

THE
CARTER CENTER



**THE CARTER CENTER & THE ELDERS
ONLINE DISCUSSION
AUG. 5, 2020
REPORT**

On Aug. 5, 2020, The Carter Center and The Elders virtually convened a round of dialogue with Israeli civil society and human rights activists. Former Algerian foreign minister, freedom fighter, and U.N. envoy Lakhdar Brahimi participated on behalf of The Elders, along with staff from both organizations. The session followed two earlier rounds of dialogue with Palestinian civil society representatives in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and inside Israel.

The Israeli participants highlighted three significant developments influencing internal political dynamics in Israel and opportunities to advance Palestinian human rights: the United States government's "Deal of the Century," corresponding plans by the Netanyahu government to officially annex parts of the West Bank, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants shared various perspectives based on their experiences.

The meeting was held one week before the Israeli government announced that it was temporarily suspending plans to annex de jure parts of the West Bank because of a peace agreement with the United Arab Emirates. Participants in the Aug. 5 meeting indicated that Israel actually put those plans on hold prior to the agreement with the UAE. Participants also emphasized that too much attention was being placed on the possibility of de jure annexation when a gradual process of de facto annexation has already been underway for decades. One participant said it was likely that annexation would still take place, but in small steps, "like any other building plan in the West Bank," as it is a project that has been building for years.

Participants expressed the view that Israeli politicians had backtracked on immediate, de jure annexation of territory because of the realization that it would create unwelcome outcomes. The announcement that annexation would happen created negative attention on Israel and mobilized international support for the two-state solution, and some Israeli politicians were concerned that it would embolden the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and encourage the perception that the situation is one of apartheid. One participant also noted that settler leaders were vehemently opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state, as called for in the Trump administration's proposals, even if it was not a genuinely viable or sovereign state.

Other Israeli influencers voiced concerns about annexation harming relations with Jordan. One participant noted that annexation failed to mobilize the public in support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as he had thought it would. Ultimately, the participant said, most of the Israeli public was not very interested in annexation and did not feel directly affected by it, underscoring a general lack of either knowledge or care about Palestinians. The proponents of annexation lost an important battle inside Israel.

Nevertheless, several participants felt that the debate around Trump’s “deal” and annexation had moved the needle within the Israeli political establishment, as it has unmasked the realities of the occupation and the direction the country is heading, which they characterized as a form of apartheid. In general, many Israelis are unaware of the realities of the occupation and lack any interaction with Palestinians except during military service. But, participants said, the prospect of annexing land made it clearer than ever to the Israeli public that leaders were seeking to expand territory and have more than a “temporary” military occupation for reasons of “security.” Importantly, some in Israeli civil society are leveraging the openings – and realizations – that the debate around annexation has created to strengthen their human rights advocacy within Israeli society.

Yet one participant raised concerns that the reaction of the Palestinian Authority – specifically the suspension of security coordination – is having unintended negative consequences for Palestinians. For example, Palestinians in Gaza are now unable to obtain passes to travel to Israel for medical treatment. They mentioned the case of a Palestinian woman who was unable to leave the country via the Allenby Bridge (the land crossing into Jordan) because she was with a very young infant, whose birth had not been registered with the Israeli military because of the suspension of security coordination.

Participants called attention to the fact that “Bantustans” were being created on the ground through large infrastructure projects – “part of an old plan being implemented” – and that the international community had failed to stop it. Another participant pointed out that the political right and settler movement are continuing to push boundaries. They gave the example of an illegal settler outpost that was built next to an army checkpoint, when in principle the army should prevent illegal outposts from being built.

Participants spoke of attacks that civil society, especially human rights groups, have faced from the government and others on the right. These attacks have increased during the annexation debate. One participant attributed them to the political vacuum on the left – with no opposition to attack, civil society is taking the hit. Another spoke of “powerful propaganda machines on the right.”

Some participants, however, sounded notes of optimism. In addition to the advocacy opportunities arising within Israel around annexation, participants were most

encouraged by the ongoing protests precipitated by anger over Netanyahu's handling of the pandemic. Although these protests have focused on Israeli social issues, such as corruption and the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, participants see them as different from previous social protests in Israel and have sought to leverage them to advance advocacy on the issue of the occupation. One participant noted that some protestors have started to draw links to the occupation, in part because of advocacy by human rights groups. Opposition to police violence was one theme of the protests, and some human rights groups were pointing out links between the need to hold police accountable for violence against Israeli protestors and the need to do the same for police violence against Palestinians. The shooting of an autistic Palestinian man, Eyad Hallaq, garnered particular attention. Nonetheless, the protests are leaderless, and participants said it is hard to break through Israelis' overwhelming indifference to Palestinians and the occupation. One participant spoke of the potential for coalition-building among the center-left and the far-left but was unclear about how to mobilize that for Palestinian rights.

Other participants were encouraged by the increased participation of Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel in the elections. The participation of the Joint List has increased Palestinian representation in the Knesset and broadened the peace camp for coalition-building purposes by 20%. The rhetoric coming from the Joint List – “working on behalf of all of us” – was viewed as an important development that could substantially change the political scene. One participant spoke of initiatives to better understand where the joint interests of Palestinian Arabs and Jews lie. One participant, however, cautioned that the lack of knowledge and disinterest amongst Israelis about the occupation and Palestinian rights, combined with heavy propaganda, is blocking progress.

Participants all said that international pressure is necessary to bring about change. The U.S. is viewed as the most powerful and influential actor on Israel, but the participants also pointed to the huge influence the European Union could have, particularly given their economic levers. The EU's warnings of sanctions were seen by some as having played a role in preventing de jure annexation. Participants expressed disappointment that the U.S. Democratic Party's recently adopted platform failed to mention the word “occupation,” but participants hope that at least a Joe Biden administration would take on Palestinian human rights and help stop violations such as home demolitions. The Socialist International, the worldwide organization of democratic, socialist, and labor parties, recently started a petition to expel the Israeli Labor Party from its ranks because of the party's support for annexation. The Meretz party is also a member. It was said that steps like this that target policy positions are useful to signal to Israelis that a red line is being crossed.¹

Conclusions

¹ The Labor Party withdrew from the organization in response.

The discussions underscored the evolving dynamics in Israel and the role Israeli civil society is playing in framing emerging trends and the opportunities they present. Participants expressed the opinion that it was not the time to debate alternatives to the moribund two-state solution. There is no interest from Israeli political leaders in negotiating with Palestinians on statehood, and “we are already living in a one-state reality where the Israelis controls one half of the population.” Rather, participants emphasized the need to focus on Israel’s obligations under international law, increase international involvement to end the “colonial situation” in Israel/Palestine, and work to capitalize on the opportunities presented by the political moment to increase understanding among Israelis about what is happening to Palestinians.

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