

IRAN, THE ARAB SPRING, & PALESTINE



REPORT

Ramallah, Palestine, 7 January 2012

This workshop addressed Palestinian perspectives on the nuclear file of Iran and the dangers posed by possible future military action against Iranian nuclear facilities. Historic efforts at reconciliation among Palestinian parties and current strategies emphasizing non-violent approaches were highlighted.



STATEMENT FROM THE PUGWASH SECRETARY GENERAL

As this report was being prepared, we learned that Dr. Aziz Dweik, speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council has been arrested and will be detained for six months in prison without trial by the Israeli military. Dr. Dweik recently spent three years in an Israeli jail, sharing the fate of all too many Palestinians who are arrested and held by Israeli authorities. We call for a prompt release of Dr. Dweik and express our solidarity with him and his family.

Dr. Dweik actively participated in our meeting in Ramallah. He was openly and clearly supporting peaceful resistance against Israeli occupation, and was engaged in creative discussions on how to promote and foster an environment more conducive to peace.

Pugwash supports peaceful confrontation and dialogue among different sides, and its *raison d'être* is to help prevent conflicts, especially in areas where nuclear weapons are present. It is always regrettable when violent and coercive methods prevail. In this spirit, we will wait for and monitor the prompt release of Dr. Dweik.

Professor Paolo Cotta-Ramusino
26 January 2012
Milan, Italy

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SUMMARY

- Palestinians are deeply concerned that Israel and the West are pushing Iran into a corner, and that the end result of this pressure may be to push Iran to make a decision to developing actual nuclear weapons as opposed of just edging towards the capability to build nuclear weapons.
- Palestinians fear any possible military strike may lead to wider destabilization of the region, that an Iranian retaliatory response could have devastating impact on Palestine, including increased repression on their population from Israel.
- Palestinians are in favor of efforts to strengthen international non-proliferation regime, and say that a future Palestinian state would abide by and implement the recognized agreements and treaties.
- Many Palestinians are not interested in negotiations or discussions with Israelis in Track 2 and are deeply skeptical about the official talks with the Israelis. There is instead support for efforts to promote an international boycott and sanctions of Israel. Some stressed the need for an international protection of the Palestinian people.
- Meanwhile, what they believe to be “historic” reconciliation among Palestinian parties is moving forward, with key agreement among Hamas, Fatah and others accepting a two-state solution based on 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital (including mutual recognition) and pursuit of a non-violent strategy.
- There are some who say that if Israel will not negotiate a two state solution, Palestinians will eventually have to live with a one-state democratic solution. Some disagree with this view.
- Palestinians of all sides expressed frustration that Israel’s move to the right and a series of Israeli actions (new settlements, destruction of Palestinian houses, the Wall, checkpoints, the situation in East Jerusalem, etc.) will increasingly radicalize parts of the Palestinian population. Many feel the Iran focus is detracting unnecessarily from addressing Palestinian’s core concerns.
- Efforts to engage the international community and media in promoting understanding of the Palestinian narrative are having limited success. Some felt that a special effort should be made to engage policymakers in DC, specifically for a better understanding of Hamas positions on non-violence and a two-state solution.

- Though it is not planned at this time, if the Palestinian youth were to decide in future to take to the streets in large numbers, there is a strong belief among Palestinians that the world could not turn its back on them.

REPORT

On 7 January 2011, the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, in association with the Palestinian Pugwash Group, convened a small and informal roundtable in Ramallah. Fourteen participants met at the Center for Continuing Education of Berzeit University for the day-long session, and explored the following topics:

1. The Iranian nuclear file and the proposed nuclear or weapons of mass destruction free zone in the Middle East.
2. The situation in Palestine, especially regarding negotiations and relations between Hamas and Fatah.
3. A proposed Pugwash meeting in Gaza on the economic development of Gaza.

The meeting was held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules. As a result, no statement can be attributed to any individual, but the substance of discussions can be reported out.¹ There was no attempt to achieve consensus, but rather, as in all Pugwash meetings, the goal was to encourage the sharing of diverse perspectives. Our agenda was not focused on systematically reviewing the historic grievances, and without minimizing the importance to all sides of the history, this report attempts only to provide a snapshot of the conversation at the time of our meeting.

Iran

The Ramallah consultation took place a day after Pugwash convened a roundtable discussion in Herzliya, Israel on “The Nuclear Program of Iran.” Several of the international participants reported some of the main substantive points they took from the previous day’s discussions.

According to one participant, Israelis seem “resigned” to the idea of conflict with Iran over its nuclear program. While the middle of the spectrum in Israel may believe that war is not in Israel’s interest, given the nature of Israeli politics, there was a concern that “they are talking themselves into it.” One participant noted that while in private conversations some Israelis were perhaps more nuanced, he was concerned about what he perceived as an increasing trend toward “groupthink” in the current discourse (another referred to a “collective paranoia”). One participant noted that in speaking in other contexts with Likud members there was no ambiguity. The Likud line is either that sanctions work or there will be a strike in six months.

There appeared to be an overriding sense among Israelis that international negotiations with Iran are no longer a viable option. While some of the international participants doubt Israel would follow through on

¹ This report is prepared by Pugwash Senior Program Coordinator Sandra Ionno Butcher, who has sole responsibility for the content (sibutcher@earthlink.net). The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the rapporteur, the Pugwash Conferences or any of the sponsoring organizations. Pugwash appreciates the support for its Middle East project provided by the Norwegian MFA, the Carnegie Corporation, other funders and our national groups.

the threats, they noted with alarm “desperation in their voices.” Israel’s talking points have long floated the prospect of attack, but the new driver is the fear that parts of Iran’s nuclear program may become invulnerable to Israeli attack in the next years (as enunciated by Israeli Defense Minister Barak’s claim that Iran may enter a “zone of immunity” in a few months, as Iran further buries some of its nuclear assets underground). There seemed to be a strong hope among some influential Israelis that the US would take military action for them, though it is not at all certain the US would do so. The US, one participant said, is “more prudent” and is trying to put a brake on Israeli efforts to push them toward military action.

While Iran is seen by most to be seeking military nuclear *capability*, in the US, it was noted, there is not agreement among experts that Iran has as of yet taken a decision to weaponize. In Israel there appeared to be a strong consensus that the decision has been made. Iranians say they do not want nuclear weapons, but many believe they are clearly getting closer to at least having a real capability..

Iran perceives itself as being under attack from constant accusations, sanctions, threats of military attack, explosions, and other acts of sabotage. There is a strong possibility that this intense international pressure on Iran may backfire, and push Iran further in the direction of weaponization.

Some think that more effort should be put into finding a diplomatic solution. As one participant said, “The only alternative is to be more open-minded, and to understand that [the Iranians] want nuclear energy under serious control, without discrimination.”

Impact of the Iran nuclear controversy on Palestine

There was deep concern among Palestinian colleagues that the West is pushing Iran to nuclear weaponization, and that the impact of these moves might threaten Palestine, the region, and the broader international community. Some noted that the policy of pushing an enemy into a corner without giving this enemy an alternative can backfire. As one Palestinian said, “Pushing Iran might become a detriment for the whole region.”

Some Palestinians did not believe that Israel would follow through on their military threats, while others disagreed and thought that the Israeli leadership might launch a military attack/war against Iran, saying the Israeli leadership are “fanatics.”

They said it might not be possible to stop a “cold” war between Israel and Iran but a “hot” war against Iran should be stopped. One participant said, Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians have watched the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and they are fed up with wars and would be against anyone initiating a new war in the Middle East. There was concern that the atmosphere created by military action against Iranian facilities would leave less space for Palestinian issues.

A diversion?



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K. Simonen

Someone said that Palestinians in a sense recognize that Ahmadinejad is the best ally of Israel, in that every statement he makes regarding destroying Israel, Israel becomes more willing to “victimize” itself to acquire weapons and political support. As one participant said, “the Palestine-Israel conflict is probably the largest wound in the Middle East” and Iran uses this wound to establish itself as a major presence in the region.

Palestinian participants rejected the notion that there is any link between the Iran-Israel conflict and the issues between Israel and Palestine. Some say that while Israel tries to give an impression that the threat from Iran and the Syrian threat (linked to Iran), deserve priority, they don’t see “how or why even if there were a threat from Iran it justifies continued Israeli settlement expansion.”

They say that if there is any link, it “plays in the opposite direction.” One could say that Iran is using its support for the Palestinians to increase its popularity and to generate hostility against Israel among the Arab population. Logically, they say, it would be in Israel’s interests to move faster to solve the Palestinian conflict to remove this argument from Iran’s approach and propaganda. The international community, they say, should not allow Israel to use the Iran-Israel confrontation to allow Israel to justify escaping its obligations under international law.

There is a lack of sympathy in Palestine when Israel talks of Iran as an existential threat, since they believe Palestine lives under such a threat 24 hours a day. “There is no peace in any room or for any child in Palestine,” one person said. They point out that it was Europeans who were responsible for the horrendous crimes of the Holocaust, and yet Palestinians have the feeling they are paying the price.

One participant commented that he is old enough to remember when Israel’s big problem was the Soviet Union, then Egypt, then Syria, then Iraq. Now it is Iran. If the Iran problem is solved, they say pessimistically, tomorrow Israel will seek another country to portray as its enemy.

Impact of possible military strike

The possible effects of military action against Iranian facilities could be severe and have long-term effect on the region. If Israel, as a non-NPT member with nuclear weapons, attacks an NPT member which does not possess nuclear weapons, this will have enormous negative consequences for the NPT regime and possible further nuclear proliferation in the region.

Iran says clearly that if its nuclear facilities are attacked, they will attack Israel with conventional weapons (missiles). This would be, according to one participant, a “potential disaster.”

If Iran retaliates militarily against Israel, Palestinians fear it would have a very negative impact on Palestine, leaving them “much more trapped” than they are at present. There is a strong worry that Israel might take further serious steps against the Palestinians, under the guise of security. There is concern on the Palestinian side that Israel is now using or in the future will use the Iran issue to “cover up” what it intends to do with Palestine.

If the West continues to push Iran to weaponize, this then raises the possibility of a future nuclear war in the region, which all agreed would be a catastrophe of the highest level.

Changing nature of Iran’s regional role (and ties to Hamas)

The question of Hamas-Iran ties was discussed. According to some, Hamas is “always presented as an Iran outfit” but this relationship is exaggerated. It has always been “a marriage of convenience”

established in 2006 when the West and Egypt stood against Hamas and cut off money and dialogue. This left Hamas with “no choice” but to accept Iranian support. “You need to feed people,” said one participant. Someone said, “Don’t blame me if you have closed walls around me and forced me to go in this direction.” Some say Hamas has shown independence in the struggles and political alliances in the region “in each and every stage” and that even the rivals of Hamas agree it has shown independence in its actions, turning at times toward Turkey and Egypt, for example, rather than Iran.

One participant noted, “There is no organic ideology between Palestinians and Iranian ideology.” Some pointed out that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is in fact a more natural ally for Hamas. According one participant, Hamas would prefer “1000 million times” to have relations with Saudi Arabia as opposed to Iran. Others urged caution about this model, as there is more freedom of thinking allowed in Iran than Saudi Arabia.

Some raised the question, however, as to whether or not the internal Palestinian conflict between Hamas and Fatah also create an opportunity that Iran takes profit of. It plays into Iran’s hands when the international community fails to see a comprehensive and unified Palestinian “common front.” Others point out that an improvement of the relationship between Hamas and Fatah could clear out some of the issue of what one participant termed “Iran dependency.”

Toward a Middle Eastern nuclear or WMD free zone?

One participant said that the only reason why any country in this region would be “crazy enough” to get nuclear weapons now is the fact that Israel has nuclear weapons already. Any country potentially can justify going down that route because Israel has nuclear weapons. Most believe that Israel will have to give up its nuclear weapons, or there will be another situation like between India and Pakistan.

A possible future regional nuclear war would be a catastrophe of the highest levels.

Possible Palestinian contributions and CBMs

- Palestine could help facilitate contact between Iran and the Arab world to help find diplomatic ways to solve the problem and to help Iran feel less isolated.
- The Palestinian President should be invited to attend the forthcoming 2012 WMD Free Zone meeting in Finland as a full participant. The facilitator, Amb. Jaakko Laajava should consult with Palestinians and engage with them on this important issue.
- The Palestinian leadership (president) might consider a statement that reinforces Palestine’s intention to join the NPT, CWC, BWC and CTBT and to follow the (Japan-type) three non-nuclear principles. Most agreed it would be worthwhile and possible to pursue such a statement (exact wording to be defined).

Palestine, Reconciliation, and the “Arab Spring”?

Palestinians believe that Israel incorrectly “thinks it can have peace with Arabs and Muslim and not necessarily withdraw from Palestinian territory.” They say Israel cannot enjoy peace with Arabs and Muslims while excluding Palestinians. Palestinians, as one participant said, “have a right to be part of the equation.”

Some wondered why Israel did not use the opportunities provided by the changes in the Middle East to rethink its relations with Palestine, especially given the fact this potentially could counter Iran's regional intentions. However, there seems to be little compulsion for Israel to act on the Palestine issue.

The grievances against Israel are many and well known. Repeated in the meeting, Palestinian colleagues emphasized that Israeli actions are "against recognized international norms" and expressed dismay at the lack of international attention on their plight. Issues include the expansion of settlements in the West Bank, the erosion of civil liberties in E. Jerusalem, continued extension of the "discrimination wall," the "humiliation of checkpoints," grabbing land, demolishing homes, injuring people. It was noted with particular bitterness, for example, that some thousands of very old olive trees were uprooted last year by settlers. Some thought it hypocritical to focus on Islamic extremism, when no one is looking at the extremist settlers who are "totally destroying the Palestinian infrastructure." Distrust runs deep about Israeli intentions, and some say the history is clear that Israel has always intended to have the land of Palestine without its people.

These moves are occurring at a time of historic change in the Middle East. All Arabs are watching the news via internet and satellites, said one participant. And they are talking about Palestinian issues. Some thought the Palestinians should try several options to profit from the new movements in the Arab World and to construct more systems of Arab solidarity. Some thought that Israel's relation with Egypt would be basically unchanged, others questioned this interpretation, and believed that Egypt will most likely shift its position.

A Palestinian Spring?

There is a feeling that the "Palestinian Spring" is in the making, that it is "being cooked" and "getting hot." The 15 March 2011 youth march, "created a pulse, but not a spring," perhaps due to the reaction of the political parties. However, it led to the announcement of Abu Mazen going to Gaza, and this triggered hope that something was going to happen.

The Palestinian youth "took a rest to give the parties space to reconcile." However, one participant noted that the Palestinian youth (including the independents) will not wait. They have been inspired by the marchers in Cairo, Tunis, etc. Any political party will be judged on the success or failure of reconciliation, and must take the youth perspective into account if it wants to continue to exist.



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The new Palestinian strategy, according to one participant, can be defined as:

1. Non-violence
2. Internal unity
3. An enhanced international solidarity campaign (including an international boycott)
4. Changing the internal Palestinian economy

Someone asked, why aren't Palestinians marching to the settlements? If Palestinians took to the street, the international community could not ignore it, and they could not ignore the fact, if in response, Israel killed Palestinians who were on the streets. In the context of the Arab Spring, one participant said, if Palestinians took to the street, "the world won't turn back."

Boycott and sanctions against Israel

Palestinians see themselves as having on a purely logical basis three options:

1. Armed struggle
2. Nonviolent resistance
3. Staying silent/business as usual

Inaction is not acceptable; therefore the choice is between armed struggle and non-violence. The Palestinian leadership on all sides has agreed there will be no armed struggle. They will push for peaceful resistance via a boycott, divestment and pressures for sanctions, drawing on the South African model. (Desmond Tutu reportedly said the situation in Palestine is worse than it was in South Africa.) In two months' time, according to one participant, one will likely see Palestinian youth asking shops not to sell Israeli produce.

The goal is to "shock Israeli society to wake up and understand what they are doing to the Palestinian people." They hope to generate political, economic and social pressure to "make this occupation of territory expensive to Israel so it one day will withdraw."

Inter-Palestinian Reconciliation

There have been some very encouraging signs that reconciliation might be achieved. "This is the only choice we have. This year, 2012, is the year of reconciliation," said one participant, who emphasized "united we stand, divided we fall." One participant said that there is "unprecedented unity" among all Palestinian groups on 1) acceptance of the two-states on the basis of the 1967 borders, and 2) acceptance of a non-violent, popular strategy. This has been elaborated by Hamas leaders "in the most clear way," it is "unequivocal."

The 22-24 December 2011 Cairo talks were considered to be "great discussions." Four parties met with the Egyptian government to discuss important issues, including the election. A committee was established to nominate the national election committee. All political parties agreed to the names put forward and it was endorsed by the President and a national decree was issued. An important committee on freedoms was established, including issues such as an agreement to release political prisoners in the West Bank and Gaza, freedom of the press, facilitating news between the West Bank and Gaza, freedom of expression and social activism, etc. The third committee explores national reconciliation, to deal with the effects of the division and bloodshed that took place in 2006, in order to "heal the wounds and compensate the families" who lost loved ones in the internal conflict.

The last day of the Cairo meetings was considered "historic" as Hamas and Jihad joined for the first time the PLO committee for the temporary leadership framework of the PLO. Dates and deadlines were set for achieving goals (one person said that each paragraph in the reconciliation paper has some timetable. 31 January is a deadline for establishing a unified government in Palestine and Gaza. The united PLC will meet 1 February. The territory leadership agreed to meet monthly. The committees have already

started meeting in the West Bank and Gaza. According to one participant, “The breakthrough has happened, reconciliation is moving. There is a new atmosphere.”

However, it was noted that elements of the two parties remain entrenched, and it will not be easy to get reconciliation “at the press of a button.” However, some felt strongly that they cannot lose hope that reconciliation can continue, despite likely setbacks and negative developments. For example, participants discussed the example of the hindrance of a Fatah delegation when they tried to go to Gaza. Some say this was a “misunderstanding” by the “youngsters” on the crossing. They said that the Fatah delegation was “quick to leave” while senior Hamas officials were trying to correct the situation.

There was a strong feeling that Palestinian reconciliation efforts deserve strong international support. According to one participant, “The US, Japan, China or Iran, anyone who doesn’t like Palestinian reconciliation is against peace.”

Hamas positions

Current Hamas positions on several key issues were discussed. Participants said that Hamas leadership is “wholeheartedly with reconciliation” despite the fact the process is slow. Participants were told that Hamas has now agreed to the strategy of non-violent pressure. According to some, the literature of Hamas is clear that Hamas will accept a sovereign Palestinian state with the 1967 borders and East Jerusalem as its capital, and this has been reinforced by the Prime Minister of Hamas in Gaza in “clear terms.”

However, others believe that Hamas has not clearly enough accepted the two state solution. They say that accepting the 1967 borders and East Jerusalem as a capital can be understood in different ways. (Some thought it important to remember the significance for Palestinians of the agreement to accept the 1967 borders, as this would mean the state next to them would be “living on 90% stolen property from Palestinians.”) This was disputed by others, who said the Hamas positions are clear.

Talks

There was clearly a sense of fatigue among Palestinians regarding efforts to reach a peace agreement with Israel. “Talking all the time is tiresome,” said one. When there is “no fruit” from the talks, only failure after failure, “credibility becomes zero,” said one person. Some now oppose any talks while Israel is “violating international law.”

Palestinians say their side has fulfilled all obligations, including ending violence against Israel and developing Palestinian Authority institutions to the point where Palestine is now capable of being an independent state. They believe Israel has failed to live up to its obligations, most prominently to stop settlement activities. While some recognize the role Palestinian disunity may play, they said they “don’t see how Palestinian disunity justifies settlement activity.” Settlement activity, according to one participant, is the “main threat for the viability of peace



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now and in the future.” (It was pointed out that as we met in Ramallah, we were surrounded by three settlements.)

And more talks (Jordan)

There was some discussion of what many (or most) believed to be “futile” between Fatah and the Quartet in Jordan which were underway as our meeting took place. Most participants did not see any hope for the talks. According to one participant “no Palestinian” believes there will be any tangible outcome. One person said that “exploring possibilities” is “like going on a date with your wife after 20 years of marriage, it’s nonsense.” The only clear result, according to one participant, would be losing more ground with the Palestinians.

It was clear there is controversy among Palestinians about the advisability of President Abbas participating (some say there was disagreement among the Quartet as well). All the independents, Hamas and even a good number in the PLO reportedly opposed the talks. (One participant said, “Ninety percent of the Palestinians are against it, not only Hamas.”) Some believe that Palestinian President Abu Mazen didn’t go to Amman from his “personal choice,” as he has said he would not negotiate with Israel while settlements were moving forward, but that he was forced into it.

One participant said “leaving the Palestinians and Israelis alone is like leaving the lamb with the wolf.” The sides have been talking for 18 years, and meanwhile Israel has destroyed Palestinian infrastructure and taken land.

Non-violence?

Hamas is portrayed in the West, according to one participant, as “bloodthirsty.” If non-violence is the predominant message, and if it is true that it will never enter the head of Palestinians to think of eliminating Israel, these messages should be repeated constantly and backed by positive action. To the extent this can be promoted in internal reconciliation, the better. Adherence to non-violence will have to be strong enough to “make it work over time and in the face of provocation.” It is typical for an oppressor to get increasingly violent in the face of non-violent struggle, but the key is to continuing to suppress violent responses. (This will be difficult. It was noted that as Israel moves further to the right, more Palestinians are becoming extremist and entrenched.)

One potential area where an issue could spread to violence if greater international attention is not brought to bear, is the “strangulation of Gaza.” (There is no movement allowed between the West Bank and Gaza.) According to one participant, “Gaza is a very big prison, where about two million people are surrounded by air, sea and land (that can hardly be crossed).” “Do you think Gaza is idle while threatened,” asked one participant. It was noted that Israel is tightening, rather than loosening its control of the strip.

Mutual Recognition with Israel

Hamas has said it will give recognition to Israel only when it receives recognition from



Israel (they see what happened to the PLO once it recognized Israel as a negative example). Mutual recognition was an area identified for possible further exploration. (On this note, it was also highlighted that there have been some recent statements that if Israel does not recognize the Palestinian state with 1967 borders, then the PLO will withdraw its recognition of Israel. This, according to one participant, reflects the views of some “young Palestinian activists” but is not necessarily a consensus position.)

According to one person, after 1964 people in the region started talking about an existential threat to Israel. This is not, according to one participant, a Palestinian position, who referred to “some stupid statements” made by some, including Ahmadinejad. “When discussing the vanishing of the State of Israel, this is not practical at all. It doesn’t come to the imagination of Palestinians at all. We need to live in peace with Israel, a lasting, just, comprehensive peace is needed.”

One state?

There is a feeling among some that Israeli actions are “endangering the future possibility of two states.” The right-wing settlers in Palestinian territory are stirring a reaction on the Palestinian side, which leads, according to one participant, to a “process of radicalization of Palestinian public opinion.” There are some Palestinians who are beginning to think that if Israel refuses to leave Palestinian territory, it may be time to promote instead a one state solution. This, according to one participant, is the end result of what Israel is doing. “This is not a threat,” said one participant. It is the “most elegant solution” for Israel, though it implies Israel would not be a Jewish state, given the demographics. There is a misconception that Israel can be “democratic and a Jewish state at the same time.”

Others strongly disagreed with this floating of the one-state solution and said this “will never fly” and it is not a consensus or a majority position among Palestinians. Colleagues were reminded that when a group in Ramallah put up posters for a one-state solution, they were defaced.

Refusal to talk with Israelis at all levels?

There is a dichotomy, that the absence of a solution and the expansion of settlements makes the Israeli peace camp stronger, but the behavior of the Israeli government and Israel in general makes things difficult for those in Palestine pushing for peace. The Palestinian moderate leadership “gambled on the peace process” and their failure to get the promised end of occupation by peaceful means has undermined the leadership.

Many Palestinians currently believe talking to Israelis is “not of interest” and that “disengagement” is the best way forward. One participant said, “We talk with an Israeli at night and the next day his brother goes and kills someone....we are fed up.” Another said there is a “fine line between meetings that contribute to solutions and having meetings that cover a bad situation.” Most Palestinians have said that they do not see it useful any longer to talk to Israelis, especially at a Track 2 level. They said they have “no counterpart in Israel to talk with seriously about peace.” (Others pointed out that there are weekly demonstrations at the wall with Israelis and other international groups, but the numbers are small.)

The advisability of this strategy was questioned by some, who wondered if it might be “destroying the seeds” in Israeli society who might help to change the policy. Some thought it important to discuss in a Track 2 setting ways forward. Some felt that there is a “dramatic shift” among those in Israel who are more open-minded on these issues, and that a more forthcoming attitude from the Palestinian side at this time is critical or those in Israel pushing an anti-government position may become further weakened.

Others thought that attempting to stop all meetings with Israel as a total rejection of normalization might be deceiving, because some meetings will be necessary.

Some wondered if it is possible to change the Israeli narrative, to bring it back more to Rabin's message. It is important to change the dominant narrative that making progress on Palestine will weaken Israel in its dealings with Iran.

Participants raised questions as to what can be done by the West and with Palestinians to strengthen those in Israel who want to pursue peace. One participant said that there is a sense that those people in Israel who used to talk with the Palestinians feel powerless, and that they are also losing effectiveness within Israel.

Some commented with sadness on "what Israel is doing to itself." Israel is its own worst enemy, according to one participant, and seems to lack long-term thinking about its final goal. Some wondered what kind of Israel its people want. Issues of recent extremist views winning in Israel were worrying (for example, women being put on the back of buses, etc.)

Role of the US

One person said, the US has to be "an unbiased broker" between Palestine, the Arabs and others. There was disappointment expressed by Palestinians, who perceived the Obama administration as having failed to live up to expectations. "Actions speak louder than words," said one participant, who noted the Obama "preached well" in his Cairo speech and "later failed us." "The actions didn't in any sense match the words we heard from Obama." Obama decision not to support UN recognition of Palestine in September 2011 was a "disappointment to the Palestinian leadership."

While the Obama administration's immediate response to reconciliation was negative, said one participant, "read past the headlines." The real mood in the administration is very different and recognizes that in the long term reconciliation is essential to peace in the region. Top levels of the Obama administration support the president on this, as does Europe. While it might take years it is important to keep talking. As one participant said, "Maybe this Israeli government is deaf, but very powerful people in very powerful governments with influence in Israel are willing to listen."

Changing possible (mis)perceptions

It was noted that there is a serious mismatch between the US perceptions of the Hamas position and the sorts of perspectives shared in our meeting. According to one participant, "Most Americans would be shocked" to hear the positions outlined in our meeting. It was suggested that perhaps a broader communications angle would be helpful and perhaps crucial. In this respect, a few items would need to be addressed.

1. Given the fact that Iran is "US enemy number one," it will be necessary to "defeat the narrative" that there is a strong alliance between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas.
2. The Israeli security elite believe they are engaged in a proxy war with Iran (their language), which poses an existential threat to Israel. They say the instruments Iran is using are Hezbollah and Hamas. As a result, Israel's concerns about Iran are not just on the nuclear side, but they see a direct security threat to Israel from Iran's connections in the region.
3. Hamas is listed on the US state terror list. Since 9-11, according to one participant, "anti-terrorism is the single core point of US strategy." Being on the "wrong side of that line" will

strongly cement the positions of Israel and DC. The US believes that Hamas is dedicated to the elimination of Israel. This sounds inaccurate given perspectives shared in this meeting, but past speeches are invoked all the time to promote this view. There is a perception in DC that Israel is protecting the US from threats emanating from this area.

To the extent that these sorts of perceptions can be corrected, the better. Washington will say that actions speak louder than words.

Someone commented that “99% of the US Congress is on the side of Israel.” They said that this limits Obama in an election year. It was noted that in DC, the American Task Force on Palestine is “pathetic” and this contrasts dramatically with the role of pro-Israeli groups in Washington politics. Some encouraged Palestinians to have more activity in DC and Europe, and it may be helpful to go to this environment with Western Europeans, Americans and some counterparts from Israel. The emphasis could be on human rights and how peace with the Palestinians would increase Israel’s security.



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Media

From the Palestinian perspective, the “biggest problem is media.” “The struggle will never succeed unless the narrative succeeds,” according to one participant. In this respect, one of the participants highlighted a new DVD, “Our Story,” that has been created to try to convey their message. Palestinians say they need to think how to influence mainstream media in the USA. They have explored the possibility of an English speaking TV station, but there is not enough financial support. Some suggested making better use of Al Jazeera, but others said this also can be expensive.

Some said that the support for Israel in the US and Western media has increased, but others thought it is important to separate out the support for Israel vis-à-vis Iran versus other human rights issues, such as the flotilla, the wall, and the Gaza attack last year. (Some noted support for Israel is more apparent at government levels—except for Iceland—but that public opinion is more in favor of Palestinians.)

One participant said that since February last year, there has not been any military action from Palestinians except in response to Israeli attacks. This is a change that has not been noted in the media. Rather, if Israel attacks nothing is mentioned, even if someone is killed. If one missile is fired back and no one is hurt, the negative media focus is on the Palestinians.

Participants expressed a willingness to speak with American media, especially the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*. Past efforts have not been successful. Some thought that if Hamas is accepting a two-state solution, and willing to recognize the existence of Israel if they receive recognition, then this would be very useful to further push into the media.

What next?

Palestinians point out that their cause is supported by some 180 states which recognize the “dire need” of Palestinians to determine their own future, including Egypt, Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, Libya, the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, Russia, China, and Turkey. It is time, one participant said, “to highlight the resentment among nations” and “to end the state of denial.” Someone needs to “tell Israel enough is enough.” Continued denial could bring more troubles to the entire region and is a “threat to international peace” according to one participant.

The role of international NGOs like Pugwash and the diplomatic community is essential, since the voice of Palestinian voices “fall on deaf ears.” This is urgent, according to this perspective, since Palestine is connected to most of the major issues of the world.

Some possible next steps surfaced in discussion, though this was not the main focus of the meeting and so these are incomplete.

- Reconciliation should be completed soon
- Palestinians will promote the boycott and sanctions against Israel
- Palestinians could explore additional means to clearly and unequivocally reinforce any new consensus between various groups on the acceptance of a two-state solution by all parties (based on 1967 borders and E. Jerusalem as its capital), the intention to recognize Israel once they receive recognition, and the reliance on non-violence. Further efforts should be made to brief Americans and Europeans as to this narrative.
- Palestinians could further explore options the “Arab Spring” has created for them, including reaching out to the political Islamic movements
- UN recognition remains a goal
- An international peace conference might provide a more creative format for discussions
- International protection could be explored (perhaps via the UN?)
- Identifying some small steps or confidence building measures would be helpful (such as statements that settlers taking Palestinian land cannot continue to acquire it by force, Israel could in some way admit its injustice)
- The Palestinian refugee situation must be addressed
- One participant pointed out that Israel could “withdraw tomorrow” from the West Bank if it wanted to, it is “not a big deal” and could defuse some of the major tensions in the region
- A meeting, perhaps in Western Europe, focused on human rights issues in Palestine might be useful, especially if it were to include Americans (including Jewish Americans), Palestinians from all sides, and other experts

Future Pugwash meetings

Pugwash was encouraged to hold another meeting in the West Bank, perhaps on a larger scale. Engaging Jewish Americans and Palestinian Americans would be very useful. At this time it was felt it would not be possible to involve Israelis. Someone suggested holding the next meeting in Hebron.

In addition, there was support for a possible Pugwash meeting in Gaza in early February (after the 2 February meeting in Gaza), to explore the future of Gaza.

Conclusion

Pugwash as an organization promotes dialogue across divides in areas of nuclear risk. All participants welcomed the opportunity to engage in discussions on key issues related to Palestinian efforts to promote a peaceful resolution to their longstanding issues.

One of our Palestinian participants arrived late to the meeting, because he had been hospitalized after being tear gassed the previous day, while protesting against the wall.

As this report was being prepared, we received news on 19 January that one of the participants in our meeting, Dr. Aziz Dweik, was arrested by the Israeli military while returning from Ramallah to his home in Hebron. He was reportedly blindfolded, handcuffed, and taken to an undisclosed location. As we go to publication, we have learned he will be detained for six months with no trial.



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