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COMMENTARY

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Oslo Twenty Years Later: Another Twenty Years?

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For many years, it appeared that nothing would threaten the status quo of authoritarian Arab regimes. Then came the Arab Spring. Since 2011, it has become equally common to expect the Arab Spring to come to Palestine, where a third intifada has been repeatedly prophesied—whether against Israeli occupation, the Palestinian Authority, or both. But this is trite. There will no doubt be occasional flare-ups at a few friction points in the West Bank and East Jerusalem—most obviously in the Old City's al-Haram al-Sharif—and along the Israel-Gaza border, but these will be the exception. More likely is that the integration of the Palestinian territories and population into the system of Israeli control—political, economic, administrative, and social—that has been ongoing since 1967 will continue indefinitely.

Several factors account for this. Regional conflicts have displaced the Palestine question as a central concern for at least three decades. The list is long: the grinding 1980s Iran-Iraq war, 1990–1991 Gulf conflict, Yemen's 1994 war, 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Sudan's separation following a decades-long civil war, NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya, and the ongoing strife in Syria and the Sahel are only the most prominent highlights. The rivalry over Iran's nuclear program remains a constant shadow, while the degeneration of internal security in the Sinai and the incessant slaughter by car bombs in Iraq presage what could happen elsewhere.

The Arab Spring has reinforced the trend. Domestic politics increasingly drive the behaviour of Arab states in foreign affairs, obvious examples being the way the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq and the administrations of both former Egyptian president Mohammad Morsi and the interim regime that has taken over since his overthrow on July 3 have responded to the Syrian crisis. The dominance of domestic concerns will be protracted, given the depth and scale of the social and economic challenges facing many Arab countries. Even if most avoid

armed conflict and the level of destruction experienced in Libya, or especially in Syria, they will nonetheless be mired in political struggles and reconstruction efforts for years to come.

This is why the assumption by Hamas that it has devised a more successful strategy to attain Palestinian independence and rights has been proven wrong. The political gains made by the Muslim Brotherhood or similar "centrist" Islamist movements in Egypt and North Africa—and even in Turkey—are being challenged, and the promise of Qatari activism is in retreat. Egypt's Morsi never lived up to Hamas's hopes for breaking the siege of Gaza, which has become even tighter since the Egyptian president's ouster, and the break with Syria is now proving more costly since the damage to Hamas's financial and military ties with Iran is no longer balanced by gains in access and material support from Arab countries.

The mainstream Palestinian nationalist movement Fatah and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank have not gained what Hamas has lost. Although they have done what Hamas has consistently refused to do—recognize Israel and engage in direct negotiations—the Arab Spring has undermined their approach by eroding the assumption that a two-state solution is the most obvious and effective way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This may seem counterintuitive, but the geopolitical map of the Levant has been redrawn over the past decade in ways that suggest the viability of sub-state entities that fall short of full, sovereign statehood. The Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq is a foremost example, and it may be followed by varying levels of autonomy within unitary or federal states for Kurdish or other communities in Syria and elsewhere.

Extending and perpetuating the Israeli-Palestinian status quo is certainly not a preferable outcome, but is something with which regional and international powers have shown they can live. This is most evident in relation to the United States, which, by privileging diplomatic process over substance for the past twenty years, made it possible to speak of Palestinian rights while tacitly acquiescing to the deepening spatial, functional, and legal integration of the Palestinian territories into Israel in its pre-1967 borders. Indeed, this has been the characteristic feature of U.S. policy since before the establishment of Israel in 1948. Writing in 1946, for example, then U.S. president Harry Truman described the Palestinian question as "a most difficult problem and I have about come to the conclusion that there is no solution, but we will keep trying."

Little has changed in U.S. core convictions or policy more than sixty years later. Paradoxically, the striving of the principal Palestinian political actors to attain statehood has also reinforced the trend. The state-building drives of Fatah since 1993 (if not much earlier) and of Hamas in Gaza since 2007, coupled with the opportunity to construct political systems within the wider envelope of Israeli control, turned these movements into status quo actors in ways that neither has been able to fundamentally challenge. The status quo was never static, certainly not in the past twenty

years of Palestinian autonomy, but the Israeli control system proved exceptionally successful at adapting and reproducing itself.

There is a sobering historical lesson here. The "Oslo phase" has now lasted longer than the system of internal control set up by Israel in 1949, soon after its own establishment, to control the minority of Palestinian Arabs who remained within its borders, which lasted until 1966. This system combined military administration over the Arab community with its legal and spatial separation from the Jewish majority within a shared national territory and economy.

Throughout this early phase—and ever since—there was a continuing struggle over land and demography based on ethno-national rivalry, during which the Israeli security and political establishments controlled Palestinian citizens by co-opting community elders and village mukhtars through a variety of "brokers." The system was resisted by younger activists both before and since 1967, who challenged their own patriarchal leaders while debating whether to struggle for complete autonomy and separation from Israel or for full juridical equality and social integration.

In much the same way as Israeli control techniques were extended across the 1949 armistice line into the territories occupied in 1967, they were adapted and replicated after 1993. There are important differences, but the similarities are disturbing: military administration, legal and spatial separation, and a politics of co-optation based on rewards and punishments in which not only Fatah but also Hamas have become implicated. And although a younger generation of activists has sought repeatedly to challenge these structures, it too is torn between divergent political strategies and goals.

The resilience of the Israeli control system has enabled it to emerge stronger than before. It is also more sophisticated, since it now deals with several distinct subsets of Palestinians: those who have juridical equality as Israeli citizens, those with contingent rights as resident aliens in East Jerusalem, those with even more limited status in the West Bank and, even lower on the scale, the inhabitants of Gaza. International financial assistance upholds the system, in effect, but was it to stop Israel would almost certainly compensate by loosening economic and travel restrictions to allow a greater flow of capital and increased domestic revenue into the West Bank and Gaza, even while maintaining overall control of border crossings, currency, communications, and so on.

In the Arab Spring countries, everything is subject to complete renegotiation: the form and purpose of politics, the nature and identity of the state, and the basic assumptions and dynamics of state-society relations. But the opposite is true in Palestine, where the prospect is one of unequal but continuous integration into the overarching Israeli control system. It may be difficult to see how such a trajectory can endure since it is bound to face challenges from within and

without, but it is even more difficult to see how it cannot endure since it has no obvious challengers.

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