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CARTER CENTER



## THE CARTER CENTER & THE ELDERS DISCUSSION

July 1, 2020

On June 17 and 18, The Carter Center and The Elders virtually convened two rounds of dialogue with Palestinian civil society and political and human rights activists. Former Algerian foreign minister, freedom fighter, and U.N. envoy Lakhdar Brahimi participated on behalf of The Elders, along with staff from both organizations.

The sessions included Palestinians from across geographical areas, including the Gaza Strip, West Bank, '48/Israel, and the diaspora, and included many younger people. The dialogue occurred at a critical moment in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Participants noted in particular the unprecedented U.S.-Israeli alliance on extreme anti-Palestinian positions, the pending annexation of additional West Bank territory, and Israel's recent Nation State Law. These dynamics, combined with entrenched forced displacement, occupation, and dispossession, are forcing Palestinians to rethink old assumptions and search for new solutions to longstanding problems. The sessions revealed that Palestinian civil society is frustrated and feels abandoned by their own leadership, the Arab world, and the international community. This frustration is compounded by a sense that they lack a coherent strategy. There is, however, a wish to take matters into their own hands, particularly among the young.

Israel's threatened annexation of an additional 30% of West Bank territory is one challenge. Participants said the land grab is consistent with what they see as Israel's long-term colonial strategy toward the Palestinians. The annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967 significantly altered the Palestinian landscape, and under the Oslo Accords, Israel also took control of 60% of the West Bank ("Area C"), including Jordan Valley. Participants therefore saw the imminent annexation plans as a shift from de facto to de jure annexation and expressed the view that it has long been clear that Israel intended to colonize all of what had been Mandate Palestine, minus the Palestinian population centers.

Participants focused mostly on the existential challenges posed by annexation, including the likely erosion of the Palestinian Authority's legitimacy, lack of clarity about its institutional role and capacities post-annexation, and the erasure of previously politically significant boundaries; namely the pre-1967 borders. As one participant noted, "What is the PA without land and no prospect of a contiguous state?" Another participant, however, pointed out that the PA represents Palestinian institutions and

presence; its efficiency in service delivery, especially in education, is a meaningful factor in Palestinian life. The absence of the PA could create a political vacuum and lead to disastrous violence.

Several said it was ironic that the PA is being weakened at a time when it has been performing strongly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, however, participants recognized that the PA is undermined by its lack of control under Israeli occupation, and by its economic fragility. For instance, the PA did not have the option of closing its borders during the pandemic, as many countries did.

The challenge of Palestinian fragmentation was presented as a particularly urgent issue. There is a lack of understanding of the realities of life for Palestinians in separated territories (such as East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip). The failure of Palestinian leadership to mobilize around clear objectives is further contributing to national fragmentation. One participant spoke of the need for a return to “patriotic accountability,” whereby Palestinian national leaders would not be lulled into complacency by elite privileges or the trappings of “statehood.”

Such challenges are compounded by youth political alienation. There was a suggestion that youth are losing their political culture because restrictions on freedom of movement are impeding their ability to connect across geographies and see broader horizons. Participants also emphasized that younger Palestinian activists and leaders, such as student political organizers, are liable to be arrested either by Israeli or Palestinian Authority security forces, and that security coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority amounted to a concerted effort to crush any Palestinian youth movement. “Everyone with leadership potential is jailed,” said one participant. COVID-19 and other social ills – from economic pressures to drug use – are also distracting people from politics. Some said Israel is exploiting youth alienation, leading many to consider migration the answer, though others were determined to remain on the land despite the costs. “There is a second Nakba on the way, and our future is worse than our past,” said one participant.

The discussion highlighted differences between anti-colonial struggles in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. On the one hand, the existence of Palestinian nationhood as a coherent polity has been clearly established; on the other, this has not delivered liberation. Some activists believe the focus of Palestinians should now be on equal rights within a one-state reality, rather than on the elusive two-state solution.

Though most stakeholder countries reject annexation as illegal and dangerous, for many years, the U.N., EU, and Arab regional entities have failed to deliver effective support for Palestinian independence and statehood. For instance, Gulf states appear poised to normalize relations with Israel. The Arab world has not played a helpful role in bringing about reconciliation between Palestinian political factions. Participants also noted that the U.S. and some European countries are opposing nonviolent actions, such as invoking

international law by resorting to the International Criminal Court. Most problematic is the current U.S.-Israel alliance. There is now no effort to address the fundamental causes of the conflict; instead, there is an attempt to paper over the real issues with layers of narrative.

Participants said Palestinian voices and stories are not being heard internationally. Liberal Zionist voices are what the international community takes notice of. Gazans, in particular, said they feel they have to die to gain notice and support. Others, however, are starting to question the sacrifices imposed upon them, such as the Great March of Return and its high cost in terms of lives and casualties.

Rather than despairing over international abandonment, participants expressed a strong desire to work toward new solutions driven by Palestinian needs and contemporary realities. The Palestinian feminist movement is growing, as seen in the Tal'at demonstrations for the liberation of Palestinian women that started at the end of 2019, and some participants argued that the new generation of Palestinian leaders needs to be made up of women. Participants highlighted opportunities presented by social media and growing solidarity for Palestinian justice within global civil society, citing recent uprisings in U.S. cities for racial justice as one example of where international grassroots solidarity for Palestinian rights was advancing.

Participants also acknowledged the important role American Jewish organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace are playing. However, it was unclear the extent to which Palestinians in more isolated circumstances, such as in Gaza, East Jerusalem and West Bank pockets, are linking with these global solidarity trends. Concern was also expressed that Israeli movement restrictions and blockades in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were contributing to a growing chasm between Israelis and Palestinians, making it impossible for younger Palestinians in the occupied territories to interact with Israelis outside of oppressive military contexts. Another fissure was mentioned among '48 Palestinians who had backed Benny Gantz for prime minister in the Israeli elections.

Participants repeatedly pointed to the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement as a particularly important strategy to advance Palestinian rights and justice. One participant said that when the PA announced a boycott of Israeli goods in protest of Israel's treatment of Palestinian prisoners, the pressure had been effective. Participants discussed the positive role economic boycotts have had in other struggles for freedom and their potential for helping the Palestinian cause. It was pointed out that the European Court for Human Rights opinion supporting the right to advocate BDS had underscored the legitimacy of the movement.

The energy evident among Palestinian civil society to find new paths and pursue effective strategies was balanced by expressions of exhaustion and anger over the deep and chronic imbalance of power between Israeli advocates and Palestinian civil society. Some said that new allies may be found in the global south as geopolitical realities shift.

### ***Conclusions***

The discussions highlighted the necessity of finding ways to support Palestinian civil society, particularly younger activists, as they organize for change, self-determination, and human rights in a shifting world. Combatting fragmentation and supporting new-generation Palestinian leadership appear as immediate priorities, along with working with Palestinian civil society leaders to amplify their voices and protect their ability to work. At this critical juncture, participants criticized the failure of Palestinian factions to reconcile, highlighting the need for frank and inclusive national dialogue among Palestinians to grapple with the existential challenges facing their communities across geographies and to strategize about how to leverage emerging opportunities in a context of heavy oppression. The discussions also emphasized the need for international actors to consider their legal responsibilities, including with respect to their bilateral relationships with Israel, and to avoid normalizing Palestinian dispossession.