**Until October 7 We Ignored the Palestinian Problem. Now We’re Paying the Price**

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The Hamas attack on October 7 shattered the wall of denial and placed the Palestinian problem back on the center stage of Israeli, regional, and global discourse. After years of relegating the Palestinian question to the sidelines; after false claims by the prime minister about the “most peaceful” decade for Israel's security; after the Israeli public has become enamored with the deceptive status quo; after falling for the illusion that Israel would be able to establish relations with Arab countries while bypassing the Palestinian problem—the conflict has raised its ugly head and is forcing us to confront the painful reality.

Over the past year and a half our research group, Tamrur-Politography, has undertaken a multidisciplinary and broad-based endeavor to create a comprehensive database to trace developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over time and identify trajectories of change. Our analysis reveals that many in Israel and abroad disregarded the Palestinian problem prior to October 7th , and only few warned that ignoring the elephant in the room and failing to prepare a diplomatic plan to address it, would eventually come back to hurt us.

Our project presents a social anatomy of the multisystemic failure that can help explain the current conflagration in the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Dr. Maoz Rosenthal found that the decisions of the 35th, 36th, and 37th Israeli governments (2020–2023) and the discussions of the committees in the 23rd, 24th, and 25th Knessets on the conflict were few in number and focused exclusively on steps to promote annexation. An analysis of leadership discourse in social media showed a similar trend. Specifically, over 70,000 tweets posted by the heads of all the political parties between December 2018 and May 2023 indicate a low level of attention to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Most of the tweets on the issue came from the heads of the religious right-wing and secular left-wing parties, both of whom focused mainly on the annexation option (whether they supported or opposed this policy). The leaders of the center parties preferred not to address the issue at all. The Palestinian problem was demoted to the corner of political discourse rendering it almost entirely absent.

As for the Palestinian leadership, Dr. Ronit Marzen analyzed 33 speeches by Mahmud Abbas and 15 by Ismail Haniya over the period 2021–2022. Both leaders sought to change attitudes and bring the Palestinian cause back to center stage by amplifying the Palestinian national narrative. Abbas in his speeches called to end the occupation and reach a permanent agreement through a concerted diplomatic campaign directed at the international community and moderate Arab leaders, and through partnership in the war on terror in the Middle East. Haniya attempted to persuade the international community and Arab leaders to recognize the legitimacy of "armed resistance." The word “peace” appeared dozens of times in Abbas’s discourse, but only once in Haniya's, and only in reference to a “false peace.”

We sought to examine whether the Israeli press had also evaded discussion of the conflict and possible diplomatic solutions. Dr. Rosenthal studied the attitude of the Israeli press through an analysis of 38,774 headlines that appeared on the front pages of Haaretz, Yediot Acharonot, and Israel Hayom from the beginning of 2018 to the end of May 2023. Haaretz covered the conflict more frequently than the other newspapers and focused on the issue of annexation; the other two newspapers focused on security incidents. All three newspapers refrained from presenting possible solutions to the conflict. The Israeli press effectively reflected the political atmosphere in Israel, ignoring discourse on territorial solutions.

Along with our analyses of the political elite and the press, we also examined whether public discourse and public opinion among Israelis and Palestinians is consistent with those of the political leadership. Prof. Moran Yarchi analyzed Israeli public discourse on the conflict between February 2021 and February 2023 (based on a sample of 14,972 Facebook posts and 24,410 tweets). She found that public involvement (likes, replies, and shares) to posts discussing various policy alternatives attracted a low level of attention relative to online political discourse in general. Those who did show some involvement with policy alternatives, tended to support solutions that are based on territorial compromise such as a bilateral agreement or unilateral separation, and to oppose solutions based on continued occupation, such as annexation of territories or the status quo.

Prof. Gilad Hirschberger and Prof. Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler conducted 14 surveys among Jewish Israelis and three among Arab citizens of Israel between 2018 and 2023. In addition, surveys of settlers in the West Bank were conducted in 2016, 2018, and 2023. The findings show a trend of increasing extremism among Jewish Israelis regarding the conflict and the preferred territorial solutions. Prior to October 7, the surveys showed a gradual decline in support for the two-state solution among the Jewish public and an increased preference for the status quo, which effectively means a process of creeping annexation.

October 7 changed these trends to some degree. While support for a two-state solution dropped to an all-time low, there was a significant upturn in support for unilateral separation, along with a drop in support for the status quo. Thus, Israelis after October 7th still want to separate from the Palestinians, but do not believe it will be possible to reach a bilateral agreement with them.

A trend toward extremism can also be seen among the settlers, who comprise around five percent of the Israeli public. In 2016, a significant proportion of settlers were willing to consider evacuating settlements as part of a peace agreement, or to even consider immediate evacuation for monetary compensation. Since then, however, the level of willingness to accept such scenarios has fallen sharply, not only among ideological settlers, but also among “quality-of-life settlers.” Arab citizens of Israel are the only group that, for the most part, still supports the two-state solution, although they do not believe that this solution is acceptable to Israeli Jews or to Palestinians. It should also be noted that Arab citizens have intensified their identification with Israel since October 7.

Dr. Marzen examined the discourse of 25 online social influencers (from the Palestinian Diaspora, Israel, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip) over the period 2021–2023. These social influencers focused mainly on promoting justice for the Palestinian cause, presenting the suffering of Palestinians to the outside world, and securing empathy from Israeli, Arab, and Western audiences for Palestinian national rights. They paid less attention to the question or two states or one. Opinion polls conducted among Palestinians support this analysis and show that for some time the Palestinian public has shifted support away from diplomatic solutions to support for armed confrontation as a means of achieving their goals.

On the regional level, we examined the positions of several Arab countries: Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Dr. Moran Zaga analyzed 538 documents from 2018 through mid-2023, including speeches, statements, decisions, media reports, and interviews that included references to the Israeli-Palestinian arena. The study showed that Qatar is the country that exerts the strongest economic influence on the conflict. However, the countries closest to the Israeli-Palestinian arena geographically—Egypt and Jordan—are the most active in advocating and promoting a diplomatic solution.

The UAE is the country that made the most references to annexation plans. All of the countries examined support the establishment of a Palestinian state based on a two-state solution within the May 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. It appears that the Abraham Accords did not change the position of the Arab countries concerning the principles for a diplomatic solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Dr. Nimrod Novik examined the international system as reflected in the protocols of parliamentary discussions (EU, France, UK, Germany, and the US Congress), as well as statements by international presidents and foreign ministries. His study, covering the period from the beginning of 2020 through the end of September 2023, found an ongoing trend toward a loss of focus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Indeed, the only figure who consistently made comments concerning the two-state solution was US President Joe Biden. Conversely, the US Congress and State Department increasingly made statements that seemed to reflect reduced commitment to the two-state solution.

The second half of 2023 saw the beginning of a reversal of this trend in the US Administration and its associated institutions. The effort by the US to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the use of this process by the Saudis, through the US, to raise demands for changes to Israel’s policy in the Territories (particularly the blocking of annexation moves) again highlighted the need for the Administration to focus on the conflict.

This renewed interest in the two-state solution reached a peak in October 2023 following the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip. The US Administration reinstated its commitment to a two-state agreement, from what had previously come to seem like lip service, into a key component of its policy for the “day after” the war.

The reduced interest of US officials in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before October 7th is also reflected in American public opinion. Polls conducted by Hirschberger and Hirsch-Hoefler toward the end of 2023 found that most of the public in the US is not interested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A majority of US citizens regard Israel as the national home of the Jewish people, and not as a settler-colonialist state, and a majority sees Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and supports US aid for Israel. However, the US public is divided regarding the extent of sympathy the Administration should show for Israel. While most US citizens still support a two-state solution, there is clear sign of change among the younger generation, which does not show sympathy for Israel.

This extensive review shows that the policy of avoiding discussion of permanent solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict adopted by recent Israeli governments headed by Benjamin Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett was also shared by the leadership, the media, and Israeli society, as well as by the US Administration (with the exception of President Biden), US society, and the UN. The Palestinians and the Arab world (with the exception of Hamas) discussed the need to resolve the conflict by means of a two-state solution.

The prevarication and lack of will to formulate clear policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict created a vacuum that was filled by Hamas in its horrific attack on October 7. If it seemed before that Israel could live with the conflict and behave as if it did not exist, it is clear now that this is Israel’s fundamental problem. If we imagined that the world had lost interest in the conflict, the Palestinian cause is now proclaimed from the halls of college campuses across the US to the International Court in The Hague. If we dreamt of Middle East peace while bypassing the Palestinian problem, it is now obvious that there will not be calm in the region until a stable solution is found to this bloody conflict.

The events of October 7 provided some notable achievements for Hamas, including the return of the Palestinian issue to center stage. The achievement is manifested not only in the rekindling of global discourse but also in the tone of this discourse, which questions Israel’s right to exist and rejects pragmatic solutions.

In the face of this extremist approach, Israel must bring forward brave and responsible leaders who can ensure a Jewish and democratic future for the State of Israel by aspiring to a solution based on painful compromises with the Palestinians while maintaining Israel’s security interests.

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