 5,200. Professor Sternhell answered with a smile on his face, presenting a huge book about Jewish success stories in Germany in the 1920s saying that “compared to those, the Palestinian achievements were modest.”

Odeh expressed concerns regarding Israel's control over the country, its systematic attacks on Arabs, its delegitimizing and treatment of them as enemies, and their view that the Arabs are a fifth column. Odeh stated that whenever Israeli politicians explore possible strategies for managing the Gaza Strip, they always add in every news bulletin and piece of analysis of the mobilization of Palestinians inside Israel, which shows how tangible treating Arabs as enemies has become in Israel.

With regard to Israel's continuous efforts to undermine the possibility of establishing a Palestinian state, Odeh said that after new annexation laws were released in recent Knesset meetings and the Ariel College [in the West Bank settlement of Ariel] was recognized as part of the Israeli academic system, the possibility of an official annexation of Area 'C' may well be imminent, unless there are significant changes in the American stance regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Odeh observed that the USA has always worked for and clearly wanted a Jewish majority in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This became particularly obvious after the fall of the Shah in 1979 when the CIA declared that the only country it depended on in the East was Israel with its Jewish majority and that relying on an Arab or Muslim dictator always carried the risk of a coup d'état at any time. The American official speech regarding the matter reiterated that as long as Israel has the guarantee of a Jewish majority, it would have continuous American support. Odeh also mentioned the letter which President George W. Bush Jr handed to Sharon on 14 April 2004, encouraging him to

Judaize the Galilee and the Negev. Furthermore, the position of Mike Pence, Trump's Vice President, and Counselor, who believes in and eagerly defends Israel's right to owning all of the contested lands. Finally, the US Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, who is a settler and the first American ambassador explicitly against evacuating settlements, believes that annexation of Area 'C' has become legitimate and tangible.

According to Odeh, the annexation of Area 'C' will be the first project pursued by Netanyahu and Bennett in the upcoming parliament round and its achievement will give the currently ruling conservative party a significant political gain. He added that the governing right-wing coalition is not merely a continuation of the traditional right-wing in Israel, but a different right that was determined to succeed in the elections, and persisted to gain control over the country to ensure that whether or not they lose in the next elections, the changes made will take a long time to recover from.

Odeh went on to say that not only did President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and the former Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, discuss East Jerusalem and the restoration of the Wailing Wall, but that Olmert told him in a meeting three weeks ago that he is fully convinced that there must be a return to the boundaries of the Green Line, with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.

Historical Achievements:

Odeh insisted that despite Israel's official denial of Palestinian rights and the accelerated colonization to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, there has been a historical progression in establishing a Palestinian state on the 1967 Green Line boundaries, thanks to the Palestinian strife and the 35,000 martyrs since then. He said that half of the Israeli public support the two-state solution, along with more than 90% of the international population worldwide, not only through UN Security Council Resolution No. 2334 of December 2016 which reaffirmed that all Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem are illegal, a resolution which the USA did not veto.

As for the one-state "solution", Odeh said it was not the result of an ideological rationale or any convictions, but rather it was due to a weak position and desperation. He continued that this is illogical as we all share the feeling that Israel is eliminating the possibility of establishing a Palestinian state. Odeh asked whether escaping by running forward to a solution with no depth or planning is an illusion, or is it directed towards developing a plan that can be achieved? However, Odeh warned about the one-state solution, saying it is obvious that it will take long phases and many stages to build trust, procedures, and negotiations, but from the first moment the settlements become legal, there would be no difference between Tel Aviv and the Kiryat Arba settlement in Hebron since Israel and Palestine would be considered one country. After 20 years of struggle, the question now is who is economically and militarily stronger? Who will control the natural resources, economy, checkpoints, etc?

Odeh gave an example of what he witnessed during his visit to South Africa two weeks ago on the occasion of celebrating a quarter century after the end of Apartheid. He expressed that there is a complete economic division, and the only political change was that a party of black people joined a party of white people to control the black populace in South Africa; plus a number of rich black people, that

form the top 1% wealthiest in the nation, joined the rich white people to control the black people economically. This is South Africa today.

Odeh believes a Palestinian state should be established first, and then other issues can be negotiated. Borders can be opened, with a shared economy and currency. However, the main problem remains the occupation which has to end, because as soon as it does, it would establish a foundation for reaching equal opportunities. There are two solutions: de-Zionization of Israel or a continued occupation. The public is divided into two camps: the first is relatively small and believes that Palestinians should obtain their rights in an independent state, and the other far larger camp, wants separation from the Palestinians in order to maintain a Jewish majority.

3) Anton Shalhat:

Anton Shalhat, Head of the Israel Unit at MADAR, talked about the Israeli political scene where he noted that a new right-wing has emerged in Israel separate to the conservative party which we are all well aware of. This new right wing is strongly associated with the new worldwide right that fights the BDS Movement at the core of its agenda.

Shalhat added that this new right wing is considered an evolution of the traditional conservative party founded by Vladimir Jabotinsky, which was part of the 'Herut' faction then the 'Likud'. This new wing complies with the traditional group in many ways. However, it has developed new orientations that weren't present in the conservative party before. The new wing is integrated with nationalist and liberal developments especially those dealing with civic matters and religious orientations, as religion has become part of the Israeli intellectual narrative.

Shalhat also referred to a book by "Erez Tadmor", who is close to Netanyahu, as well as the founder of I'm Tirtzu Organization, which is considered the most prominent organization leading the new Israeli right wing and inflicts huge influences on the decisions taken by the Israeli organization. The leaders of that movement stress that the ideas of nationalism that Im Tirtzu adheres with runs counter to movements in the western world. Additionally, Erez Tadmor mentions that defending human rights delivers the heaviest blow possible to country's esteem. According to this, human rights organizations feed propaganda against Israel. Tadmor also demands that hundreds of professors who call for boycotting Israel be brought to justice and to even cut off their salaries. Tadmor considers this cleansing a necessity in defense of the nation.

Moreover, he pointed out that this new right wing is trying to control Israel's politics through adopting a series of hegemonic and arbitrary procedures and decisions. But how is this right-wing succeeding in reaching its achievements in Israel? Shalhat answered that this is due to the socio-demographic changes, as well as the increased enforcement, which even affects the conservative party. He framed the former prime minister, because of whom the Likud ascended to the government, as a traitor to the right wing principles, as he tries to dominate Israel's future direction. Erez also resolved two main issues. The first has to do with resolving the conflict with Palestinians in the occupied territories on the Green Line, taking into consideration that the 48 borders had been resolved in the Oslo Accords, and the second has to do with keeping the country as a Jewish nation.

Shalhat went on to say that this is depicted through the policy of Netanyahu's successive governments since 2009 to impose a unilateral solution that proposes to annex large acres of land from Area C in the West Bank and settlements through direct and indirect operations to widen what is called the 'Israeli sovereignty' on the settlements. The policy then proceeds to gradually annex them with the country's structure and institutions, while keeping the PA in its current form, or perhaps expanding its powers and influence to support the concept of a 'deficient state'.

Shalhat said that Netanyahu speaks frankly about the 'Palestinian deficient state' to remove any ambiguities. The first to ever use this term was Yitzhak Rabin, the champion of peace. One month prior to his assassination, Rabin gave a speech at the Knesset on the 4th of November 1995, where he gave his

input that Israel should compromise with Palestinians according to the Oslo Accord. He said that what Israel want to achieve from this compromise is the red lines, i.e. no return to the borders of July 1967, united Jerusalem capital of Israel, no right of return to Palestinian refugees, keeping full sovereignty over the Jordan Valley, and allowing Palestinians to have more than autonomy and less than a country, i.e. 'a deficient state'.

Shalhat went on to say that Rabin, before Netanyahu, marked the future/ historical resolution borders, which are the same red lines of Netanyahu, in addition to adding a new red line, which is demanding Palestinians to recognize Israel as the national state of the Jewish people.

Shalhat made clear that Israel is keeping the PA in its current form while claiming to expand its powers and influence. Netanyahu considers this as an achievement contributing to his government's strategy of making the PA a 'deficient state'. The occupation guarantees that Palestinians remain under complete Israeli military control, resulting in the transforming of the PA into an alternative civic administration and 'a deficient state'. This gives Israel the opportunity to control the occupied territories, especially the territories surrounding settlements, such as the valleys and East Jerusalem.

Shalhat emphasized the need to differentiate between the two-state solution and a two-state solution for two people. He asserted that the differences are fundamental and huge in theory and in practice. The two-state solution means an Israeli state as well as a Palestinian state; whereas, when declaring two states for two people, this is in line with the demand of Netanyahu from Palestinians to recognize Palestine as a nation state for the Jewish people, which means that Israel is a nation for all Jews worldwide, which is not acceptable.

Shalhat went on to say that if we draw upon the resolutions of international legitimacy and in particular the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 calling for the division of Palestine which refers to three states: a Palestinian state, an Israeli state, and Jerusalem. It is clear that the resolution did not mention that the Israeli state is for Jewish people worldwide, but for those who used to live in Palestine.

Shalhat stated that this policy demonstrates the hierarchy of citizenship according to ethnicity, placing Jews at the peak and Arabs at the bottom, by pursuing policies such as allowing Arabs individual integration on the basis of Israelization and accepting this hierarchy.

Profound Structural Changes

Shalhat affirmed that the rightward trend is related to profound structural changes stemming from demographic societal changes and transformations. There was a repositioning of parts of formerly marginalized groups and a change in their decision making. These groups include the Sephardim, inhabitants of the developing cities, Haredi Jews and the settlement groups. They gradually replaced the founding central forces (secularist, Ashkenazi with communist tendencies). Contesting the presidency of the 'Labor' party is considered by traditionally secular Ashkenazis as an important indicator in the context of these transformations. The two who most recently competed for the party leadership both originate from Eastern Morocco: Amir Peretz and Avi Gabbay. Avi Gabbay went on to win the presidency.

Shalhat added that the structural changes in Israel and the transition in elections have led to many significant observations. These observations include the continuous 'Zionization' of sectors that were originally not part of the Zionist system, such as the Haredi Jews, who today make up for 30% of the settlers, thus forming the largest colonial group. The Sephardim are another group to be affected by 'Zionization'. They have switched their support to the conservative party in stark contrast to the protest program laid down in their 1977 ideological manifesto.