

THE
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The Elders and The Carter Center
Joint convening with “1948 Palestinian” civil society and thought leaders
September 30, 2020, via Teams
Summary Report

On September 30, 2020, The Carter Center and The Elders jointly hosted an online consultation with “1948 Palestinian” civil society and thought leaders. This was the fourth in a series of similar consultations with Palestinian civil society leaders from the West Bank and Gaza and their counterparts from Israel.

Former Algerian Foreign Minister Lakhdar Brahimi and Human Rights activist Hina Jilani participated on behalf of the Elders and introduced the sessions with brief framing comments:

Palestinian rights and justice is a long-standing issue of concern for The Elders and The Carter Center. Since Nelson Mandela founded The Elders in 2007, he set resolution of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as a priority for the Group. This series of consultations run by the two organizations serves to better understand Palestinian priorities and concerns in the evolving political context in Israel-Palestine and the wider region. Mr. Brahimi described the situation as one that is fast becoming akin to apartheid. Ms. Jilani reminded the group that The Elders had condemned the US plan in the strongest terms and written to European leaders warning against the threat of Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank. She welcomed the input of the Palestinians to help inform the advocacy work of The Elders.

Participants described an increasingly oppressive, albeit complex, atmosphere for Palestinians in Israel. Significant mention of the 2018 Jewish Nation State Law was made, but participants stressed that it did not change their reality on the ground. Rather, it simply confirmed Jewish supremacy policies that have been in place since 1948, including segregation and land grabs. The one difference is that it legitimizes de facto apartheid, giving it a “constitutional value.”

A few participants highlighted the shrinking space for Palestinian civil society in Israel. This includes increased restrictions imposed by the Israeli government on foreign assistance to Palestinian CSOs and human rights defenders. One participant pointed out that an EU project funding approved for her organization had been blocked by the Israeli government. Another stated that the Israeli government had increased digital surveillance of Palestinians, drawing on its advanced technologies

and using the Covid-19 crisis as a pretext. One participant mentioned that the cyber units in the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Strategic Affairs have been intensifying smear campaigns online, portraying Palestinians as “terrorists.” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has also been successful at cultivating a “new right” that frames anyone who opposes his policies as an enemy.

Human rights advocates are being targeted and censored on social media, especially Facebook, including being detained and charged with crimes. Administrative detention has also increased.

Participants mentioned that the crackdown on foreign funding and human rights advocates, combined with the political climate, was having a chilling effect on European support for Palestinians in Israel. “Donors are afraid to work in this field,” and to the extent that they are engaged are contributing more to soft social projects like “women’s empowerment” and other social issues. The exception cited was the British Council.

While Netanyahu’s government has been sensitive to criticism regarding the disparities between Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel, most participants spoke about increasing efforts to keep Palestinians segregated and disenfranchised. One participant mentioned that economic disparities between Palestinians and Jews in Israel have been reduced due to injections of government funding in response to a country review by the OECD, which in 2019 ranked the socioeconomic gap in Israel last among 79 member states due to differences between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Ultimately, Palestinians are still experiencing higher levels of dire poverty. Israeli support for Palestinian employment is also being directed toward nonpolitical sectors. This coincides with what one participant described as a rejection by leading political parties like *Kahol Lavan* (the *Blue and White* coalition) to be associated with Palestinian political groups. Although the Joint Arab List was not discussed in detail, there was suggestion that the increased representation of Palestinians in the Knesset is having little influence at this time, especially as the dominant parties were organizing themselves into coalitions precisely to avoid having to include Palestinians.

Infrastructure investments from the Israeli government are also being used as a basis to maintain physical segregation. Two participants mentioned that money for buildings was aimed at keeping Palestinians contained within existing enclave spaces, and excluded any support for Palestinian integration into Jewish areas. Some Palestinian communities have also been forcibly displaced, such as the Bedouin in the Negev.

In responses to queries about the future of the two-state solution, participants expressed deep cynicism. Several made the point that it was more important to talk about justice and Palestinian rights than about political “solutions.” The discussion

around normalization between Gulf states and Israel also led participants to question the relevance of trying to reach a peace agreement at this time now that Netanyahu no longer believes that normalization depends first on resolving the Palestinian question.

One participant spoke of the need to organize support for the survival of Palestinian culture through autonomous educational initiatives that seek to empower and strengthen the Arabic language within Palestinian society. Other initiatives use cinema and communal spaces as ways to remind Palestinians of their past and kindle pride in their identity. Connecting people to their heritage is a way to combat Israel's attempt to erase Palestinian culture from Israeli society.

Conclusion

The discussion reinforced the need to focus on Palestinian rights and justice across territorial areas while understanding the particular experiences Palestinians face in different geographies (West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, Israel, Diaspora). The segregation policies that are being applied to Palestinians within Israel are perhaps similar to those in the West Bank and Gaza, with a common outcome: an apartheid reality. At the same time, the particular complications of the situation of 1948 Palestinians, as well as the particular human rights abuses they face, need to be understood and appreciated at the international level. Further conversations with Palestinians in Israel about political challenges and opportunities are also warranted. Finally, more effort is needed to encourage dialogue among Palestinians across geographies in order to highlight the linkages between their experiences and build a common project to combat human rights abuses and achieve real peace.