



The Elders and The Carter Center
Joint Convening with Diaspora Palestinians
November 19, 2020, via Zoom
Summary Report

On November 19, 2020, The Carter Center and The Elders jointly hosted an online consultation with “Diaspora” Palestinian civil society leaders, analysts, and human rights workers based in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. This was the fifth joint convening in a series of similar consultations with Palestinians and Israelis. Former Algerian Foreign Minister Lakhdar Brahimi participated on behalf of The Elders.

The session sought to explore the status of the Palestinian identity and national movement and the role of the diaspora and international organizations such as The Carter Center and The Elders in promoting peace, Palestinian human rights, and an end of occupation.

Almost all of the participants rejected the idea that Palestinian identity was under threat. Rather, participants highlighted the disintegration of the national movement and the exclusion of refugees and younger Palestinians from decision-making as the most urgent problems. Along these lines, participants pointed to the lack of representative national leadership working to advance Palestinian interests. They said filling the vacuum should be a priority. At least one participant suggested either reinvigorating the Palestine Liberation Organization or creating a new structure. However, the discussion focused more on diagnosing the problem than on brainstorming solutions.

Many participants pointed to the deep geographic fragmentation and divisions among Palestinians. The power imbalance between Palestinians and Israelis, and the Oslo era’s accommodation of that imbalance, were also mentioned as primary causes of the disintegration of the national project.

It was clear that none of the participants felt the Palestinian Authority offered a way forward. In fact, most saw the PA, or at least the Oslo process framework, as an impediment. One participant asserted that the issue is not “that Palestinians have poor leadership, but there is no leadership,” with the PA only representing “West Bank Palestinians.” Several called out the PA’s “accommodation of Zionism” and the Oslo process, which reduced the national movement to a single focus on statehood and discrete issues such as land swaps. This enabled the power imbalance to go unchallenged and has distorted the national liberation paradigm while leaving stateless refugees disenfranchised.

Several participants suggested that the PA’s resumption of security coordination with Israel in the current context was a final nail in the coffin. Hamas was described as a “political current” by one participant. Another declared the PA’s and Hamas’ suppression of Palestinian civil rights undermined their legitimacy as national leaders. Regional neglect by Arab leaders was also mentioned as contributing to the atrophy of the Palestinian movement.

Much of the discussion centered on combatting the leadership void, which was called a clear threat to the Palestinian national movement. One participant said the next four years will be critical, during which the movement will either die or be reborn. One participant cited the need to rebuild the Palestinian movement from within. Another similarly assigned responsibility to Palestinians, saying the revival needs to be “self-generated, voluntary, and committed.” This would include examining and correcting decisions that have accommodated Palestinian

powerlessness and fragmentation. Others spoke of the need to reframe the struggle away from statehood to “settler colonialism” and the original dispossession of Palestinians, seeing Israelis and Palestinians as intertwined and projected to live a shared future.

Civil society was considered a key actor in this struggle, with nearly all participants putting the highest priority on countering threats to Palestinians’ ability to organize and advocate for their rights. Participants pointed to politicized efforts to equate the advancement of Palestinian human rights with anti-Semitism and/or terrorism in the U.S., Europe, and Israel. The criminalization of speech supporting Palestinian rights is prevalent across different geographies where Palestinians are living and organizing. The chilling effect this is having makes it very difficult for Palestinians in the diaspora to connect with Palestinians inside.

The boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement has made strides in mobilizing popular coalitions promoting Palestinian rights. BDS has become a prominent movement that allows Palestinians to work together across geographies; however, the crackdown on civil society is making it difficult to advance this nonviolent project, as well as to circulate Palestinian stories highlighting their experiences and situation. Rather than an existential question, this issue was framed as a human rights question central to the freedom to organize effectively and create the space to call attention to human rights abuses.

It was stressed that despite “normalization,” many people in the wider Arab world and elsewhere still stand in solidarity with Palestinians. Widespread frustration with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was noted. Participants spoke in favor of international organizations like The Elders and The Carter Center helping protect the space for civil society to mobilize and advocate for Palestinian human rights, including through BDS. At least one participant said such support should include ensuring that younger Palestinian voices are heard in the halls of power.

Others encouraged international support to help change the narrative away from the failed paradigm represented by Oslo and state-building under occupation and instead reflect the perspectives and priorities of a wider segment of Palestinians, including the diaspora and refugees. This would include facilitating space for Palestinians to come together to strategize the renewal of the national movement and a “blueprint for the future.” One participant also thought support would be welcomed to assist Palestinian civil society in creating links with counterparts in the region on shared human rights challenges to help reinvigorate the Palestinian movement on the regional map.

Conclusion

The Palestinian diaspora has the space and foresight to assume a guiding role in setting a future agenda for the renewal of the Palestinian national movement, an urgent need that is grounded in an apparently wide consensus about the challenges and priorities facing the Palestinian national project.

At the heart of this effort lie calls for new-generation leadership while moving definitively away from the two-state/Oslo project. International efforts can play an important role in enabling Palestinians to lead this transformation and in turn create the basis for rights-based peacebuilding, including by i) organizing forums that allow Palestinians to connect across geographies; ii) elevating their stories and experiences with the media and with governments; iii) ensuring that new voices/excluded voices are heard; and iv) protecting civil society from efforts to criminalize their advocacy and organizing.