

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

¹ See e.g. Shlaim, A., *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (W. W. Norton: New York, 2014); Thrall, N., *The Only Language they Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine* (Metropolitan Books: New York, 2017); Anziska, S., *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2018); and Abdallah, S. L., 'Endless borders: Detaining Palestinians and managing their movements in the occupied territories', *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2020), pp. 372–93.

² AP News, 'Netanyahu vows to annex West Bank settlements if re-elected', Politico, 7 Apr. 2019; and 'America says Israeli settlements in the West Bank are legal', *The Economist*, 21 Nov. 2019.

³ Israel also established diplomatic relations with Bhutan in 2020 see Ayyub, R., 'Israel and Bhutan establish diplomatic relations', Reuters, 12 Dec. 2020.

⁴ United Nations, General Assembly, 'Economic costs of the Israeli occupation for the Palestinian people: The Gaza Strip under closure and restrictions', A/75/310, 13 Aug. 2020.

⁵ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 'Occupied Palestinian territory: Data on casualties', accessed 11 Feb. 2021.

⁶ 'Former US envoy explains why Mideast peace talks collapsed in 2014', NPR, 8 June 2017.

June 2019. The economic part of the initiative, which included a pledge of \$50 billion worth of investment in Palestine and neighbouring countries after a peace deal, received a mixed reaction.⁷

On 28 January 2020 President Trump unveiled the main US blueprint for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.⁸ 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.⁹ 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'.¹⁰ 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).¹¹

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.¹² The pandemic also led to the postponement of a corruption trial against Prime Minister Netanyahu and efforts to form a unity government.¹³ After

⁷ White House, *Peace to Prosperity. The Economic Plan: A New Vision for the Palestinian People* (White House: June 2019); and 'An underwhelming start to the "ultimate" Israel-Palestinian deal', *The Economist*, 27 June 2019. On developments in 2018–19 see Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 90–94; and Davis, I., 'The Israeli–Palestinian conflict and peace process', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 152–55.

⁸ White House, *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People* (White House: Washington, DC, Jan. 2020).

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ '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.

¹¹ Halbfinger, 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ 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.¹⁴ However, in late December 2020 the Netanyahu–Gantz unity government collapsed, and new elections were scheduled for March 2021.¹⁵

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'.¹⁶ 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'.¹⁷ 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).¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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

¹⁴ Halbfinger, D. M. and Kershner, I., 'Netanyahu's power is extended as rival accepts Israel unity government', *New York Times*, 20 Apr. 2020.

¹⁵ Wootliff, R., 'Israel calls 4th election in 2 years as Netanyahu-Gantz coalition collapses', *Times of Israel*, 23 Dec. 2020.

¹⁶ 'Israel weighs the future of the West Bank', *The Economist*, 25 June 2020; US Congressional Research Service (CRS), *Israel's Possible Annexation of West Bank Areas: Frequently Asked Questions*, CRS Report for Congress R46433 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 14 July 2020).; and Halbfinger, D. M. and Rasgon, A., 'Abbas says security cooperation will end, raising stakes for Israeli annexation', *New York Times*, 19 May 2020.

¹⁷ 'UN chief urges Israel to abandon annexation plans', UN News, 24 June 2020.

¹⁸ Williams, D. and Cornwell, A., 'US won't approve Israeli annexations for "some time", Kushner says', Reuters, 17 Aug. 2020.

¹⁹ 'Israel approves first new settler homes since suspending annexation', Reuters, 14 Oct. 2020; and 'UN official: Israel's largest demolition in the occupied West Bank for years', *Middle East Monitor*, 5 Nov. 2020.

Israel.²⁰ 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.²¹ On 15 September 2020 Bahrain and the UAE signed bilateral normalization agreements—the Abraham Accords—with Israel at the White House in Washington, DC.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴

On 23 October 2020 President Trump announced a normalization agreement between Israel and Sudan's transitional government, shortly after agreeing to remove Sudan from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. This was done in exchange for Sudan paying \$335 million to the families of victims of the 1998 al-Qaeda bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. Removing Sudan from the US terror list was expected to facilitate access to desperately needed international debt relief and loans to combat the country's dire economic crisis.²⁵ However, in early December the new agreement appeared to be on the point of collapse as Sudan sought immunity from the USA for future terrorism-related lawsuits.²⁶

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.²⁷

The four normalization accords further splintered pan-Arab solidarity over Palestine, which had been based on the premise that normal relations

²⁰ Baker, P. et al., 'Israel and United Arab Emirates strike major diplomatic agreement', *New York Times*, 13 Aug. 2020; and AP News, 'Israel and UAE open phone link after historic deal', *The Guardian*, 17 Aug. 2020.

²¹ Borger, J., 'Bahrain to normalise ties with Israel, Donald Trump announces', *The Guardian*, 11 Sep. 2020.

²² White House, 'Abraham Accords peace agreement: Treaty of peace, diplomatic relations and full normalization between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel', 15 Sep. 2020; White House, 'Abraham Accords: Declaration of peace, cooperation, and constructive diplomatic and friendly relations, announced by the State of Israel and the Kingdom of Bahrain', 15 Sep. 2020; and 'Trump hails "dawn of new Middle East" with UAE-Bahrain-Israel deals', BBC News, 15 Sep. 2020.

²³ Bianco, C. and Lovatt, H., 'Israel-UAE peace deal: Flipping the regional order of the Middle East', European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary, 14 Aug. 2020.

²⁴ Reuters, 'US approves \$23bn advanced arms sale to UAE: Pompeo', Al Jazeera, 10 Nov. 2020.

²⁵ Burke, J. and Holmes, O., 'Sudan and Israel agree US-brokered deal on normalising relations', *The Guardian*, 23 Oct. 2020. On the armed conflict and other developments in Sudan see chapter 7, section IV, in this volume.

²⁶ 'Israel-Sudan normalization at risk over US terror lawsuits law-report', *Times of Israel*, 1 Dec. 2020.

²⁷ 'Israel, Morocco agree to normalize relations "with minimal delay"', Deutsche Welle, 10 Dec. 2020. On the conflict in Western Sahara see section IV in this chapter.

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

²⁸ Al-Mughrabi, N. and Williams, D., ‘Islamic Jihad offers Israel truce as Gaza toll hits 26’, Reuters, 13 Nov. 2019.

²⁹ Holmes, O., ‘Israeli strikes in Syria and Gaza kill two Islamic Jihad fighters’, *The Guardian*, 24 Feb. 2020.

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.

³¹ ‘Fatah, Hamas say deal reached on Palestinian elections’, Al Jazeera, 24 Sep. 2020.

³² Melhem, A., ‘PA restoring ties with Israel undermining reconciliation, Hamas says’, Al-Monitor, 19 Nov. 2020.

³³ AFP, ‘Israel strikes Hamas targets in Gaza’, *The Guardian*, 22 Nov. 2020; and AFP, ‘Israeli jets strike Gaza after rockets fired across the border’, *The Guardian*, 26 Dec. 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.