III. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict and peace process

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The history of Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and West Bank—territories it captured in the 1967 Arab–Israeli War—is well known and much commented on.\(^1\) Israeli settlement expansion in the occupied territories has added to recent instability, especially in the West Bank, where Israel threatened in 2019 to annex parts of the territory with the tacit support of the United States.\(^2\) A new US ‘peace plan’, the threatened annexation of parts of the West Bank and a series of normalization agreements between Israel and four states—Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—were the key developments in 2020.\(^3\) The economic and humanitarian costs to the Palestinian people of the Israeli occupation continued to be severe.\(^4\)

Casualties in the conflict in 2020 were at the lowest level in the past decade. Israeli forces killed 30 Palestinians (3 in the Gaza Strip, 24 in the West Bank and 3 ‘not listed’), with 2751 injured. (A total of 137 Palestinians were killed in 2019, while 299 were killed and more than 29 000 were injured in 2018 by Israeli forces, mostly in protests along the Gaza–Israel border.) In 2020 Palestinians killed 3 Israelis (compared to 10 in 2019) and injured at least 58 others.\(^5\)

**A new US peace plan**

Intermittent peace discussions have been held since the beginning of the conflict. Since 2003 the basis for an Israeli–Palestinian peace agreement has been a two-state solution: an independent state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel. The latest direct negotiations between the two sides collapsed in 2014.\(^6\) A new US initiative led by President Donald J. Trump’s son-in-law and US Middle East peace envoy, Jared Kushner, was partially unveiled in

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\(^3\) Israel also established diplomatic relations with Bhutan in 2020 see Ayyub, R., ‘Israel and Bhutan establish diplomatic relations’, Reuters, 12 Dec. 2020.


On 28 January 2020 President Trump unveiled the main US blueprint for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.\footnote{White House, Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People (White House: Washington, DC, Jan. 2020).} In marking a radical departure from past international consensus positions and previous final status parameters, the plan raised widespread concerns about its viability as a sustainable peace plan. For example, the plan would effectively consolidate the Israeli occupation by guaranteeing it control of a unified Jerusalem and allowing it to maintain its settlements in the West Bank. The plan was immediately rejected by Palestinian leaders, and international reaction was largely muted.\footnote{Lovatt, H., ‘From negotiation to imposition: Trump’s Israel-Palestine parameters’, European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary, 11 Feb. 2020; Malley, R. and Miller, A. D., ‘The real goal of Trump’s Middle East plan’, Politico, 28 Jan. 2020; AP News, ‘Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas threatens to cut security ties over US Mideast plan’, NBC News, 1 Feb. 2020; and Quilliam, N. and Zhelyazkova, R., ‘How Donald Trump’s peace plan looks to the Gulf and Europe’, Chatham House, 19 Feb. 2020.}

On 1 February 2020 the Arab League issued a unanimous rejection of the plan, while the European Union’s high representative for foreign affairs said it broke with ‘internationally agreed parameters’.\footnote{‘Arab League rejects Trump’s Middle East plan: Communique’, Reuters, 1 Feb. 2020; and ‘EU rejects Trump Middle East peace plan, annexation’, Reuters, 4 Feb. 2020.}

There was also a surge in violence in the West Bank as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would move to begin annexing parts of the territory (although this did not happen after US support for the idea cooled, as discussed below).\footnote{Hallbfinger, D. M. and Kershner, I., ‘Trump plan’s first result: Israel will claim sovereignty over part of West Bank’, New York Times, 28 Jan. 2020; and Kershner, I., ‘Violence surges in wake of Trump’s Mideast plan’, New York Times, 6 Feb. 2020.}

From April 2020 the US plan was largely overshadowed by the introduction of emergency measures to counter the spread of Covid-19. Israel and the Palestinian Authority cooperated closely in the first months of the pandemic to contain the spread, but at the end of August a new outbreak began and infection rates rose sharply in the occupied Palestinian territories.\footnote{International Crisis Group, ‘Gaza’s new coronavirus fears’, Middle East Briefing no. 78, 9 Sep. 2020; and UN OCHA, ‘Occupied Palestinian territory’, Covid-19 Emergency Situation Report no. 21, 3 Nov. 2020.}

The pandemic also led to the postponement of a corruption trial against Prime Minister Netanyahu and efforts to form a unity government.\footnote{Kershner, I., ‘Citing threat to Israeli democracy, Netanyahu opponents take battle to Supreme Court’, New York Times, 22 Mar. 2020.}
12 months of political deadlock and avoiding the need for a fourth general election, on 20 April 2020 Israel formed a unity government with Netanyahu as the prime minister for the first 18 months and his former opponent Benny Gantz as deputy prime minister. They were due to switch roles halfway through the government’s three-year term. However, in late December 2020 the Netanyahu–Gantz unity government collapsed, and new elections were scheduled for March 2021.

The threatened annexation of parts of the West Bank

In June 2020, despite opposition from Palestinian leaders, Israel’s new unity government began to prepare for the annexation of more of the occupied West Bank in accordance with the US ‘peace plan’. At a meeting of the United Nations Security Council on 24 June 2020 UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on the Israeli Government to abandon its annexation plans, which he said ‘would constitute a most serious violation of international law, grievously harm the prospect of a two-State solution and undercut the possibilities of a renewal of negotiations’. Israel was reluctant to proceed without the approval of the USA, and in August the Trump administration announced the annexation process would be delayed for ‘some time’ as the focus shifted to wider regional normalization discussions (see below). Nonetheless, in October Israel approved over 1300 new settler homes in the West Bank, the first since Israel suspended annexation plans in August. In November it carried out further forced displacement activities.

Israel’s normalization agreements

On 13 August 2020 President Trump announced a ‘historic’ deal between Israel and the UAE that would see the two countries, already covert allies in their efforts to counter Iran, open full diplomatic ties—the third Arab country (after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994) to formally recognize Israel. This was followed by normalization agreements with Sudan in September and Bahrain in October.

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Notably, Israel also agreed to suspend its annexation plans in the West Bank. A few days later, Sudan announced it would also shortly reach an agreement with Israel, while on 11 September 2020 President Trump announced Bahrain and Israel had also reached an accord. On 15 September 2020 Bahrain and the UAE signed bilateral normalization agreements—the Abraham Accords—with Israel at the White House in Washington, DC. The signatories were motivated by a mixture of domestic politics, shared regional threat perceptions and the prospect of closer trade ties and access to Israeli and US technology. In this regard, in November 2020 the USA approved arms sales to the UAE worth an estimated $23 billion and which included F-35 combat aircraft.

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Finally, in December Israel agreed a further normalization agreement with Morocco after the USA became the first state to formally recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (Western Sahara) territory.

The four normalization accords further splintered pan-Arab solidarity over Palestine, which had been based on the premise that normal relations
with Israel would follow but could not precede an Israel–Palestine peace agreement.

Continuing clashes in Gaza

Hamas has been the de facto governing authority of the Gaza Strip since the 2007 Fatah–Hamas conflict resulted in the split of the Palestinian Authority (with Fatah, under Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, retaining control of the West Bank). In recent years frequent military exchanges between Hamas and/or the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (rockets fired into Israel) and Israel (air strikes in Gaza) have been punctuated by often short-lived ceasefire arrangements.\(^{28}\) In February 2020 two days of clashes between Israel and the Islamic Jihad Movement ended in another ceasefire.\(^{29}\) Clashes escalated again in August 2020, until Israel and Hamas reached a Qatari-mediated de-escalation agreement at the end of the month.\(^{30}\)

In September 2020 amid ongoing reconciliation talks in Turkey, Fatah and Hamas announced a deal to hold legislative elections for the Palestinian Authority, 15 years after the last elections took place in the occupied territories. It will be followed by Palestinian Authority presidential elections and Palestinian Central Council elections for the Palestinian Liberation Organization.\(^{31}\) The elections represent an attempt by the Palestinian leadership to counter its marginalization in the aftermath of the US peace plan and the bilateral normalization deals signed by Israel with Bahrain and the UAE.

In November Fatah–Hamas relations soured again after the Palestinian Authority restored ties and security coordination with Israel (having cut them on 19 May 2020 over the Israeli West Bank annexation plan).\(^{32}\) Further cross-border exchanges of fire between Hamas and Israel took place in November and December.\(^{33}\)

Conclusions

The developments in 2020—the new US peace plan, the threatened annexation of parts of the West Bank and Israeli normalization agreements with


\(^{30}\) ‘After rocket fire, Israeli airstrikes target Hamas special forces base in Gaza’, Times of Israel, 19 Aug. 2020; and ‘Hamas says deal reached to end escalation of violence with Israel’, Al Jazeera, 31 Aug. 2020.


Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the UAE—suggested a significant shift in the regional Arab–Israeli conflict. However, despite further marginalization of the Palestinians, the underlying reality in the local Israeli–Palestinian conflict remained largely unchanged. There appeared little prospect of resolving the principal Israeli–Palestinian territorial dispute, including Israel’s occupation, in its various forms, or of ending Palestinian political divisions.