



Does Anyone Still Care about Palestine?

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On 14 October 2016, the Institute for Palestine Studies hosted a panel titled “The Impact of Regional Realignments in the Middle East on the Next U.S. Administration and the Palestine-Israel Conflict.” Moderated by *Journal of Palestine Studies* editor Rashid Khalidi, the panel explored the importance of natural gas finds in the eastern Mediterranean; the Gulf’s unspoken alliance with Israel against Iran; the Syrian crisis and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); changing dynamics in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon; and the Palestinian issue’s likely place on the new administration’s foreign policy agenda.

Below is a full transcript of the discussion. The transcribed remarks have been edited for clarity and grammar.

Rashid Khalidi:

I am happy to welcome you all to an Institute for Palestine Studies panel titled: “Does Anyone Still Care about Palestine?” The same title could have been extended [with the words] “. . . except the Palestinians themselves?” because obviously *they* do care. The subtitle of our panel today is: “The Impact of Regional Realignments on the Next U.S. Administration and on the Palestine-Israel Conflict.” [W]e will be listening to four experts, all of whom will speak about aspects of this question. I think it’s relevant, given the typically small amount of attention that has been given to the question of the conflict over Palestine in the U.S. electoral cycle this year. It’s symptomatic of the way in which the case of Palestine—the issue of Palestine—the problem of Palestine—is blurred in U.S. public discourse.

Tareq Baconi:

[. . . This is] a particularly important discussion to be having against the backdrop of a most unusual and disturbing presidential race here in the United States and profound geopolitical transformations in the Middle East. My copanelists will speak about the reconfigurations that we have been witnessing [in] the region since 2010. I want to take you through changes that are perhaps less visible than those that they will be talking about, but no less important. I want to go

below ground, as it were, to look at the rapidly shifting subterranean energy landscape that has been evolving at the same time. I want to focus in particular on the newly emerging geopolitical reality for Israel and the Palestinians, looking through the lens of the recent gas field finds across the eastern Mediterranean basin. In my mind, it is through this lens that the stark demotion of the Palestinian question on regional and international agendas becomes clearest. Exploring the local scene of gas politics elucidates most starkly as well how the U.S. government has adopted the framework of economic peace, given the political paralysis that has defined the relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

To begin with, I would like to offer an overview of the political landscape that Israel and the Palestinians find themselves in. Up until 2010–11, Israel and Jordan were both reliant on gas imports from Egypt for their energy needs, through a pipeline that crossed the Sinai Peninsula into southern Israel and southern Jordan. Over the course of 2011–12, as Egypt was rocked by the crisis that brought down the regime of Hosni Mubarak, the pipeline was attacked close to eighteen times by Sinai-based militants. The flow of Egyptian gas from Egypt into both Jordan and Israel was suspended and both countries began seeking alternative sources of fuel.

Around the same time, in quick succession, an Israeli-American consortium of energy firms discovered two gas fields off the coast of Israel. The first, Tamar, contains ten trillion cubic feet of gas and was discovered in 2009. The consortium immediately moved toward production, and gas began to flow from Tamar into Israel in 2013. Tamar had sufficient resources to meet close to thirty years of Israeli domestic demand. It offered immediate relief from the insecurity of losing Egyptian gas.

A year later, in 2010, the consortium discovered the much larger Leviathan gas field. Production has not yet commenced from Leviathan. It's estimated to hold close to twenty trillion cubic feet of gas, which is almost double Tamar. With this discovery, Israel was placed in a position where it could set a considerable portion of its gas reserves for export. Within the space of two years, directly overlapping with upheaval in the region, Israel moved from being a gas importer to potentially becoming a powerful gas exporter.

Following these discoveries, Israel has been on a quest to solidify its rule as an energy hegemon in the Levant by seeking to identify prospective buyers for its gas. Most recently, Israeli energy minister Yuval Steinitz traveled to Europe seeking to drum up interest in Israeli gas. In particular, discussions are taking place regarding possible gas exports to countries such as Greece and Cyprus, as an entryway into Europe. But these negotiations are complicated by a host of actors, including the energy landscape of both of these countries and various political considerations. More directly relevant to our discussion are Israel's attempts to capitalize on neighboring sources of demand, of which there are many.

Immediately to its north, Lebanon and Syria are both likely to have gas reserves off their coast as well. But no serious exploration of these territories has taken place for various reasons. In the case of Lebanon, there are contestations over the demarcation of the maritime borders with Israel that once—or I should say *if* they are ever—sorted might have some implications on the distribution of gas wells between Israel and Lebanon. More important are Israel's relations with Turkey, also to its north. Five years after the rupture of diplomatic ties between Turkey and Israel in 2011 following the *Mavi Marmara* attack, relations between Israel and Turkey resumed earlier this

year. From the perspective of the politics of gas, Turkey is on Israel's list of potential destinations for gas exports, while Palestinians—particularly the residents of Gaza—were hoping that Turkey would make diplomatic relations with Israel contingent on lifting the blockade of the Gaza Strip. Such a condition was not upheld.

Closer to its borders, the plot thickens, with Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians. In the case of Egypt, the country has reverted to being a gas importer after years of supplying the region with energy. With such a reversal, Egypt is another possible recipient of Israeli gas. However, any sales agreement with Egypt is likely to cover a short period of time as Egypt discovered the Zohr gas field earlier this year, which is an immense offshore reserve. As Egypt begins exploration and production of its own resources, ending significant and much-needed reform in the energy sector, it might be able to move itself again to becoming an energy exporter . . . which brings us to Jordan.

Three weeks ago, Israel signed a deal to supply Jordan with gas for a fifteen-year period, closing the first significant deal for Leviathan. The agreement is surprising. Although the deal has been in the making for close to two years, in 2014 Jordan commissioned a gas terminal in Aqaba on the Red Sea to import liquefied natural gas from global markets. That was a substantial step: it advanced Jordan's energy security and allowed [the Jordanians] to achieve energy independence after the loss of the Egyptian pipeline. At the same time, Jordan maintained discussions with Israel for the import of natural gas from Leviathan primarily because the pipeline and gas from Israel is cheaper than importing liquid natural gas through the Aqaba terminal. Despite mass opposition to these talks and even though the deal was voted against by the House of Representatives in Jordan, the government nonetheless moved forward quite swiftly and locked Jordan into a long-term agreement that ensured reliance on Israel as the main source of energy supply for the kingdom. In some ways, this made Jordan's investment in its Red Sea terminal redundant.

So what do all these geopolitical changes mean, and what are the prospects for Palestinians? There are two key consequences to consider. The first is that Israel's integration into regional trade networks has not been contingent on it ending the occupation of the Palestinian territories. This is perhaps clearest in relations with Turkey and Jordan, although it is also likely to be the case with Egypt. While both Jordan and Turkey rhetorically linked resumed relations and gas purchase on the provision of some benefit to the Palestinians, ultimately this has not been the case. Jordan, in particular, was in a strong position to hedge its gas purchase agreement on some form of concession for the Palestinians. Its decision to proceed with the gas purchase independently of the persistent occupation and blockade on Gaza is a loud affirmation of the readiness of incumbent Arab regimes to circumvent the will of their public in pursuit of economic relations with Israel. This gas deal and negotiations elsewhere are a resounding precedent that lays to rest the increasingly vacuous promise of normalization in exchange for Palestinian rights.

The second point is somewhat related to the first, and is once again clearest in relation to the issue of Jordan. Jordan did not need this gas agreement. Commercially, of course, the government is correct in reiterating that this agreement alleviates the financial burden incurred by the state in terms of electricity provision to its citizens. But there were other, and possibly smarter and safer, ways in which Jordan could have met its energy needs. And while slightly more expensive, those

would have secured valuable energy security that is now sorely lacking as the country comes to depend almost entirely on Israel.

The decision to go ahead with this deal points to a deeper involvement by the U.S. State Department to push forward its agenda of economic peace, which I define as the pursuit of greater economic integration and normalization in the region. In the absence of viable political or economic prospects, the United States appears to have transitioned toward a policy of enhancing economic relations. Greater energy integration between Israel and its neighbors can provide a substantial bedrock of stability by maximizing cooperation and codependence between American allies in the region (namely Israel, Jordan, and Egypt), as well as creating open channels of trade and normalization between Israel and the Palestinians. But this depoliticized view is in fact a deeply problematic approach to dealing with the reality on the ground, particularly between Israel and the Palestinians. While this tragedy is informed by the commercial logic of the present snapshot I have just painted of regional geopolitics, it overlooks broader historical context.

I want to explain this through the lens of hydrocarbon resources. Palestinians discovered their own natural resources more than a decade before Israel discovered its gas reserves. Off the coast of Gaza, Gaza Marine was discovered in 1999 and its exploration license was sold to BG Group, before the British oil and gas major was acquired by Shell.

In the early days of the discovery, these national treasures were hailed as a breakthrough that could offer Palestinians a windfall. Lighting the first flare from Gaza Marine in 2000, the late Palestinian president Yasir Arafat declared, and I quote: “This is a gift from our God to our people.” It was thought the discovery would essentially secure sufficient revenue to rebuild the Palestinian state and move Palestinians closer to their dream of self-determination. That move to sovereign law was not to be. We now know the fate of the Oslo process twenty years later as it conferred limited self-rule to the Palestinian Authority. Unlike Israel, which began the process of converting itself from a dependent energy importer into an active exporter two years after its discoveries, Palestinians continue to lobby to develop their own resources two decades after they were first discovered, and Israel continues to prevent them from doing that.

Jordan could have easily hedged its gas purchase agreement on Israel allowing Palestinians to explore gas from Gaza Marine. That would have provided considerable revenue for the Palestinians and gone some distance to defuse public fury over the purchase of Israeli gas . . . by adding Palestinian gas into the mix! Ultimately however, Jordan, no doubt guided by American policy makers, made the calculus that there was no need to do so. It figured it could get away with signing a gas deal relying on Israeli gas while Palestinian reserves remain untapped. This shift on the part of the U.S. administration toward pursuing economic peace, itself a strategy that has much longer historical roots, is likely to continue with the next administration, particularly in the gas sector, which unsurprisingly holds the most benefit for economic growth. So I want to close off by offering a few thoughts on what normalized relations between the Palestinians and Israel in this sector might mean.

Palestinians already depend on Israel for their energy needs. The West Bank almost imports the entirety of its electricity from Israel. The Gaza Strip imports electricity from Israel and Egypt, as well as fuel from the Israeli private sector, which is trucked into Gaza. Both of these imports are insufficient and are hugely complicated by the persistence of the blockade. Electricity in Gaza is

only available for six to eight hours per day, putting enormous pressure on hospitals, schools, and sewage treatment plants, not to mention everyday life activities. Gas trade between Israel and the Palestinian territories can alleviate financial burdens, enhance quality of life, and underpin overall economic development. With gas sale agreements proceeding from Leviathan throughout the region, and with dim prospects for getting Gaza Marine online, Palestinians are now also looking to purchase Israeli gas for their own power generation—a sign, if there ever was one, of the absolute absence of Palestinian sovereignty. Such decisions are made for economic reasons, while political aspirations remain unfulfilled. This dynamic illustrates the shortsightedness of economic peace.

Rather than advancing state-building efforts, Palestinians have been maintained as a captive market for Israeli resources. This ensures that Israel reaps the reward of its own discoveries, while retaining full control over the supply of energy to Palestinians. This carries with it huge dangers and I will highlight three, very briefly. The first is that it pins energy security on Israel's goodwill. Israel can, and has in the past, used its power to turn the taps off to Palestinian consumers. I saw firsthand the destruction wrought on the only power-generation company in the Palestinian territories, located in the Gaza Strip, after the 2014 war. Second, this approach legitimizes the Israeli occupation, now entering its fiftieth year. Not only is there no cost to Israel's prevention of Palestinian state-building, there is now a direct reward in the form of revenue from the sales of gas to territories maintained indefinitely under Israeli control. Third, and perhaps most importantly, such energy exchange and trade in pursuit of economic peace without political prospects entrenches the power imbalance that has plagued the relationship between the two parties—the occupier and the occupied—for decades. It concretizes Palestine's dependence on Israel, undermining any sovereign approach to decision-making.

In this sense, while economic development could enhance Palestinian quality of life, such growth would only be tolerated within the overarching framework of the occupation, which would remain fully entrenched. One might think back to similar quality-of-life initiatives put forward in the 1980s with direct encouragement from the Reagan White House, as a failed alternative to political engagement with the PLO. We, of course, know how Palestinians reacted to such marginalization, with the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987, coming on the heels of growing discontent on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territories. So with the likely continued absence of an unbiased political interlocutor in the next American administration that might check the power disparity between the parties, the situation means that Palestinians are not only the weaker party, they have become locked in a reality where their livelihood is dependent on Israel's goodwill. In such a setup, the concept of negotiations is a fantasy. How can one effectively pressure the hand that literally feeds one?

This may go some distance to explaining the catastrophic situation of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas rule in the West Bank and Gaza, where dependency has bred creeping authoritarianism. I'll end by saying this: looking ahead, as the incoming administration here in the United States contemplates the virtues of economic peace, it will focus on the clear commercial advantages that can be reaped and the localized economic growth that can be enjoyed. These will be posited, quite rightly, as a stabilizing factor among the tumultuous currents in the region; but this approach cannot be seen as an end in its own right and certainly not a substitute for a genuine political

settlement for the Palestinians. Economic growth will never remove the Palestinian call for sovereignty or the demand for self-determination. So while economic peace could offer short-term relief, it will only pave the way toward greater stability if it is built on a foundation of equality and justice.

Toby Jones:

There has been no more enthusiastic abandonment of the Palestinian cause than Saudi Arabia's. And perhaps this isn't very shocking for those of you that follow the politics of the Gulf states and oil since the 1950s and 1960s. Ghassan Kanafani has written powerfully about the fundamental betrayal by oil wealth and oil states of the Palestinian nationalist cause in the 1970s. But, for many years, including in a meeting between Ibn Saud and Franklin Roosevelt [near the end of] World War II, as well as with the ostensible objectives of the 1973 oil embargo, the Saudis have at least *performed a commitment* to the case of Palestinian nationalism and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. Today there are very few signs that the Saudis care very much at all or that they are trying very hard. But the Saudis might say something like this: "It's not about you, it's about us." And really it always has been.

What I want to work through today [is] a series of examples of evidence over the last few years that underscores how dramatically the Saudis have moved away from the pretense of commitment to the Palestinian cause [and] the creation of the Palestinian state, toward not just an abandonment of that position, but also hostility toward Palestine and the cause of Palestinians in the region. I also want to address what drives it, how we can explain it, and then revisit the question of whether anything has really changed—even though the Saudis have taken a much more public position away from old claims that are ideological and political in nature.

Over the last eleven or twelve years or so, there has been creeping evidence that the Saudis were not tied to an earlier era of radical politics (if they ever were) around the fate of Palestine or Palestinians. In 2002, you may recall, as well as in the year that followed, Thomas Friedman celebrated then-Crown Prince Abdullah's plan, the "Arab Peace Plan" that was legitimized—to the extent that anything is ever legitimized—by the Arab League, which also gave it another rubber stamp five years later, and in which Abdullah and the Saudis called for the normalization of relations with Israel pending its withdrawal from a vague set of territories, as well as a just solution to the refugee problem. In 2006, more clear evidence of Saudi uncertainty about its commitment to Palestinians and Palestine was on display during the Lebanon war, when Saudi Arabia condemned openly, along with a host of other Arab states, Hezbollah's resistance—calling it illegitimate, poorly timed, and perhaps pegged to a set of concerns that weren't paramount at the time; acting irresponsibly in a moment when there were other pressing and more urgent concerns in Israel's aggressive behavior on its northern neighbor and, by extension, Israel's behavior elsewhere.

Over the last two years, though, we have seen evidence of an even more wrenching, direct form of abandonment. In 2015, in the lead-up to the U.S.-negotiated rapprochement with Iran around Iran's alleged pursuit of nuclear energy and perhaps nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia and Israel openly collaborated and discussed possibilities of coordinating military campaigns against Iran in the event that it was necessary. Saudi Arabia requested that Israel make available its Iron Dome

technology air missile defense systems—as though the Saudis didn't have the same assurances from the United States. That same year in October 2015, a highly visible and very charismatic, influential money-giver to American universities—Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal, [7% shareholder] of Fox News and various other things—said openly in a series of speaking engagements across the Persian Gulf that if it came to choosing, he believed that he and the Saudis should choose Israel against the Palestinians and Iran in the event of a regional conflict. In July this past summer, a former Saudi general visited Riyadh with the Saudi delegation that probably reflected already existing close intelligence and military collaboration on a broad set of issues from Iraq to Iran. Just this past week, a prominent Saudi lobbyist here in [Washington] wrote an editorial in the *Hill* that Saudi Arabia and Israel should pursue normalized relations—not so much, he argued, because of geopolitical anxiety but because of Saudi Arabia's economic needs and the very powerful role that Israel could potentially play in the reconstruction or the fashioning of a post-oil Saudi economy. The editorial made no mention of Palestinians at all.

Now taken together, I think these series of developments over the last fifteen years are striking. Striking not just for their gradual turn away from Palestine for, as Tareq called it, “vacuous calls for normalization.” But also partly because, or what's widely understood to be, a series of collaborations and mutual assurances and sets of interests around the vague notion of security and what that constitutes for the region. Perhaps even more alarmingly, and interestingly/disturbingly, is hostility toward Palestinians.

The lumping of the Palestinian question, the future of the Palestinian state, and broader regional, political, and geopolitical concerns in ways of thinking that the Saudis are confronted with, or anxious about, or concerned with, and [that they] are primarily driven to respond to by linking Palestine not to the future of Arab politics but to the future of something that they see, is primarily dangerous to Arab politics. I'll make a very brief comment at the end about what this means for the next U.S. administration, but if we assume the next administration will be led by Hillary Clinton, this is likely all music to her ears. So not only the absence of any kind of Saudi pressure but the abandonment, the unwillingness of the Saudis to even entertain, or talk, [or] deploy rhetorical or empty commitments on the question of Palestine, does not bode well for the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict or for the future of the Palestinian state.

So what drives all of this? How do we make sense of, if not something that we might call a reversal of the Saudi position, a kind of enthusiastic guilt-free abandonment of something that they and others around them have for so long at least made the symbolic center of their regional politics? Well, the most obvious and probably most evident explanation comes with the fallout from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the realignment of hegemonic and balance-of-power problems in the Middle East from the Saudi perspective that has almost entirely to do with Iran's rise as a regional power. Now, I am not a subscriber to the notion that Iran has become the Middle East's most dangerous actor. I am an enthusiastic social media user that says that Saudi Arabia is the region's most dangerous actor, but with Americans helping periodically as well. But the Saudis do believe, and have made the case since at least 2003, that the war in Iraq, ill-conceived, poorly executed—whatever we want to call it—nevertheless, from their view, opened a Pandora's box that allowed their rival from the late 1970s, the villain of the 1980s, the principal ideological, geopolitical foe imagined through

the 1990s, to regain a kind of foothold that [it] had not previously enjoyed, or not enjoyed since the early 1970s.

The Saudis interpreted the rise and the reemergence/rehabilitation of Iran as a serious regional player, not just as a nuisance, but as having a foothold (as King Abdullah of Jordan called it, “an irk across the Middle East”) from Iran to Lebanon, down into the Gulf, as the single most important source of its anxiety geopolitically in the region over the last thirteen years or so. I think it’s a bunch of rubbish. But the Saudis have talked consistently about it and what it does [mean is] that we should probably suspend our own disbelief about it and assume that the Saudis take it seriously. It is on display currently in Syria: antipathy toward Iran explains Saudi Arabia’s position in calling for and backing the consistent military exercise of power to topple Bashar al-Asad. It explains the now eighteen-month-old war in Yemen that just last week led to the murder of hundreds of funeral-goers in the capital city of Sana’a by Saudi bombs; and [it] explains other developments: the military occupation of Bahrain in 2011, as well as a pronounced and intensified form of anti-Shi’ite, anti-Iranian sectarianism across the region in which I would argue that these things have become so fundamental to Saudi politics that they have essentially come to stand in place of anything that might resemble Saudi nationalism. But the extent of being Saudi today now means blasting Shi’ites and blasting Iran. That does powerful work in the region and at home.

[. . .] Saudi Arabia’s anxieties with abandonment to Palestine are not only about geopolitics; [they are] also about domestic issues—particularly politico-economic and political issues that are sources of vulnerability and anxiety. Through all of this, while Saudi Arabia probably occupies a position as the most powerful Arab actor, primarily because of its large oil wealth and its ability to generate revenues—although that has now been under pressure for the last eighteen months or so—[it] nevertheless operates domestically through a position of weakness. In here too, the role of Palestine in domestic politics did one thing a generation ago: today it has been replaced by other powers that are more expedient, most noticeably my claims around sectarianism that I just articulated.

In December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced that over the course of 2016 it will face a potential \$100 billion budget deficit, declining oil revenues because of high global oil supply primarily driven by its desperate desire to keep its own market share up against American frackers, as well as Russia and Iran and others that are coming back on line or are operating on line in a significant way; and the Saudis have been confronted, like all other major oil producers, with low revenues and fiscal and economic pressures at home as a result. The *New York Times* just ran a piece that was meant to be, I guess somewhat spectacular, about dairy farming and water politics [. . .] in Saudi Arabia; what might have appeared to be excessive commitments to absurd economic projects in the desert a decade or even a generation ago, are now being abandoned by the Saudi state because the purse strings no longer extend quite as far. They are cutting subsidies on water, electricity, and elsewhere. They are trimming employment, subsidized commitments to health care, education, and work. Saudi Arabia’s own Ministry of Labor estimates that its unemployment numbers are somewhere around 3 percent of a population that numbers around thirty-five million, so between two and three million Saudis live under Saudi Arabia’s own estimated poverty line.

This suggests remarkable and pressing structural economic challenges: with low oil revenues, high oil consumption, high water prices, and low possibilities of generating alternative forms of

industry, the Saudis are in a difficult position. Confronted with all of this, the Saudis then measure and understand their approach to regional politics with these vulnerabilities in mind.

The uprisings of 2011, while predating the collapse of oil prices, also opened up and accelerated a series of anxieties about political possibilities in the region. The Saudis responded to the uprisings with a widespread counterrevolutionary set of preferences—throwing money or military resources at various outcomes—and, of course, they have supported terrible developments in Syria. It is here—the uprisings, domestic politico-economic anxieties, and geopolitical concerns around Iran—where all of these things converged, producing narrow ways of thinking about politics, with the Saudis and Saudi leadership orchestrating a kind of conflation of their anti-Iranian position in the region to explain everything else that goes on, including their own domestic anxieties. It is Iran's fault the oil prices are dropping. It is Iran's fault that Yemen is unstable. It is Iran's fault that Hezbollah is irresponsibly radical in a dangerous neighborhood. It is Iran's fault that Syria is what it is. It is Iran's fault that Bahrain cannot have a robust political order because people demand political inclusion and political rights. And it is Iran's fault that Saudi Arabia has to spend its resources addressing all of these in a time of oil-revenue scarcity.

Here I think is the most reasonable and useful framework through which to think about why Palestine mattered in the past, and why it doesn't matter today. It mattered in the past because it was convenient for it to do so, even though it didn't really change anything for Palestinians. Today the Palestinians can be jettisoned because there are bigger dangers: for the Saudis, Iran has replaced Israel as the most powerful, pernicious force in the region. So, is any of this surprising? Well, it sort of is, because it is remarkable. Since at least the late 1940s, when Ibn Saud met with Franklin Roosevelt, Palestine has served as a symbolic marker of Saudi pressure on both U.S. policy makers and U.S. corporate interests, including Aramco—the American oil company that operated there until the early 1980s [when it was nationalized].

We know that for all of those pressures and for all of their talking over the course of about sixty years, the Saudis actually produced very little. Moving away from [Palestine] then doesn't really mark much of change. The Saudis face no pressure in Washington for them to alter their tone. They face no pressure in the region for them to alter their tone. There is no domestic pressure for them to alter their tone. So why continue to engage in the symbolic politics of the Middle East [of] the 1960s and 1970s? The Saudis aren't pretending anymore. There is no evidence in the next generation of Saudi leadership, there is no evidence among Saudi public opinion, that any of this matters. All of the talk today, inside Saudi Arabia, is precisely the talk that the United States asked it to think about for the ten years prior to the current moment, and that was “reform, reform, and reform,” and that has caught on and swept through the kingdom—whether they do it or not, I don't know, but the Saudis have bought into the Western narrative about the ills that face them, [and] that has to do with ways to fix the economy, make the system work more easily, and to assure the stability and durability of the royal family in the kingdom itself. Palestine was an easy sacrifice to make.

Bassam Haddad:

[. . .] I am tasked with addressing something that has been conspicuous by its absence, namely the Palestine-Israel conflict as well as Israel's *actual* influence—through lack of direct or sustained

involvement—in the Syrian conflict. My approach to this topic will involve centering the discussion on two levels by way of indirectly coming back and addressing implications for the Israel-Palestine conflict, although I'll try to embed that in the discussion. The first level is to address what is actually happening in Syria, and the second level is how Syrian developments are tangled up with regional and international issues and struggles, of which, of course, Israel-Palestine is one.

It might appear that the Palestine-Israel conflict is in the background, but it is very much an implicit part of the calculus of nearly all players, from the United States to Syria, Russia, Iran, and certainly Saudi Arabia, which has been getting ever closer to Israel in recent weeks and months. Although most parties [in] the Syrian conflict have, until recently, in one way or another, championed the cause of Palestine, it is primarily what can be called the “resistance camp” that made Palestine part of its canon of arguments for why the [Syrian] opposition is suspect, with external ties to regional and international interests that quietly do the bidding of Israel. The opposition, for its part, in its various factions, have used the Palestine-Israel conflict to compare the brutality of Israel to the brutality, and military (as well as the discursive) methods of the Syrian regime—and pointed out the double standards of Hezbollah, based on its intervention on the regime's behalf in crushing the uprising, or the people's voice. Most Syrians, however, are much less concerned with these rhetorical devices on all sides, and far more concerned with procuring means for decent survival, or just survival, amid the killing, destruction, and economic destitution engulfing all of Syria (some places more than others, as we have seen in [the case of] Aleppo).

Away from rhetoric, however, the only party [to] the conflict that has actually done more than pay lip service to the Palestinian cause, and perhaps the only party that Israel has been truly concerned about in security terms for the past few decades, is Hezbollah. This concern is not just an intellectual point or observation: it is part of the linchpin tying the Syrian uprising to the Palestine-Israel conflict. The alliances that endow this confrontation with substance are uncanny. On the eve of the Syrian uprising it was no secret that the only remaining camp that posed a threat to Israel in the region was the Syria-Hezbollah-Iran triangle. That camp also faced another alliance that grew stronger in the post-2008 period: between conservative Arab Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and the United States (and of course others in that orbit).

It is not a mystery, nor is it irrational for Israel to be the beneficiary of gains made by the latter camp. There is no conspiracy here; it is a matter of balances of power and simple math. However, considering how the Syrian uprising was quickly transformed into many other things, local, regional, and international, one ought not to take this standoff as static. Only a dynamic approach that integrates developments since 2011 within the region and the “Arab uprisings” together along with Syria, allows us to opine soundly on the impact of the Syrian conflict on the Palestine-Israel conflict. We have to take into consideration recent agreements and policies, for instance, that have shifted the goalposts or alliances, not least the nuclear deal between the United States and Iran, which caused shivers in both Israel and Saudi Arabia—and with consequences between Saudi Arabia and Israel that we see unfolding by the day, as we witnessed last week and as Toby recounted. And that's just the surface. One also has to be cognizant of the growing importance of economic and development forecasts in the region and how this will cause the deepening of existing alliances and the forging of new, perhaps unlikely, ones. So there's a lot to cover—and I'm not going to cover [it] all right now.

A good start for now is to revisit some of the developments in the Syrian case and the region. The conflict in Syria, as many of us know, remains one where there is no single party that is an evident victor. In fact, most Syrians would not necessarily desire a single party's victory. As a result, the notion of victory itself has lost meaning in Syria. This makes the Syrian situation quite tragic. If you consider those who have perished since 2011, you will find that about eighty thousand Syrians were killed per year over the past five and a half years. That does not include those injured, maimed, paralyzed, or permanently affected physically in one way or another, which is a much higher number. In addition, we have witnessed the displacement of more than 11.5 million Syrians, according to the best estimates, some of them twice displaced. About a third have left Syria altogether and sought a future in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and beyond. Many died during their journey knowing full well that this was the potential fate they might face.

The physical destruction that Syria has endured is also colossal; two cities have been turned into rubble for the most part, first Homs, and now Aleppo; entire neighborhoods and small towns have been severely damaged in Idlib and Daraa provinces, around Damascus, throughout northeastern Syria and elsewhere. Thousands of schools, hospitals and other establishments necessary for the sustenance of social life have been destroyed or rendered useless. It is no mystery that the regime is actually responsible for the overwhelming majority of this destruction but it is also important to recognize the contribution of the various factions on the sides of the opposition. Scores of other infrastructure, from roads and bridges to refineries and factories, have also been transformed into rubble.

Beyond the tangible, Syrians in war-torn areas—notably those exposed to air raids by the Syrian regime, and now Russia raining missiles, and barrel bombs, but also those exposed to that by the regime's enemies—have suffered profound psychological trauma akin to that of those who suffered a similar experience in World War II. Entire worldviews, and much more importantly, dreams, have been shattered in Syria—these aspects are things we don't talk about as much and I think it's going to haunt us if we don't address these nontangible aspects. Most of the remaining Syrians have seen large parts of the world and their families come apart, disintegrate, and sometimes disappear. The less fortunate have seen their income dissipate further, preventing them from doing more than merely surviving. This does not happen in an ordinary confrontation between state and opposition.

This merits repeating: this picture that I have just drawn does not happen ordinarily in a confrontation between state and opposition. The struggle against dictatorship in Syria did happen, is ongoing, and is certainly the cause and the spark that set matters in motion. But, lest we have our heads buried in the sand, it is not the whole story. The whole story will be told in full in future times in a manner that infinitely surpasses current narratives; for now, the best we can do is to point helplessly to the complexity, and opine on the various factors and actors that interfered, intervened, encumbered, and exacerbated. And though the Palestine-Israel conflict has not come explicitly to the fore yet, it *will* in the proximate future, as exit formulas begin to take shape in Syria.

So [in answer to] the question, is it not understandable that people will rise up to challenge oppression and exploitation? Sure it is—and the story would have ended with a winner and a loser if that trajectory had unfolded independently. But it didn't. Much has gotten in the way: the

Syrian uprising—and I will say this in relation to its effect on the entire region, not least Israel-Palestine—was relatively quickly transformed from a legitimate local affair to a complicated regional affair with international dimensions.

After the autumn of 2015, the conflict began to adopt more concrete international dimensions, culminating in what might be termed a standoff, as some call it, or, as some say, a new mini-Cold War between the United States and Russia now. Yet others are saying it has gone beyond a cold war to outright confrontation. It is foolish to underestimate the current tension and hasty to prematurely make too much of it. The issue is that a direct confrontation between the two super or strong powers is not desired by either, and both would like to resolve the current impasse otherwise, each for their own reason. Syria is too small and poor in and of itself to lead them [down] such a path, but if other matters enter the equation, either by accident or [because of an] unintended development—and one could envision what might happen on the Israel-Hezbollah front for instance—it would be hard to rule out the possibility that they [the global powers] would be dragged into a confrontation.

The best characterization of the current standoff is that it is unpredictable. The United States is in an awkward, if not precarious, position as the bombardment of Aleppo continues. It can neither act against the regime unprovoked by more than a humanitarian plea, risking a direct confrontation it does not see as worthwhile—and it's notable that the United States responding to a humanitarian plea in the Middle East is itself an oxymoron of sorts, given its record. Nor, however, can the United States continue sitting on the proverbial sidelines, and appear weaker by the day while Russia rules the day. I say “proverbial” because the United States is *not* sitting on the sidelines (and its allies are not sitting on the sidelines), it is quite active in its own right, bombing various ISIS targets (and by mistake the regime), as well as providing ample support, in multiple ways, to those fighting the regime. Finally, it is the rock and the most important line of defense to those actively wreaking havoc in Syria since 2011, namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and, early on, and to a lesser extent, Turkey. And there is a connection there between those various countries and the general position that they hold, and other players, Israel not excluded.

Russia, on the other hand, has always had its reasons for entering with force into the Syrian battlefield—its position vis-à-vis Israel in this case is always ambivalent. Sure, the aim is to save the regime from collapsing and retain its own indebted proxy ally, which [can] access and influence more directly and legitimately a number of issues in the region, but most notably, Russia is using Syria as a vehicle, not a goal. Syria is the playground through which Russia struts its new self-image as a global power politically, and exhibits in broad daylight its new weaponry skills and efficient firepower—in relation to what has transpired in terms of the *inefficiency* of alternatives in the “fight” against ISIS. It also helps divert attention from its policies and actions in Eastern Europe and their not-so-rosy economic forecast at home.

Russia is fully aware of the changing nature of international relations and the gradual withering of the United States' undisputed role, leadership and efficacy worldwide, not just in the Middle East, after fifteen years of knee-jerk politics and counterproductive adventures on an international scale. In the Middle East, despite pontifications by disconnected pundits, the Arab uprisings revealed the extent to which the soft power of the United States has been eroded, and the dangerous flip side—how it must resort to brute force, like most other

nations, to get what it wants, which further erodes its soft power and leadership myth. This of course all concerns the role of Israel in the region, and of course the relative power of the United States' allies that are looking for alternatives.

All the while the United States' allies are gradually becoming less loyal and developing wandering eyes, looking to other alternative or additional patrons. Egypt is a great example: Egypt-Russian relations are doing quite well. Other allies have started a reverse countdown to some form of implosion in the medium-run as a function of their own impunity, reckless [political and] economic behavior, repression and regional adventures as well as discrimination—Saudi Arabia is a good example. Much more can be said about Egypt and other countries and players . . . as opposed to Egypt, Saudi Arabia does affect the region, because Egypt no longer has the effect it had forty years ago, at least in neighboring countries. Yemen, alone, aka the graveyard of invaders then and now, will also complicate the years ahead for the current lead invader, Saudi Arabia, in multiple ways. Saudi adventurism in Syria, and more covertly in Iraq, will also not bode well for the internally volatile country, amid austerity and growing social and sectarian tensions.

And some countries in the region within the U.S. orbit are becoming less dependent while growing more unstable—an odd but real combination—and Russia is aware of that, and taking advantage of it in Syria where various other attempts at intervention failed to be decisive in any [one] direction. In nearly all cases, the net effect will not be more power or influence for the United States in the Arab world or Persian Gulf, for the time being at least. The kind of influence that the United States will retain is also likely to change, with more and more players coming onto the scene, offering alternative support and protection to local actors, so we will see things changing and developing. For its part, Israel is likely to be the biggest winner, without lifting a finger: nearly all [of] its enemies are fighting a long and exhausting war—though we must take into account the positive aspect of training and testing weapons—Hezbollah, Syria, Iran, various Islamist and jihadist and other groups, I don't know what to call them, like ISIS—are fighting, and these represent either natural or convenient enemies for Israel. Kind of like how Iran was the greatest winner from the fraudulent invasion of Iraq by the United States.

But that does not mean Israel wants an absolute toppling of the regime. It wants to reduce any possible threat that comes in the way of its ethnic cleansing of Palestine, and that actually requires a certain formula that doesn't necessarily, again, include the toppling of the Syrian regime. From the very beginning, Israel was not convinced by the arguments to topple [Bashar al-]Asad; it wanted a regime that was sufficiently strong to keep its own people down in Syria but not strong enough to pose a threat to it. That has always been the formula, despite serious disagreements within Israel. At this point all eyes are on the current complexities of the conflict [within Syria], and yes, Palestine-Israel *is* left out for the most part, in terms of explicit mentions, but that conflict surely looms in the background.

I'll close with a couple of words on the catastrophe in Syria and the regional sort of basket case it is, and how Israel-Palestine will figure at the moment as a side act, but is actually part of what will be in store as a conclusion to these multiple conflicts. To fully understand how this comes together regionally, and how it might affect all existing struggles—which Syria forms a sort of linchpin to—we must adopt a bird's-eye view [of] the interconnected, simultaneous hotbeds of conflict in the region.

The Syrian war, given the players involved, is increasingly bound up with the regional developments in Iraq and Yemen, as well as the question of ISIS. Russia is pummeling Aleppo, with potential threats from the United States looming, while Saudi Arabia is pummeling Yemen with U.S.-made jet fighters that the United States is currently refueling, with Iran advancing its warships to the Yemeni coast in defense of the Yemeni Houthi rebels. Russia, Syria, the Syrian rebels, the United States, Turkey, various Kurdish forces, Iraq, and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-hashd al-sha'abi*) are all disunited in battling ISIS, and the last five players [. . .] are preparing an attack to retake Mosul from ISIS, though the Turkish and Iraqi governments are having a war of words about who is joining that fight, particularly which Kurdish groups.

More complications can be added here. If one thinks that the Syrian conflict and its potential impact on other conflicts in the region, including Israel-Palestine, will be addressed in isolation from these other battles, they are not paying attention. Timetables for various actors differ, and though the potential crushing of the rebels in Aleppo might be a milestone for the Syrian regime and the Russians, it is but a stage in a broader strategic effort whose contours are not defined independently from developments in Syria's backyard, near and far. With all these moving parts, unforeseen possibilities and maneuvers are largely too complicated, and entrench the situation in Syria even further, all at the expense of Syrians.

Short of a miracle, it is shortsighted to expect the fruition of any quick solutions in a situation that is far from being ripe. [. . .]

Mouin Rabbani:

[. . .] When we ask the question about whether Palestine remains relevant, whether anyone still really cares about it, I think we're speaking first and foremost about regional dynamics, and the ways in which [the region] has changed since late 2010 and early 2011. We're basically looking at a process that constitutes the breakdown of the patterns of governance that emerged in the Arab world after World War II, and the question remains whether the boundaries that were established after World War I will or will not survive these challenges; I think the evidence thus far is that they *will*, but it remains an open question. The other issue that is relevant for us is that if we look at the upheavals today they are primarily inward-looking and being contested within national boundaries, rather than being focused on a conflict with an imperial or colonial power, and this is quite relevant. I'd like to start by saying, in terms of the issue I've been tasked to address—whether Palestine remains relevant—is that we've been here before, particularly in the mid-1980s, and I'll get to that in a moment.

But I'd first like to say a few words about Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon and preface my remarks by saying that an absolutely essential factor we have now when we compare it to previous eras is not only the regional changes, but also the very fundamental changes within the Palestinian political system. First and foremost, the fragmentation, the division, and the disintegration of the Palestinian national movement and the inability of Palestinians themselves to mobilize what Toby Jones very aptly referred to as a “performed commitment” by the formal leaders and rulers of the Arab states system.

But I would like to focus on Egypt because it remains absolutely central to these questions; I've often said that Egypt is the only genuine nation-state in the Arab world and no matter how severe its

problems and internal challenges, it is and will always remain a trendsetter in the Arab world, particularly when it comes to the question of Palestine, and I think we've seen that very clearly in the last five years. [. . .] This was very visible [in] the last two Israeli assaults on the Gaza Strip, namely Pillar of [Defense] in late 2012, and [Operation] Protective Edge in the summer of 2014. In 2012, you had the Morsi government in power in Cairo; it was very supportive of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip; and when Israel unleashed its assault on the Strip by first assassinating the Hamas military leader, you saw this situation where Arab leaders were basically beating a path to Gaza City to kiss babies in [al-]Shifa Hospital with a beaming Ismail Haniyeh [senior political leader of Hamas] looking on as they were competing [among themselves] to get there first. And I think this had very much to do with the type of leadership there was in Cairo.

Then of course there was the [Egyptian] coup in summer of 2013, and the greater length and intensity of [Operation] Protective Edge in 2014 is also a reflection of the reality that you had in Cairo at the time. In 2014 of course, not only did no one beat a path to the Gaza Strip, you didn't even have [. . .] a "performed commitment." People felt comfortable simply ignoring the slaughter that was going on in the Gaza Strip. The other issue about Egypt is that, today, it is very much trying to externalize responsibility for its own predicament by blaming it, not only on the Muslim Brotherhood, but specifically on Hamas—in other words, "Our travails are not because we're being opposed by compatriot Egyptians, but it's because of these (demonized) foreigners" that Palestinians [living in Egypt] have now become in this political discourse, unfortunately. You also see Egypt getting involved on the other side of the Palestinian domestic equation, specifically in terms of the close relationship that the Sisi government has established with the former Fatah warlord/strongman Mohammad Dahlan, who I believe, is organizing a big conference in Cairo this weekend. Again, this reflects not so much the intent of Arab states to get involved in Palestinian politics—there's nothing new about that—but the greater, unprecedented ability they have to do so precisely because of the mess that the Palestinian political system itself is in today, to the extent that it still exists.

Jordan, of course, is a different case, much smaller, less powerful and so on, but like Egypt, also has a formal peace treaty with Israel, and of course a very substantial Palestinian population. But the way that Jordan today looks at the Palestine question is to say that, "This conflict, with all its domestic ramifications, has been around now for sixty-plus years and for all the challenges, we're doing quite fine, thank you very much."

[The] much bigger challenges, as far as Amman is concerned, have to do with dramatically changed regional [trends], particularly in the immediate neighborhood, which is to say that Jordan is much more concerned with the threats to its security and stability emanating from Syria and the Islamic State movement than it is about any potential ramifications from what's happening west of the Jordan [River]. There are two [things] that cannot be fully explained without a reference to the division and fragmentation of the Palestinian national movement and that helps explain why the [Jordanians] feel so much less threatened. It is nevertheless the case that when push comes to shove, [the Palestinian question] does become an issue—[to wit] the very comprehensive domestic opposition, popular opposition, to the gas deal with Israel. And this is not Palestinian opposition to the issue, it exists across the board in Jordan; these are opponents of Transjordanian background, of Palestinian background, who've been there since 1948, [or]

1967 and so on. Similarly, when the most recent bout of unrest, whatever you want to call it, began in the occupied territories last year specifically around the issue of al-Aqsa Mosque, there was quite a bit of popular mobilization in Jordan. What was rather remarkable about these was that they took place completely independently of any encouragement by any Palestinian political parties.

Lebanon is a bit more difficult to discuss in this respect, precisely because it is such a fragmented political entity itself these days. And here I will only say the obvious thing, that the Hezbollah factor remains absolutely key. Particularly the way in which Hezbollah, unlike so many others in the region, continues to mobilize the Palestine question in order to consolidate and expand its own credentials and legitimacy, especially at a time when it's coming under so much regional criticism and condemnation because of the direct role that it's playing in the Syria conflict. And the other point to make about Lebanon is that we are, in a sense, going back to the situation we had during the early phases of the Lebanese Civil War when, every once in a while, one sees leaks in the media where various parties in Lebanon are virtually inviting Israeli intervention into Lebanon in order to help resolve their own domestic intra-Lebanese conflicts.

So having said all that, I would nevertheless argue that the more interesting regional realignments, the more substantial ones, are not taking place within the countries I mentioned, but in the Gulf, particularly in the longer term. And that, I think, whether one is talking about Egypt and Jordan or Saudi Arabia, at the end of the day, reflects the complete breakdown of an Arab consensus. Not just on Palestine, on *anything*. There's no consensus on Iraq, on Syria, on any of these issues.

So, while I agree that, to a significant extent, [this situation] reflects an Arab abandonment of the Palestinian people and their struggle for self-determination, bear in mind that this is part of a larger breakdown of consensus on any other issue [. . .] in the region. But again, speaking specifically about the Gulf states, and given the extraordinary influence that they can bring to bear on other Arab states, it also does very much reflect the elevation of Iran as the primary threat to Arab national security—particularly by the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] states—and the removal of Israel from the blacklist. And again, it also very much reflects the absence of a unified and effective Palestinian leadership capable of mobilizing the Arab state system around the Palestine question—in other words, the Palestinians today seem incapable of even mobilizing a “performed commitment” to basic Palestinian rights by what remains of the Arab state system.

I began by saying that we've been here before, and I'm thinking of the period 1982 to 1987: Israel invades Lebanon, the Palestine Liberation Organization is ejected from Beirut, in subsequent years the Arab state system, and the Arab League for that matter, are much more concerned with the Iran-Iraq War than with the Arab-Israeli conflict, and this includes Arab states that are directly involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict—I'm thinking of Syria at the time, of Jordan at the time. And it got to the point where, in November 1987, the Arab League held its summit meeting in Amman with Yasir Arafat practically forcing his way into that summit. I believe this was the first Arab League summit that left Palestine completely unmentioned in its final communiqué, in November 1987 [. . .] and only one month later the first intifada erupted in Jabaliya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, and Balata refugee camp outside Nablus in the West Bank.

There is obviously not a cause-and-effect mechanism at work here, but I do think that Palestinians were particularly conscious of their abandonment by the Arab state system and that

that fed into the manner in which the intifada spread so rapidly in the subsequent month; I think we saw this to a certain extent last year when you had the sudden proliferation of Palestinian demonstrations and attacks mainly in the West Bank, and that too can be seen, in part, as a response to the abandonment being felt [with] the Egyptian sealing off of the Gaza Strip and so on. And that is why Palestine is still important. Because the Palestinians, for all their problems today, retain the capacity to make it important.

I remain absolutely convinced that if and when the Palestinians can put their petty rivalries and internal conflicts aside and reestablish a meaningful national movement—and here unfortunately I’m not only speaking about division between Fatah and Hamas, but also within Fatah: I mean these days if you talk about Palestinian division, you’re not talking about the split between Fatah and Hamas, you’re talking about the split between Mahmoud Abbas and Mohammad Dahlan, that’s how bad things have gotten—I do believe that if Palestinians are capable of reviving and rejuvenating their national movement they will retain the capacity to mobilize the Arab state system around their cause, even if only to discharge a “performed commitment.” I completely subscribe to [Toby’s] cynical view about it, but it is something that also does matter if you’re talking, for example, about votes at the United Nations.

And here I’ll just make a few other brief points: Why does Palestine remain the central Arab question? Well, if you look at what’s happening in our region in the past several years, it has not been at a loss for conflict, but where do you see popular demonstrations across the Arab world? They have not been about Libya, they have not been about Yemen, they have not been about Syria, or even about the Islamic State movement. To the extent that we *have* seen them in the past few years, they have tended to reflect first and foremost solidarity with the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip in the context of repeated Israeli assaults on them and, to a lesser extent, on the issue of al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

The point I’m trying to make is that I don’t think that popular opinion is neglectful of any of these other conflicts, but it is divided on them to one extent or another, whereas on Palestine, to this day, I think it’s fair to say that they’re not. The problem rather is that the Palestinians, in being divided, have allowed themselves to become an *issue* in these regional rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran and so on, rather than being a unifying factor that stands over and above the regional divisions. But even with that, where you have Hamas aligned with one camp and Fatah with another and so on, I think it’s quite extraordinary, particularly given all the issues that the previous speakers have raised, the extent to which the Palestine question has remained central to Arab public opinion.

Also, just one last point, [concerning] the Islamist movement and jihadi movements that we see in the region: [. . .] Al-Qai’da, at some level I think had, let’s call it an anti-imperialist agenda, and tried to harness its cart to the Palestinian horse, in terms of expanding its legitimacy. When we look at the more recent movements, whether Islamic State or many of the others, they tend to have much more local concerns and seem to speak much less about regional or global issues. One thing that will be interesting to see in the years ahead, to the extent that these movements continue to grow, is whether they will, on the one hand, play the Palestine card in their struggle for legitimacy in the context of their opposition to the region’s various governments, and the extent to which Palestine may also become a factor in them playing the sectarian card in terms of

the Sunni Islamist movements, on the one hand, and the Shi'ite ones, on the other—again, whether one's talking about popular mobilization in Iraq or these various groups in Syria and so on, for the present they remain very much focused on local concerns and one would hope that Palestine will not become a victim of their conflicts. [But it remains to be seen.]

By way of conclusion, in terms of the next American administration: well, you just had an American administration that was able to essentially wash its hands of this entire issue and of the Palestine question. And I think one thing that the current Israeli leadership is now salivating over is the prospect of finally consigning the question of Palestine to the dustbin of history. Particularly with the change of administration coming here. And this does remind me very much of the 1980s: 1988 was the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel, and the preparations in the year or two beforehand, as I recall them, were very much [in the vein of], "How can we use this [as] a kind of final removal of the Palestinians from the historical stage and put this question to rest once and for all?" Of course, history never repeats itself, let alone in very detailed ways, but nevertheless, the point I would make is: we have been here before more than once. The mid-1980s, in many respects, provide an instructive precedent for what we're seeing today.

I would, however, like to say [one last thing]: a key question that will remain [is] the capacity of the Palestinians themselves, not so much to overcome their differences, as to overcome their various *leaders* who have managed to place parochial interests above the national interests in a way that, for a colonized people in the midst of a struggle for self-determination, is quite breathtaking. [. . .]

Rashid Khalidi:

[. . .] If we think about the Middle East today, and think of it globally, which nobody ever seems to do, something that immediately springs to mind is the fact that compared to every other region of the world, this is the one with the most extensive external intervention, ongoing, from the highest level of military intervention . . . look [at] where the most powerful state, the most powerful military in the history of mankind, is unloading most of its ordnance, has most of its troops, has most of its bases . . . the United States and every other major power, Russia, France, Britain, are fighting wars in a half dozen places, whether declared, undeclared, drone wars, real wars, bombing wars, [all] in the Middle East. And this is also a place where you have governments with an extraordinarily reduced degree of autonomy by comparison even with regions like Central America or Africa where governments are deeply under the pressure of global economic forces, global economic structures, being bullied by large corporations, or by the world trade structure or by the United States. By comparison, the Middle East is much, much more, I think, a penetrated region—to use the terms that Carl Brown devised many, many years ago—penetrated in every sense of the word.

And there are really, of twenty-five or so states in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, there are really three or four, *only*, that have a degree of autonomy. Iran is one, Israel is one, and Turkey is one. They have allies, they are imbricated in systems, there are influences on them, but those are [a handful] as compared with Europe, where you have twenty states or twenty-five states that are pretty much free to, you know, brutalize their populations, do whatever they want without getting bombed or droned or whatever. Or several dozen Latin American states, or several dozen East Asian states, or several dozen other states. In the Middle East, there are three or four places where *maybe* you won't

get droned, or five or six. There are a few other states that are not on the level of Israel, Turkey, Iran—states like Saudi Arabia [or] Algeria, which have a certain degree of autonomy but are roped into some of these systems.

I want to contrast that situation today with a situation in the past when the Middle East was clearly not quite so subject to external intervention: during the Cold War. The Cold War was a bad thing, we all agree, but the Cold War, because of the two superpowers holding each other off, prevented these sort of massive, direct, destructive interventions that produced ten million refugees, or produced the destruction of the oldest cities known to mankind like Aleppo—it's one of the oldest cities on earth, it's eight to ten thousand years old, and it's being destroyed today, as well as dozens of smaller cities in Iraq and Syria. That kind of thing didn't happen.

And at the same time you had weak governments, in many cases, which were driven by public opinion and were driven by causes. So go back to the 1950s and you'll see the Algerian cause roused the entire Arab world; it pushed Arab governments to do things they maybe didn't want to do, the Moroccan, Egyptian, and Tunisian governments, [and] many other Arab governments, were forced to act in [certain] ways by public opinion. What was happening in Algeria moved the entire Arab world; the Palestine cause did the same thing, a couple decades later and for a very long time. And this was a situation where it was *not* Arab governments, out of their undying patriotism and love for the brown eyes of the Palestinians, that were acting, it was Arab governments *completely* in the grip of external forces, acting *completely* against their instincts because public opinion would threaten to destroy them if they didn't do that. And even when it was not that, when you look at what *moved* in the Arab world in regard to Palestine, go back to the Ottoman Parliament in 1912, it wasn't the C.U.P. government [the "Young Turks"] that tried to limit Zionist colonization, it was public opinion as expressed in the press and Parliament that raised the issue, and put the only pressure on Zionism that it experienced in the Ottoman period.

Similarly in the 1920s [and '30s and '40s], the Arab general staffs met—Walid Khalidi has written on this—and they told their governments, "We are completely incapable of intervening, we have no means whatsoever, our armies are useless; if we intervene in Palestine we will be soundly defeated. It is a terrible idea, don't do it." The governments, each one of which was almost *run* by foreign powers—the Lebanese and Syrian governments had been installed by General Spears, they were completely dependent, they had no money; the Jordanian government had an army commanded, officered, armed, and financed by Britain; [and] Egypt was occupied, British troops were in the citadel in Cairo—those governments went to war in Palestine, *not* because of patriotism, not because they had a decent bone in their body (I'm not saying that they didn't but that wasn't the reason they did what they did) but because public opinion forced them to. Political parties opportunistically, cynically, for genuine motivations, whatever it may have been, played against one another and pushed them into doing this.

Now, the interesting thing is that that's not happening now. And I think each of our panelists in different ways, talking about economics and gas, talking about the kinds of toxic religious propaganda being spread by Saudi Arabia, talking about the complications of the Syrian war, each of them have given reasons why, and I think Mouin Rabbani put his finger on what is really quite important. Look at the unity that the FLN [National Liberation Front] showed [in Algeria]—they were brutal, they killed thousands of their own people; it's not a model I'm recommending to

anybody—but they were a unified national leadership that helped to engender in Arab public opinion an enormously positive response to the Algerian cause, at a time when France won the battle on the battlefield. The French crushed the Casbah in 1957; the French smashed the FLN in the field; the French had [the FLN's] ears pinned back in Tunisia and Morocco; they were defeated in the field; the FLN did not win the war on the battlefield. The FLN won the war of propaganda: it won the war in Cairo, it won the war in Paris, it won the war in Tunis, and it won the war in Morocco. The Palestinians never won a battle. I mean you can call Karamah a victory, or whatever, but in practice, what led the Palestine cause to have such success as it did at the UN and in the Arab world was not victory on the battlefield, heaven knows—only the Vietnamese won victory on the battlefield in the entire panoply of anti-colonial wars. [The current situation] is not an absence of leadership; it's a volcanic hole where leadership should exist. It's a black hole, it's an emptiness, it's leaderships that don't exist for practical purposes; they're not national leaderships. And even to use the plural reveals the problem. There was one address for the Palestinians for decades; there was one address for the Algerians for decades, a couple of decades; and there's not one—there's *no* address today. Anyone who would address themselves to Ramallah and expect a serious response to anything beyond local garbage collection is deluding themselves. Anyone who would direct themselves to the government in Gaza and expect anything other than a “will you accept our offer for gas”—which is what's happening right now [. . .]—is fooling themselves. There is no address. [. . .]

There are many changes in the global environment, but the biggest changes are in the Middle East generally. You have a Middle East that is super-penetrated by external intervention, of the most overt forms: physical occupation—I mean, Turkey is occupying two Arab countries today; the Ottoman army left in 1918, [but] the Turkish army is back. A chunk of northern Iraq and a chunk of northern Syria are under Turkish occupation [and it] may or may not last for a very long time.

You have the [United Arab] Emirates and Qatar fighting a civil war between them in Libya—with the assistance of the British and the French. The French are helping the Emirates on one side, and the British the Qataris on the other side, and so you have a Lebanese civil war with two Arab powers, and two European powers, on different sides. I mean this is a level of penetration of this region—it's like five Spanish civil wars being fought at the same time with every single major power in the region, plus the United States, plus Britain, I mean anyone who has an aircraft carrier is in the game. That's four powers. They're all in the game. And then a bunch of miserable third-rate powers are also in the game, and every regional power is *also* in the game.

My question is: Is the division of this region, and is the extraordinarily weak position that Palestine appears to be in, a result of all of this, plus this black hole where the Palestinian national movement should be—or is it partly that, and partly a result of something Toby was alluding to? We have today in the Arab world a narrative, which doesn't just argue that Iran as a state is dangerous, or Iran as a potentially nuclear power is dangerous, or Iran as the heir to the Persian Empire is dangerous, but that “the Shi'a are *worse* than not being Muslims.” They're apostates; they're people who have deviated from Islam, and therefore are dangerous on an existential level to, not just the nation-state of Saudi Arabia or the political order of the region, but to the very being of the entire Islamic community. And that is what people are being taught—in an

extraordinarily well-funded campaign, all over the Muslim world. They're being taught that in some mosques in this country, they're being taught that in Europe, they're being taught that in Indonesia, in Afghanistan—but especially in the Arab world, and especially in countries where Saudi Arabia has the greatest influence and is able to spread this poisonous message. I don't know how important that is, but if everything is measured in terms of this "existential" danger—not just to the Saudi state by a very powerful Iranian nation-state (any Saudi ruler would be concerned, in a country of thirty million people that has absolutely no ability whatsoever, in spite of the largest arms imports of any country, to defend itself in any way. Any Saudi ruler would be worried about a country with eighty million people, an industrial base, an extraordinarily high technical level, and a capability to project power in any direction for fifteen hundred to two thousand miles)—[. . .] if the question is an existential one, that is, *our existence as Muslims is threatened by this heresy and there is this crescent of heretics that is engulfing us*—that would, perhaps explain, why suddenly something like Palestine, Israel, Zionism, colonization, whatever's happening in West Asia, is much less important.

About the Participants

Rashid I. Khalidi is the editor of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* and the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University. He has also been president of the Middle East Studies Association, and was an advisor to the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid and Washington Arab-Israeli peace negotiations from October 1991 until June 1993. He is author of many books on Palestine, Israel, and U.S. foreign policy.

Tareq G. Baconi is a visiting scholar at Columbia University's Middle East Institute and an adjunct visiting fellow at the U.S./Middle East Project. His forthcoming book, *Hamas: The Politics of Resistance; Entrenchment in Gaza*, is being published by Stanford University Press.

Toby C. Jones is associate professor of history at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. He is the author of *Running Dry: Essays on Energy, Water and Environmental Crisis* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Harvard University Press, 2010), and is currently working on *America's Oil Wars* (under contract at Harvard University Press).

Bassam Haddad is director of the Middle East and Islamic Studies Program and associate professor at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. He is the author of *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford University Press, 2011) and coeditor of *Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Old Order?* (Pluto Press, 2012). He is the founding editor of the *Arab Studies Journal* and is coproducer and director of the award-winning documentary film, *About Baghdad*, as well as the director of a critically acclaimed film series on Arabs and terrorism. He is cofounder and editor of *Jadaliyya* and executive director of the Arab Studies Institute, an umbrella for five organizations dealing with knowledge production on the Middle East. He serves on the board of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences and is executive producer of *Status* audio journal.

Mouin Rabbani is an independent researcher and analyst specializing in Palestinian affairs and the Arab-Israeli conflict. He is a senior fellow with the Institute for Palestine Studies and coeditor of *Jadaliyya*. He is coauthor, with Norman G. Finkelstein and Jamie Stern-Weiner, of *How to Resolve the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, forthcoming from OR Books.