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Introduction: Tracing History, Politics and Law as a Vindication of Palestinian Liberation

Berdal Aral*

Abstract

Today, the Zionist occupation of Palestine and the continued dislocation of Palestinians for nearly a hundred years through brute force – combined with the former’s discursive hegemony over its victims – remain as major obstacles to the construction of a peaceful and stable international political order in the Middle East. The so-called *Palestinian problem* remains the *key* to understand the failure of the Middle Eastern sub-system to produce sustainable peace in the region. This brief introduction to the special issue seeks to explain the general perspective and summarise main arguments of the contributors who have approached the issue of Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the lenses of various fields of study such as international law, foreign policy analysis and discourse analysis. As will be seen, all the authors offer notable critical reflections that challenge established understandings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the mainstream Western media and scholarly literature.

Keywords: Israeli–Palestinian Conflict; Zionism; Colonial-Settler State; Palestinian Self-Determination; Oslo Process; United Nations; Peace and Conflict Resolution; American Foreign Policy; Arab and Muslim World

Introduction

Today, the Zionist occupation of Palestine and the continued dislocation of Palestinians for nearly a hundred years through brute force – combined with the former’s discursive hegemony over its victims – remain as major obstacles to the construction of a peaceful and stable international political order in the Middle East. The gradual disappearance of Palestinian people as a “political unit” with a right to self-determination is not the only consequence of the Zionist project which finally achieved its most cherished goal of founding a Jewish state, Israel, in 1948. Israel’s perpetual ethnic cleansing policy against Palestinians since then and its forceful seizure of almost the entire territory of the British Mandate for Palestine have been a sure recipe for endless conflict and bloodshed in Palestine and the surrounding Arab states of the region. The so-called *Palestinian problem* is the *key* to understand the failure of the Middle Eastern sub-system to produce sustainable peace and orderly diplomatic interactions among political actors in the region. Since 1948, imperialistic encroachments by external forces (e.g. Britain, France, and the United States), combined with the aggressive and expansionist impulses of Israel, have left little space to the will and voices

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of indigenous political/social forces to be heard and reflected into the map in this part of the world.

To make sense of the Palestinian problem, one needs to locate the issue historically in the defeat of the Ottoman Empire during World War I – which led to the withdrawal of the Ottomans from the predominantly Arab portions of the Middle East. The Zionists, who lay claim to the historic land of Palestine on account of an ethno-religious discourse (“the promised land”), first sought to align themselves with the British Empire which established the Mandate for Palestine. Immediately after the end of World War II, the Zionists changed their approach and attempted to obtain the support of the US (United States). The history of these alignments, alongside multiple strategies that were deployed by Zionists within and beyond the territories of the Mandate of Palestine, to “convince” their aforementioned powerful patrons to support their cause, have to be analysed seriously. By contrast, the Palestinians and their supporters have sought to counter such strategies by, *inter alia*, mobilizing international support against Zionist violence, first and foremost, through the institutional machinery and decision-making within the United Nations (UN). Alas, their success in this front has been fairly limited so far. Yet, as the “peace process” has merely become a matter of history due to the intransigence of the Zionist ideology, and, more specifically, because of Israel’s exclusivist notion of sovereignty which allows little space to the sovereignty claims of Palestinians, all pro-Palestinian forces ought to advance strategies to ensure that Israel and its international supporters such as the US, are countered by the full force of international law and punitive action by major international actors – in particular – the UN.

This special issue on the Palestinian problem begins with an article by Selin M. Bölme, entitled “**The Palestine Policy of the US before the Israel Lobby**”. This study addresses the process leading to the consolidation of the Zionist influence in the US, exploring the way in which Zionist actors have gradually become the most powerful lobby in terms of shaping the US foreign policy towards the Middle East. Bölme argues that the Zionist lobby had already distinguished itself as an influential actor even before the birth of the state of Israel in 1948. During the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945), the influence of the lobby was partially offset by State and Defence Departments. However, the lobby – after having reorganized itself in a way that considerably increased its membership and wealth – came to exert unsullied influence over the administration of President Harry S. Truman (1945-1953). By contrast, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in spite of its rich oil resources and intimate connections with the US, failed to exert any tangible pressure on the US administration so as to moderate the latter’s partiality in favour of the Zionist lobby which eventually led to the partition of Palestine and the formation of the state of Israel.

In her article, entitled “**Evidence for Hope? Assessing the Role of the UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteurs on the Course of the Palestinian Question**”, Gonca Oğuz Gök investigates the role of UN special rapporteurs on Palestine in conceptualising the Palestinian problem and framing the context for discussion in the UN and other international platforms. Based on a social constructivist analysis, she directs our attention to the legitimizing function of the mechanisms established within the UN which, she claims, is equally applicable to the Palestinian problem. Oğuz Gök particularly highlights the role of the two longest serving and prominent UN special rapporteurs on Palestine, namely John Dugard

(2001-2008) and Richard Falk (2008-2014). She asserts that the reports which they authored alerted the international community to the gravity of human rights violations committed by Israel and deployed concepts such as “colonialism”, “occupation” and “apartheid” as frames of collective debate that went beyond the euphemistic discourse of diplomacy. Accordingly, they have, *inter alia*, been able to inspire transnational pro-Palestinian activism and civil society campaigns against Israel.

Berdal Aral’s article, entitled “**A Critical View of the Scholarly Discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian Problem**”, delves into the problematic aspects of the way in which the Palestinian problem is treated by the majority of academia. Aral argues that, even the supposedly progressive/critical scholars tend to take a parochial view of Palestinian rights to the extent that their advocacy of the Palestinian right to self-determination is confined to the territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 War, namely West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. He therefore suggests that the brutality of the entire Zionist project in Palestine ought to be exposed and a more extensive definition of Palestinian right to self-determination be adopted, thus combining the two key concepts of “decolonisation” and “liberation”. This conceptual and analytical framework should lead progressive scholars to suggest effective ways of utilizing international institutional mechanisms, including those that exist within the UN, for the purpose of, first, ensuring that international society takes punitive action such as comprehensive economic sanctions against Israel in order to put an end to its ceaseless colonization of the territories belonging to the Palestinians and its massive human rights violations, and, second, safeguarding the core of rights indispensable for a comprehensively-defined Palestinian right of self-determination until and if a “peaceful solution” is finally reached on the Palestinian problem.

M. Hüseyin Mercan, in his article “**Reconsidering the Palestine Issue in the Shade of Israel’s Expanding Sovereignty Claim**”, draws on Israel’s expansionist and unilateral conception of sovereignty which leaves very little scope for Palestinian self-determination. Israel does this, under the silent gaze of the United Nations, a world body for peace, which has rarely gone beyond condemning numerous Israeli breaches of international law. The Israeli-Palestinian “peace negotiations”, the author notes, only witnessed the deepening of Israeli occupation and the mushrooming of illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Mercan asserts that Israel’s absolute claim of sovereignty in the entire former Mandate of Palestine has been warranted by the adoption in July 2018 of the new “nation-state law” which emphasizes solely “Jewish rights” at the expense of Palestinians and other communities. The US decision to move its Israeli embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (“Al-Quds”) in May 2018, the author asserts, only serves to sabotage the Palestinian claim to sovereignty in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 and emboldens Israel to insist on its absolute sovereignty claim in the entire Palestine. Mercan finally calls on the international society to impose sanctions and employ military enforcement action against Israel until a sovereign and independent state of Palestine could be established.

The final article in the issue, written by Abdullah al-Ahsan, is entitled “**The Question of Palestine and the Muslim World**”. The article focuses in detail on the historical origins of the Palestinian problem in order to show how the Zionist intruders were initially perceived by the Palestinian inhabitants of the Mandate of Palestine and by Arab and Muslim countries at large at the time. The author asserts that the extent of assistance provided by the Arab

world for the liberation of Palestine has been very limited which is highly disappointing in the eyes of the Palestinian people and their supporters. Al-Ahsan asserts that the Zionist presence in the midst of the Arab world and Israel's aggressive policies towards its prime victims, the Palestinians, as well as neighbouring Arab states such as Lebanon and Syria, have galvanized the spirit of greater cooperation and unity among predominantly Muslim countries. Yet, although the Zionist aggression has never lost its intensity and ferocity since the 1940s, Arab countries and the broader Muslim world have failed to put up an effective resistance against this "alien" presence in the Middle East. The author concludes that, so long as the US continues to provide uncritical support for Israel, it would be unrealistic to expect a peaceful resolution to the Palestinian problem.

About the Author

Professor Berdal Aral is currently a lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Istanbul Medeniyet University in Turkey. His research interests are presently focused on the Palestinian problem, disunity within the Muslim world, and the hegemonic aspects of international law and institutions.