



Rupture and Representation: The Palestinian National Movement After October 7

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Cover Image Caption:

A displaced Palestinian child waves a Palestinian national flag as he walks on the rubble of a destroyed building at the Bureij camp for refugees in the central Gaza Strip on September 22, 2025. (Photo by Eyad BABA / AFP)

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Introduction

Omar H. Rahman and Mouin Rabbani



Palestinians march carrying flags and symbolic keys representing the right of return during a demonstration marking the 78th anniversary of the Nakba in Ramallah, West Bank, Palestine, on May 12, 2026. (Photo by Issam Rimawi / ANADOLU / Anadolu via AFP)

The October 7 Hamas-led attack on Israel, and the Gaza Genocide that commenced that same day and continues more than two years later, mark a critical historical juncture for the Palestinian people. While the scale of destruction, loss of life, and displacement in Gaza has few contemporary parallels, the significance of this moment extends beyond the immediate catastrophe. For Palestinians, October 2023 did not simply usher in another episode in their protracted struggle for liberation; it exposed the cumulative consequences of decades of political fragmentation, institutional decay, and strategic paralysis within the Palestinian national movement itself.

There is broad consensus that these events constitute a rupture, clearly separating what came before from what follows. Much of the expanding body of scholarship, analysis, and commentary on this period has understandably focused on Israel and Hamas' military conduct, the human and humanitarian toll, the legal and diplomatic responses, and the regional and international fallout. Yet one dimension has received comparatively less sustained and integrated examination: what this moment reveals about the present condition of the Palestinian national movement, and how the dynamics unleashed since October 2023 are reshaping its future trajectory.

The crisis that erupted in October 2023 exposed, in stark fashion, the myriad challenges confronting this movement, which were themselves long in the making. The decision to launch the attacks was neither the product of a unified national strategy nor the outcome of collective decision-making. More importantly, it could not have been, because Palestinian politics had been fragmented for decades, particularly since the Fatah-Hamas schism and associated geographic division between the West Bank and Gaza Strip that commenced in 2007. In this context, no single institution—including the functionally dormant Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—possessed the authority, legitimacy, or capacity to articulate and pursue a coherent national strategy across diplomatic, legal, military, and societal domains.

At the same time, Israel's response to October 7—characterized by mass killing, the systematic destruction of Gaza's civilian infrastructure, the targeting of life-sustaining systems, and the forcible displacement of nearly the entire population—has posed an existential challenge to Palestinian collective existence and to the broader Palestinian national project. It has unfolded alongside a dramatic escalation of violence, repression, and land seizure in the West Bank, as well as intensified efforts to marginalize, bypass, or re-engineer Palestinian political representation in postwar planning frameworks. Together, these developments have placed untenable strain on what remains of Palestinian political institutions and raised fundamental questions about their capacity to survive, let alone adapt.

The central concern of this dossier is therefore not the direct consequences of the Gaza Genocide *per se*, but what it has revealed—and accelerated—about Palestinian politics. How did the Palestinian national movement arrive at a point where it was structurally incapable of responding to such a moment? What are the implications of this condition for Palestinian agency across key arenas, including leadership, international law, regional diplomacy, physical reconstruction, diaspora activism, and engagement with the international state system? And what does this juncture suggest about the prospects for political renewal, reconstitution, or transformation—or, alternatively, further fragmentation, disintegration, and potentially collapse—in the period ahead?

Historically, such moments of profound upheaval have served as inflection points and catalysts in Palestinian political development. The Nakba of 1948 destroyed the leadership structures and socio-economic order that had emerged during the British Mandate. In so doing it gave rise, after a prolonged period of disarray, to new forms of political mobilization and organization. This culminated in the reconstitution of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the aftermath of the 1967 June War as a national movement owned and operated by Palestinian organizations, one capable of imposing itself on regional and international politics, rather than a proxy for Arab states that had been defeated and discredited. By contrast, the Oslo process of the 1990s marked a different kind of transformation, re-orienting the movement away from liberation and toward limited self-governance under occupation, with far-reaching consequences for representation, decision-making, and legitimacy.

The transformative developments of the past two years suggest that a new and different Palestinian national project will emerge from the ashes. But the shape it takes will ultimately be determined by that of the national movement that is constructed in the years ahead. While a movement and its project are arguably organically intertwined and mutually reinforcing, there is no project without a movement to generate and sustain it.

The chapters in this volume therefore situate the post-October 2023 moment within this larger historical context. Collectively, they identify a debilitated national movement unable to translate the resources at its disposal into political power and leverage. Across multiple arenas, Palestinians today possess unprecedented assets. International legal bodies have issued rulings and opinions affirming the illegality of Israel's occupation, apartheid practices, and genocidal actions in Gaza. Global public opinion has shifted markedly in favor of Palestinian rights, particularly in Western societies. Significant segments of the Global South have mobilized diplomatically and legally in defense of international humanitarian law. Palestinian diaspora communities have demonstrated remarkable organizational capacity and discursive influence. Yet these developments have not coalesced, or been channeled, into a unified political project capable of significantly influencing outcomes on the ground. The political frameworks and institutional capacity to do so have been rendered impotent and, for all intents and purposes, must be built anew.

This volume examines that disconnect by organizing its contributions around several interconnected arenas in which Palestinian agency is exercised—or not. In Chapters 1 and 2, respectively, Nour Odeh and Omar H. Rahman address the internal dysfunctionality of the leadership and institutions. In complementary ways, both authors ask how fragmentation, authoritarian consolidation, and the legacy of Oslo undermined collective decision-making and produced a political vacuum ahead of the October 7 attack and its aftermath, which left the Palestinian people leaderless in their wake.

Several chapters then turn outward to examine how this internal crisis affects Palestinian engagement within critical external arenas. In Chapter 3, Mouin Rabbani explores the promise and perils of international law, its institutions, and the organizations that promote their norms and values in relation to the Palestinian cause. Rabbani offers a critical assessment of the efficacy of the international legal system on its own, while cautioning against overlooking it as a critical arena of political struggle in which Palestinians can position themselves at the center of the battle being waged over their future.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Khaled Elgindy and AbdalRahman Kittana focus on external political environments, the Arab world and Gaza reconstruction, respectively. Elgindy parses the diminished significance of Palestine in Arab politics, excavating the structural changes within the Arab world, in inter-Arab dynamics, and in Arab-Israeli relations that help account for this fundamental challenge confronting the Palestinian national movement. Kittana interrogates postwar reconstruction in Gaza as a political struggle over land, sovereignty, and spatial justice. He emphasizes that reconstruction is not a commercial real estate project to be designed by donors according to an agenda adopted in foreign capitals. Instead, it is a vision that will determine the future of an entire society whose rights, networks, and institutions need to be rebuilt and preserved.

In Chapter 6, Sarang Shidore, writing from the vantage point of the Global South rather than of the Palestinian national movement, examines how and why states responded to the unfolding genocide in Gaza, particularly within a multilateral framework.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Zaha Hassan examines diaspora and solidarity activism in Western societies, with a particular focus on the United States, assessing its growing influence alongside the reactionary forces attempting to repress it. Once again, Hassan draws the connection—or disconnection—between the advancements being made in one arena and the existing political leadership’s inability to wield them to any effect.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume assess various aspects of the Palestinian national movement and the arenas in which they operate. By bringing these dimensions into a single analytical framework, the volume highlights a recurring pattern: Palestinians possess the resources, commitment, and allies required to put themselves in the driver’s seat of their own future once again, yet lack the institutional and political capacity to formulate an effective strategy that converts these assets into durable power and leverage.

Each author, in their own way, reaches the same conclusion: Unless and until the Palestinians achieve national coherence and rebuild their national movement and its institutions as an effective and proactive agent of change, the initiative will remain in the hands of others, often to the Palestinians’ disadvantage.

To be clear, this dossier does not offer a roadmap for Palestinian political renewal, nor does it conclude or predict that such renewal is imminent. Instead, it seeks to examine the nature of the crisis that has emerged since October 2023, and to identify the structural conditions under which political reconstitution might—or might not—occur.

Ultimately, the purpose of this volume is to open analytical space for serious reflection on the future of the Palestinian national movement at a moment when its component parts are under unprecedented strain. Whether the current rupture will produce renewed political organization, prolonged fragmentation, or new modalities of struggle remains an open question. What is clear, however, is that October 7 has both rendered the status quo untenable and eliminated the conditions for its restoration. The chapters that follow engage this reality from different vantage points, collectively illuminating the possibilities and constraints that will shape Palestinian politics in the years ahead.

It should also be noted that this project was started and completed amid a rapidly evolving context. This affected the writing and editing processes and made drawing conclusions a difficult undertaking. Indeed, the situation on the ground in Palestine-Israel continues to unfold in transformative ways, yet the papers assembled here were designed to remain valid and relevant to the utmost possible.

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Chapter 1

The Palestinian National Movement After 7 October: Assessments and Recommendations

Nour Odeh



People move through a damaged section of the border fence between Gaza and Israel on October 7, 2023. (Photo by Hani Alshaer / Anadolu via AFP)

Introduction

The crisis of the Palestinian national movement—characterized by fragmentation, institutional disintegration, and the absence of a credible strategic program—long predates the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack in southern Israel. As a direct result of developments on and since that date, however, a chronic condition has been exacerbated into an acute, potentially existential catastrophe.

What had been a protracted erosion of political cohesion has now become a moment of total disarray, exposing the movement's inability to articulate a unified response to the unprecedented challenges confronting the Palestinian people. Rather than collectively formulating and pursuing a shared strategy to defend national rights and interests, the movement's principal components have largely prioritized maintaining their own relevance and position.

While the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas continue to dominate the Palestinian political arena, this primarily reflects the absence of viable alternatives. If Palestinians are to achieve the objectives of self-determination and sovereignty in their homeland, a more coherent, representative, and effective national movement will need to emerge from the ruins of the present order.

To better understand the current Palestinian predicament and the national movement's future prospects, this chapter examines the manifestations of the crisis before and since October 2023, and what these developments foreshadow for the future at this pivotal historical juncture.

Before the Catastrophe, A Crisis

Hamas' attempt to integrate into the formal Palestinian political system, reflected in its decision to participate in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, decisively failed in 2007. Amid escalating tensions and violence with its political rival, Fatah, Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip in June of that year, resulting in an enduring political and territorial schism between a Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and a PA-dominated West Bank.

Thereafter, Hamas ruled Gaza—internally—as a hegemonic power, establishing full control over governance, the security sector, and increasingly the economy. In the absence of either national reconciliation or new elections, it was essentially accountable only to itself. At the same time, Hamas ruled in the long shadow of Israel's punishing blockade and repeated military onslaughts, as well as unshakable international and regional isolation. Determined to function simultaneously as a governing power and an armed resistance movement, Hamas predictably failed to navigate the inherent contradictions, delivering convincingly on neither and presiding over an increasingly disillusioned population.

By 2018, Michael Lynk, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, at the time, concluded that “Gaza has become unlivable,”¹ citing an economy in free fall, 70 percent youth unemployment, widely contaminated drinking water, and a collapsed health care system. Gaza's economy relied on a combination of international aid, income generated by laborers permitted to

work in Israel, and salary payments to PA employees transferred from Ramallah. By 2022, more than one-third of the population was food insecure,² and the territory was suffering a brain drain of its most talented youth.³ A 2020 study reported that 47 percent of Palestinians in Gaza felt so excluded that they saw “no room or margin for freedom.”⁴ On the eve of October 7, 2023, while Hamas’ grip on Gaza remained firm, pressure was mounting on the movement to deliver a breakthrough for the population trapped within its 365 square kilometers.⁵

Conditions in the West Bank were scarcely better. Mahmoud Abbas—president of the State of Palestine, chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and chairman of the Fatah Central Committee—was approaching 90 and governing under a mandate that expired in 2009. Increasingly unpopular, polls in June 2023 indicated that a majority of Palestinians wanted his resignation and new elections to be held.⁶

Following the 2007 rupture with Hamas, Abbas suspended the PA’s parliament and began ruling by decree.⁷ He continued to consolidate power by hollowing out Palestinian institutions, including his own Fatah movement, rendering them largely ineffective. The PLO Executive Committee was restructured to ensure Abbas’ absolute control over its members and decisions, while similar measures within the Fatah Central Committee prompted prominent members to resign in protest at their marginalization.⁸

As Abbas established an unfettered grip on power, unions and syndicates that once held significant sway within the PLO and PA were reduced to endorsing executive decisions, while the PA judiciary was similarly subordinated to the presidency.⁹ If Gaza was ruled internally by a single party, the PA-controlled West Bank was ruled by one man. Yet even Abbas’s efforts to demonstrate his reliability as a negotiating partner yielded little from Israel, which consistently slighted his overtures and lost no opportunity to weaken the PA and further damage its stature.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian leftist movements—including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the Palestine People’s Party (PPP)—were reduced to a symbolic presence within the Palestinian political arena. Formerly influential, they became dependent on the goodwill of the PA and Hamas, functioning primarily as ornaments that enabled the latter two to claim national consensus for their decisions.

By October 2023, Palestinians lacked not only a credible national movement but also a realistic pathway out of their predicament. Fragmented politically, geographically, and increasingly economically, the ensuing crisis would place what remained of their political system under unprecedented strain.

After October 7 – The Unraveling

The October 2023 attack erupted in the context of a prolonged political paralysis, but it also exposed a broader regional and international setting that was highly unfavorable, if not outright antagonistic, to Palestinian rights.

Israel's genocidal military campaign brought Western complicity and hypocrisy into sharp focus.¹⁰ It also revealed the inability of regional governments to confront or deter Israel from exercising unprecedented military force in Palestine and across the region, or leverage diplomacy to the same effect. Despite groundbreaking support for the Palestinian people in international public opinion, as well as from numerous governments in the Global South, there was little direct impact on the course of events.

Confronted with these realities, the Palestinians urgently required a unified political posture. Tragically, the genocide instead revealed the breadth and depth of decay and debilitation of the Palestinian national movement.

PLO-PA

In the wake of October 7, the PLO Executive Committee, the supreme executive institution of the Palestinian political system, failed to take the initiative and put forward a clearly articulated position. In what can be characterized as an abdication of responsibility, it instead issued a series of bland statements that demonstrated its failure to recognize the existential threat facing the Palestinian people, including those in the West Bank, and ultimately the Palestinian political system itself.

Fatah and the other constituent factions of the PLO have had only rhetoric on offer, including statements expressing frustration with the leadership they are theoretically part of. When Mahmoud Abbas summoned the PLO Central Council in April 2025 to anoint one of Fatah's most controversial and unpopular leaders, Hussein Al-Sheikh, as his deputy and heir-apparent, the factions duly rubber-stamped the move, demonstrating they had become inconsequential and their role performative.

Exploiting this weakness, Western governments demanded a series of PA reforms that further debilitated the Palestinian political system and subordinated its policies to U.S. and European priorities.¹¹ These included enhanced security cooperation with Israel to crack down on Palestinian armed groups in the West Bank. The PA obliged, killing a number of Palestinians in the process, and further eroding what popular credibility it still had.

In a further response to Western demands, Abbas appointed a new government amid the genocide. Among the reforms adopted was putting an end to the social security safety net for the families of Palestinian prisoners, which abandoned thousands of vulnerable families.¹²

Nevertheless, such efforts were not reciprocated and failed to generate either an enhanced role for the PA or Western pressure upon Israel to modify policies explicitly designed to weaken it. Ultimately, U.S. President Donald Trump's peace plan, unveiled in late 2025, not only excluded the PA from any role in the Gaza Strip pending the completion of a comprehensive yet unspecified reform program, but it also pointedly relegated Palestinian rights to the realm of aspirations that might—or might not—be placed on the agenda at some indeterminate point in the future.

Currently, the PA remains on political and financial life support, unable to meet its payroll obligations or serve its people as envisioned when it was established in 1994. It has maintained security cooperation with Israel and failed to confront the unprecedented escalation in settler attacks and military attacks, which have forcibly displaced tens of thousands of Palestinians and erased entire communities. In short, the PA's actions are governed by fear—both of alienating the existing nominal Western engagement and of provoking an Israeli response that would place the PA's very survival at risk.

Although Western governments remain invested in forestalling the PA's collapse, their policies are falling short of bolstering its legitimacy and authority. Indeed, at a time when Palestinian unity is perhaps the most urgent national imperative, many governments that formally recognized the State of Palestine in 2025 made their announcements conditional on Abbas's pledge to exclude Hamas from the Palestinian political system and prohibit it from participation in future elections. This approach was reinforced in November 2025, when the PA imposed a new municipal elections law barring any party list that has not formally accepted the PLO's political program and its international obligations—effectively, its agreements with Israel.¹³

The political suffocation of the West Bank is now nearly complete. Ordinary Palestinians, political factions, unions, and civil society organizations have been successfully subdued at precisely the moment when their contributions are most needed for political and organizational reconstruction. Crushed by the occupation's brutal policies and abandoned by their government, Palestinians are consumed by their own struggle for survival. As a result, their response to the genocide in the Gaza Strip has been notably muted.

Hamas

The unilateral decision taken by Hamas to launch an unprecedented attack on Israel, at a time of deepening crisis within the Palestinian national movement, has proven catastrophic for not only the movement but the Palestinian people more broadly. In contrast to the planning that went into the attack, Hamas and its allies in the Palestinian national movement demonstrated little understanding of the depth and breadth of the political and humanitarian fallout of their actions. Nowhere was this more severe than in the Gaza Strip, whose residents were effectively left to fend for themselves as Israel unleashed a campaign of mass killing and destruction exceeding anything it had previously carried out.

Although severely weakened, Hamas remains the dominant Palestinian force in Gaza. It survived more than two years of bombardment and ground invasion and, despite the assassination of most of its senior commanders and personnel, preserved its core military, security, and civilian structures. In areas vacated by Israeli forces, those structures have proven capable of resuming operations, while expressions of popular discontent and opposition—where they emerged—have been swiftly suppressed.

Politically, Hamas tried to leverage its central role in the crisis to gain the international recognition it has long sought, although such efforts were devoid of a deeper political vision that meets the Palestinians' aspirations for self-determination. On the one hand, Hamas successfully displaced the PLO as the main Palestinian interlocutor in negotiations to bring the war to an end, and in early 2025, the United States commenced direct discussions with its leadership.¹⁴ At the same time, Hamas's disarmament and permanent exclusion from governance—effectively its dismantlement—has become a point of consensus among Western governments.

In November 2025, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2803 formalized these demands at the international level. In effect, Hamas is required to negotiate its own demise as a condition for ending the genocide.

While Hamas has conditionally endorsed governing structures from which it will be excluded, it has thus far rejected total disarmament, though suggesting it may be open to the decommissioning of its heavy weaponry. In practice, this may leave the movement in power even as it relinquishes formal rule. For these and other reasons, Israel may well seize upon the movement's position to resume its military campaign with U.S. and European support.

Moving Forward

Palestinians are presently trapped between two movements, Fatah and Hamas, that have neither provided meaningful support as they attempt to survive Israel's genocidal campaign to eliminate them as a national and political entity, nor offered a credible vision for a future in whose realization they can participate.

Although both movements retain some degree of popular support, supplemented by general societal apathy, exhaustion, and a lack of alternatives, considerable resentment toward Fatah and Hamas nevertheless persists. For the time being, however, backlash is contained by their enduring capacities for repression.

In short, the Palestinian national movement in its present state is no longer viable. As the Palestinian people face the gravest threats to their existence, neither Fatah nor Hamas appears to have processed the consequences of their failings over the last several decades, or the past two years. Neither has demonstrated an ability, willingness, or even dedicated interest in advancing the necessary political transformations.

It is impossible to predict how the grief, anger, and frustration now brewing in Palestinian society, especially in the Gaza Strip, will eventually manifest. Ultimately, a new national movement may emerge, with leaders who can persuasively embody and advance their people's rights and aspirations, unite them across geographies and politics, and honor the transformative traumas they continue to endure.

Uncertainty over the ultimate form notwithstanding, several possibilities are present. If the PLO is to be preserved, which would allow Palestinians to retain hard-won achievements and avoid starting over politically and institutionally—potentially setting them back years—a new representative leadership with a credible national program would have to be secured. For this to happen, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad would need to be recast and incorporated, and a strategic consensus among their constituent elements would need to be formulated.

Another possibility is that both Fatah and Hamas disintegrate and eventually fade from the scene, consumed by a combination of fossilized leadership, intensified rivalry, or internal strife. It would be difficult to envision the PLO's survival should Fatah collapse before it is put right. It would be equally difficult to imagine that Hamas or Islamic Jihad can survive in their current form, given the disastrous outcome of the genocidal onslaught and the international consensus against their continued existence.

Just as the Nakba ended the national movement that held sway during the British Mandate, the dislocation produced by the Gaza genocide, in combination with intensely destabilizing Israeli policies in the West Bank, may result in a new vacuum. What would eventually replace, it is difficult to ascertain.

To add to the disarray, the state of Palestinian turmoil is coinciding with a period of striking regional and international transformation. The Middle East has been significantly impacted by the fallout of October 7, particularly as a result of unrestrained Israeli aggression across the region and shifting balances of power. In response, regional states may further look to constrain Palestinian activity to avoid the repercussions on their own soil. Meanwhile, the policies of Donald Trump—economic, political, and military—have been tremendously destabilizing to the prevailing international order and are testing its ability to survive and maintain relevance. In such a context, the Palestinians must maneuver through tumultuous political dynamics and shifting alignments as they recreate their polity from the ashes of genocide and political decay.

Conclusion

Palestinian society—today more vibrant and educated than in the 1940s and 1950s—is highly unlikely, whether inside Palestine or in exile, to surrender to political degradation and paralysis. The unprecedented global mobilization in support of Palestinian rights since 2023 is likely to encourage activists that there is fertile ground on which to act.

The required change is by no means imminent, and this is perhaps the most impactful consequence of the long process of political demise. Yet a Palestinian renaissance that addresses Palestinian needs is almost certain, given their innate strengths and enduring drive to achieve freedom.

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Nour Odeh is an award-winning Palestinian journalist and a renowned political analyst. In 2021, Odeh co-founded the National Democratic Assembly to contest the legislative elections, which were later canceled. In 2012, she served as a spokesperson of the Palestinian government.

October 7 Exposed the Depth of the Palestinian Leadership Crisis

Omar H. Rahman



A demonstrator waves the Palestinian flag as he stands on the Neptune Fountain during a protest in support of Palestinians under the slogan 'Free Palestine' in Berlin, Germany on November 4, 2023. (Photo by Odd ANDERSEN / AFP)

The two years following October 7, 2023, have revealed to the Palestinian people the severity of a political crisis that had been mounting for years. Throughout this period, in which Palestinians have faced the most significant threat to their national existence since the 1948 Nakba, their institutional leadership has remained functionally absent, incapable of rising to the occasion by overcoming their fragmentation and charting a united strategy for confronting the immense challenges before them.

At its core, this leadership crisis reflects the steady erosion of the Palestinian political system's institutional vitality and political dynamism over several decades, sapping its capacity to reproduce new leaders and strategies. The failure of its successive national projects—from total liberation of the homeland through armed struggle, to territorial compromise and state-building on the basis of a negotiated settlement—ultimately led to a contraction of political inclusiveness, as the prevailing leadership responded by hollowing out institutions and consolidating power, in alignment with external parties that prioritized neutralizing Palestinian resistance to Israel's expanding territorial ambitions.

Consequently, Palestinians have been saddled with a weak yet highly repressive leadership, buoyed by external support, structurally wedded to a failed political program, unresponsive to its constituents, unchallenged by sclerotic and fragmented political factions, and unwilling to facilitate political renewal out of fear of losing its grip on power. This chapter examines the Palestinian's crisis of leadership before and during this period.

Before the 'Flood'

Well before the events of October 7, 2023, that plunged Palestinian life into unprecedented turmoil, the Palestinian national movement was already suffering from a profound and protracted leadership crisis. Its principal representative institution, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), had long since fallen into abeyance. Although the origins of this process can be traced to at least Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the PLO's subsequent defeat and the exile of its cadres, the assassination of key PLO leaders in exile, and the consequences of severe Israeli repression during the First Intifada, the focus of this paper is the transformation that occurred as a result of the Oslo peace process and state building project.

In pursuit of the PLO's statehood objectives, the leadership gradually divested the national movement's central organ of a meaningful decision-making role beyond reaffirming its commitment to the Oslo Accords and sustaining its principal creation: the Palestinian National Authority (PA).¹

However, the PA was never designed for national leadership. As a product of Oslo, the PA was established as a transitional entity limited to administering parts of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip under Israeli oversight and external patronage, thus bound by narrow temporal, territorial, and jurisdictional restraints.² As such, the steady shift in power from the PLO to the PA throughout the Oslo era circumscribed Palestinian decision-making in several debilitating and disastrous ways.

The executive leadership—starting with Yasser Arafat and then Mahmoud Abbas—sought to helm both institutions, conflating the PLO and PA’s distinct mandates and obscuring their proper relational dynamics. Moreover, by resituating the PLO command within the occupied territories, Palestinian decision-making became acutely vulnerable to Israeli coercion and Western donor influence. The conflated roles of the leadership—simultaneously managing the responsibilities of governance and the imperatives of national liberation—blurred the distinction between bureaucratic administration and revolutionary struggle. It subordinated the liberation project (the PLO’s mandate) to the managerial constraints of semi-autonomous rule (the PA’s mandate), while allowing donor states to condition PA financing in ways often deferential to Israeli interests.³

This was not merely a political miscalculation, but a structural re-engineering of Palestinian politics. Oslo transformed the national movement into a complicit governance apparatus whose institutional survival depended not on advancing liberation but on maintaining order under occupation. Leadership failure, in this sense, was inherent: the product of a political framework designed to foreclose independent decision-making.

This structural and geographic reordering also severed the link between decision-makers under occupation and Palestinian communities in exile—refugees and diaspora groups that once formed the backbone of the national movement—including leaders who had objected to Oslo and stayed outside the occupied territories.

The emergence of Hamas in the late 1980s, which operated outside PLO-PA structures, further challenged the authority of these institutions and their political program throughout the 1990s and 2000s. As the Oslo process itself collapsed, so too did the PA’s legitimacy, deepening the leadership crisis. Hamas’ decision to contest the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections—winning a majority of seats—triggered a violent power struggle with the Abbas presidency and the Fatah movement, culminating in the 2007 political and geographic split between Hamas-controlled Gaza and the Fatah-led PA in the West Bank.⁴

This division proved politically catastrophic, not least for the foundation of Palestinian leadership itself. As Abbas hollowed out and consolidated control over what remained of the institutions under his purview, fledgling democratic processes gave way to naked authoritarianism, further undermining his legitimacy as the leader of the national movement.⁵ “Transformational leadership,” in the sense theorized by James MacGregor Burns and Bernard Bass—driven by inspiring personalities and a collective mission—devolved into a system of personal rule sustained by patronage and repression.⁶

Within Fatah itself, Abbas’ centralized and exclusionary leadership style marginalized and alienated many established figures, among them younger leaders such as Marwan Barghouti, Mohammad Dahlan, and Jabril Rajoub, who in the early 2000s sought a greater role in decision-making and were rebuffed. This led to the splintering and factionalization of Fatah, as reflected in the proliferation of competing Fatah-affiliated lists before both the 200 and aborted 2021 parliamentary elections.⁷

Meanwhile, Palestinian society has been deliberately demobilized.⁸ Activists and critics, especially youth, have faced harassment, co-optation, and surveillance from both the Israeli and the PA's security apparatus. The PA security forces—trained, funded, and politically shielded by external actors—became the enforcer of this order. Security coordination with Israel was not merely a policy choice but the principal mechanism through which the Oslo system sustained itself—criminalizing resistance, suppressing dissent, and converting the leadership's dependency into a permanent feature of Palestinian political life.

The abandonment of elections has extinguished any meaningful avenues for political contestation or the emergence of new leadership. The monopolization of authority by Abbas and his inner circle has sapped Palestinian politics of its dynamism, while reducing political debate to the question of succession rather than renewal.

Hamas, though outside the PLO, has fared better institutionally. Its internal bureaucracy and capacity for regeneration have allowed its leadership structure to withstand years of assassination, imprisonment, and forced exile. However, while the movement did not suffer from the sclerotic decline of Fatah, the crippling blockade imposed by Israel on Gaza, and Hamas' inability to deliver liberation, relief, or effective administration—alongside its own repressive activities—made it deeply unpopular among the population it governed.

Operating in conditions of siege, isolation, and exclusion from national decision-making structures, Hamas was left without either the legitimacy of electoral renewal or the constraints of a collective leadership framework. Its capacity to act unilaterally—most consequentially in its decision to launch the Al-Aqsa Flood operation—was thus not an aberration but a systemic outcome of a fragmented and leaderless national movement.

Beyond these formal political structures lies an energetic Palestinian diaspora. Activists, civil society organizations, and transnational networks remain deeply engaged in the national struggle. However, they are excluded from the machinery of institutional politics and are unable to coordinate their efforts into a unified strategy. Rights-based initiatives such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement exemplify this energy but also the limitation of advocacy divorced from a recognized political agent with a coherent political program.

Lacking recognized authority, fiscal resources, or coercive leverage, diaspora initiatives—however morally or discursively compelling—remain structurally incapable of substituting for institutional leadership. In fact, their efforts are often neutralized by the internationally recognized Palestinian leadership itself, whose dependence on external political, financial, and security constraints leads it to obstruct or dilute initiatives that fall outside its narrow governing mandate.

By the eve of October 7, Palestinians lacked a unified, representative leadership. Fragmented geographically and politically, the remnants of the national movement operated in silos—each pursuing divergent, often conflicting, agendas. The outcome was a severely debilitated national movement, totally unprepared for the fallout of Hamas' unilateral decision to launch an unprecedented military operation against Israel.

After the ‘Flood’

October 7 and Its Aftermath

While Palestinian factions have historically acted independently of each other in ways that shaped the wider movement—such as the PFLP’s plane hijackings in the 1970s that led to the Black September war with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Syrian-backed “War of the Camps” in Lebanon in the 1980s after the PLO’s expulsion, or Fateh’s secret negotiations with Israel that led to the Oslo Accords—few such decisions have had repercussions as far-reaching as Hamas’s October 7 assault on Israel.

Over the ensuing two years, Palestinians endured the most devastating attack on their collective existence since the 1948 Nakba. Israel’s military campaign in Gaza was genocidal in scope and intent. At least 70,000 Palestinians—predominantly women and children—were killed, and experts estimate that direct and indirect deaths from starvation, disease, and lack of medical care could push the toll into the hundreds of thousands.⁹ More than two million people were displaced, with famine widespread as Israel deliberately blocked food, water, and medicine.¹⁰ Gaza’s urban landscape was obliterated, its infrastructure reduced to rubble, and its cultural heritage erased. In short, the territory was deliberately rendered uninhabitable.

In the West Bank, violence and repression escalated to their highest levels in decades. Settler attacks, military raids, and mass arrests intensified, while land expropriation reached levels unseen since Oslo’s signing in 1993. Dozens of communities were forcibly displaced. In northern cities such as Jenin, Nablus, and Tulkarem, the Israeli military sought to crush armed resistance through collective punishment and economic strangulation, instilling a pervasive atmosphere of fear and paralysis.¹¹

Leadership Vacuum and Political Absence

Throughout this catastrophe, the Palestinian leadership was conspicuously absent. The Palestinian National Council, the PLO’s highest representative body, did not convene once. Abbas, both PLO chairman and PA president, remained largely away from public view, appearing sporadically at international fora such as the UN General Assembly—via video feed—and the Arab League without mounting any serious diplomatic campaign to protect his people, much less to visit Gaza.

This paralysis reflects not only the personal inertia of a man in his late 80s, but decades of institutional decay. The PA and PLO have become passive recipients of externally driven agendas rather than initiators and executors of a coherent liberation strategy. As a result, even the accumulation of political assets—legal recognition, diplomatic access, and international solidarity—largely goes unused.

The PA’s sole relevance during the first two years of genocide appeared to come from the Arab states’ need for a nominal Palestinian interlocutor in their negotiations to bring about a ceasefire, in order to secure a pathway out of their potential post-war involvement in Gaza. In other words,

to avoid ensnarement in a permanent security and governance role—especially with Israel obstructing a broader political resolution of the conflict—they needed to secure a Palestinian entity to whom they could eventually hand over responsibility.

The “State of Palestine” remains a recognized address in international diplomacy, yet it speaks with no clear political authority or unity of purpose—given its lack of sovereignty, the murkiness of institutional overlap, and the leadership’s lack of popular legitimacy.

Hamas, for its part, has been severely debilitated by Israel’s military response to October 7 and by the deepening of its diplomatic isolation after the attack. Hamas’ leadership in Gaza has been decimated, while its exiled political bureau has been targeted for assassination across the Middle East, and was otherwise preoccupied with ceasefire negotiations and damage control in the two years after its October 7 operation.

Long ostracized by Western governments and many Arab states, Hamas lacked the diplomatic reach to influence the postwar order. Where Hamas had a seat at the table, it was forced to negotiate under extreme duress, often receiving ultimatums in which the broader civilian population bore the consequences of Hamas’ potential rejection. Coupled with the growing irrelevance of the PLO-PA leadership, this left Palestinians without a say in the international deliberations shaping their future.

The political marginalization of Palestinian leadership was epitomized in the drafting and signing of U.S. President Donald Trump’s 20-point “peace plan” in October 2025. Not only was Hamas not part of the negotiations that formulated the plan—except to agree to the release of Israeli hostages and discuss the terms of its own dissolution—but Abbas was initially denied an invitation to attend the signing ceremony in Egypt before being relegated to an observer role.¹²

Although the PA is mentioned in the Trump Peace Plan of 2025—likely as a result of Arab insistence—its future involvement in the governance of Gaza is conditional on a reform program under Israeli oversight. In the meantime, general Palestinian involvement is reduced to an implementation committee approved and instructed by an international board led by Donald Trump.

A Leaderless Nation

The consequences of this vacuum have been disastrous. Palestinians have no unified voice to articulate their cause internationally. This not only leaves them vulnerable to external agendas but also prevents them from fully exploiting the opportunities that have emerged amid the devastation. Global solidarity, legal clarity, and moral outrage—however unprecedented—cannot substitute for institutional power and effective leadership. Israel has exploited Palestinian political fragmentation to absorb international pressure at limited cost, confident that no unified leadership exists capable of translating condemnation into consequence.

Attempts to repair the Palestinians' fragmented polity or restore legitimate representation in a revived PLO have also failed. In 2024, 14 Palestinian factions met in Moscow and Beijing to discuss establishing a national unity government and reforming the PLO. Behind the scenes, however, Abbas reportedly dismissed the Beijing Accord and implementation stalled—repeating the outcome of 17 years of unsuccessful reconciliation attempts.¹³

Diaspora initiatives to revive the PLO have similarly struggled to gain traction, in no small part due to Abbas's obstruction. A notable example is the National Conference for Palestine held in Doha in February 2025, which attracted hundreds of attendees, including numerous prominent personalities. As momentum picked up for the initiative, Abbas denounced it as a foreign plot, and the PA obstructed dozens of participants from leaving the West Bank to attend.¹⁴ Other grassroots initiatives have fragmented over whether to reform existing structures or build new ones, and no alternative leadership has yet emerged.

In the meantime, Abbas has continued to position his right-hand man, Hussein al-Sheikh, as his designated successor, despite enjoying virtually no popular support.¹⁵ Al-Sheikh, who long held the role of liaison between the PA and the Israeli military occupation authorities, has been described by Israeli security officials as their “man in Ramallah,” which has further undermined his credibility in Palestinian eyes.¹⁶ In January 2022, however, Abbas had al-Sheikh placed on the PLO's Executive Committee and then promoted him to its Secretary-General in May of that year.¹⁷ In April 2025, Abbas created two new positions—vice president of the State of Palestine and vice chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee—and appointed al-Sheikh to both.¹⁸ In October 2025, Abbas issued a decree designating al-Sheikh as acting president of the PA should he die or become incapacitated for up to 90 days until elections are held, a move with no legal basis according to the Palestinian Basic Law.¹⁹

The closest thing to a consensus figure, Marwan Barghouti, remains in Israeli prison, although renewed pressure for his release emerged in the wake of the October 2025 ceasefire and Hamas' attempt to free him through a hostage exchange.²⁰

Short of that, the obstruction of democratic processes for renewing legitimate Palestinian representation is a recipe for civil conflict. Yet even if that is somehow avoided through a power-sharing agreement, the popular will of Palestinians would continue to be ignored.

Going Forward

The absence of effective leadership is no longer merely a political deficiency but a national emergency. Without a unified and legitimate representative body, Palestinians cannot confront the existential threats they face or capitalize on diplomatic openings that have arisen from Israel's growing global isolation.

Palestinians now find themselves in a condition reminiscent of the post-1948 period—leaderless, dispossessed, and fragmented. Yet unlike in the past, they now possess significant assets that can be leveraged. Palestinian identity and nationalism are stronger than ever, and global solidarity for the Palestinian cause has reached unprecedented levels—including in the United States and Western Europe. As of October 2025, 157 states recognize the State of Palestine.²¹

Recent rulings by the International Court of Justice and United Nations agencies have established the illegality of Israel's occupation and apartheid, and the likelihood that it has violated the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.²² Israeli leaders are fugitives of the International Criminal Court. In other words, Israeli criminality is firmly established by leading international institutions and provides a strong basis for pursuing accountability.

Yet on the ground, Israel continues to wield overwhelming coercive power—not only through military occupation, but through sway over the Palestinian economy and political elite. The current leadership, bound by privilege and dependency, lacks the will to challenge this structure.

For the Palestinian national movement to recover, it must prioritize the reconstitution of legitimate and independent leadership. This entails two essential tasks: First, establishing institutions that reflect the full geographic and political diversity of the Palestinian people—across historic Palestine, refugee camps, and the global diaspora; and second, restoring independent decision-making as free as possible from the coercion of occupation and external tutelage, even if that means relocating top decision-makers outside the occupied territories.

The current moment presents both peril and possibility. Palestinians face unprecedented destruction and dispossession, yet they also command historic levels of international sympathy and legal recognition. To translate that moral and diplomatic capital into political progress, they must rebuild a collective leadership capable of uniting the struggle for rights, governance, and liberation. Without it, the Palestinian national movement will remain rudderless—adrift between catastrophe and opportunity, unable to chart a course toward genuine self-determination.

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Chapter 3

The Palestinian National Movement and the Challenge of International Law

Mouin Rabbani



A view from the hearing at the International Court of Justice on Israel's humanitarian obligations toward Palestinians in The Hague, Netherlands on April 29, 2025. (Photo by Mouneb Taim / ANADOLU / Anadolu via AFP)

International law and international legal institutions have emerged as a key arena in the struggle for Palestinian rights since October 2023. In this period, Palestinians have secured unprecedented achievements in fora such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). More broadly, the human rights community, including its most prominent organizations, has decisively shed its prior reluctance to assess Israeli conduct according to the same legal standards routinely applied in other contexts.

At the same time, opponents of Palestinian rights have launched a concerted campaign to render these successes meaningless and to undermine the institutions that produced them. In the process, norms and values embedded into the corpus of international law since the Second World War—already under strain prior to October 2023—hang in the balance. United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2803 of November 17, 2025, together with the Board of Peace established by U.S. President Donald Trump in January 2026, exemplify the attempt to eliminate the applicability of international law to the resolution of the Question of Palestine, while more broadly challenging the very authority of the UN by presenting a hand-picked group of individuals as a viable alternative to the UNSC on matters of war and peace.¹

As a result, Palestinians are now confronted not only with the longstanding struggle to translate legal and expert findings into material change, but also with the additional task of safeguarding the principles and, in some cases, the institutions that have made their progress in the legal realm possible. While this dual challenge poses an existential danger to Palestinian rights, it also creates real opportunities for building coalitions to uphold them in defense of a universal agenda.

Judicial rulings and human rights reports are frequently dismissed as having limited practical effect for populations enduring prolonged dispossession, structural discrimination, and mass violence. Those responsible for such crimes often evade meaningful accountability based on existing structures of power. For Palestinians to expect that legal processes alone will overcome these realities is therefore misplaced.

Nevertheless, recognition of these limitations should not obscure the fact that the Palestinian struggle is fundamentally political, and will triumph or be vanquished in the political rather than legal or human rights arenas. Seen from this perspective, the growing international consensus that Israel is a genocidal apartheid regime led by indicted criminals creates significant political opportunities that can contribute directly to the struggle for Palestinian liberation, by transforming the terms of discussion and debate about the Question of Palestine and its resolution.

Background and Context

From the very outset of their national struggle, Palestinians have engaged with international law and its institutions—imperfect as these may be—to defend and retrieve their rights. In contrast to armed confrontation, in which Israel has always enjoyed an overwhelming advantage, the legal arena provides a much more level playing field. Palestinian rights, including the right to resist

foreign occupation in accordance with the laws of war, are firmly anchored in international law. The Palestinian Right of Return is consecrated in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1948, and UNGA 3236 of 1974 defines the Palestinian right to “self-determination” and to “national independence and sovereignty” as “inalienable.”² Palestinian diplomacy has ensured that both these landmark resolutions have been reaffirmed over subsequent decades.

Similarly, the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 has also been repeatedly upheld, including by the United Nations Security Council, which in Resolution 478 of 1980 additionally denounced Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem as “null and void.” In what was considered a historic verdict before the world’s foremost court of law, the ICJ in 2004 declared those sections of the West Bank Wall that intrude beyond the Green Line to be illegal, and in the process reconfirmed virtually every Palestinian position about the status of the occupied territories and illegality of Israeli policies and practices within them.³

In parallel, UN human rights agencies, special rapporteurs, and fact-finding missions have issued an expanding body of reports directly accusing Israel of perpetrating a panoply of specific violations and crimes against the Palestinian people. Between 2021 and 2022, several leading international and Israeli human rights organizations confirmed the longstanding findings of their Palestinian counterparts that Israel functions as an apartheid state, an assessment most apply not only to the territories occupied in 1967 but also to Israel itself.⁴

Until October 2023, Israel appeared secure in the knowledge that such findings could be contained through diplomatic support from its allies and its own international influence. The 2009 Goldstone Report on Israel’s Operation Cast Lead illustrates this pattern: despite detailed findings of war crimes, sustained political pressure succeeded in producing a high-profile renunciation that blunted its impact.⁵ No less important in such cases, the Palestinian leadership did not mobilize around these rulings and reports, reflecting concerns about diplomatic repercussions and relations with Israel and Western partners.

Key Developments After October 2023

Since October 2023, Israel’s vulnerability has increased markedly. A series of legal initiatives and rulings has significantly altered perceptions of Israel and its senior leadership in ways previously difficult to imagine. In particular, legal proceedings have contributed to the broader normalization of public discourse on illicit Israeli policies and practices.

As Israel commenced its military campaign in the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023, its official narrative resorted to tropes of an exceptional adherence to humanitarian norms and attributed civilian casualties to the conduct of its Palestinian adversaries. These arguments, reinforced by Israel’s well-organized public relations campaign, contributed to a sense of confusion over responsibility for civilian harm among segments of the international audience, even as the scale of destruction and bloodletting prompted widespread outrage.

In December 2023, when South Africa submitted its application to the ICJ accusing Israel of violating the Genocide Convention in Gaza, it was dismissed by some observers as politically motivated. That all changed on January 26, 2024, when the ICJ issued its initial ruling.

By an overwhelming majority, the Court determined that South Africa had presented a plausible case, that the situation on the ground was sufficiently urgent, and that provisional measures were therefore necessary to prevent irreparable harm pending a final judgment.⁶

Israel, whose creation in the public imagination is often perceived as the international community's atonement for the Holocaust, now stood credibly accused of "the crime of crimes." Thus, the Court's ruling transformed the prevailing discursive frames by placing Israel under formal legal scrutiny for genocide-related obligations and by repositioning the Palestinians within the international legal narrative as a protected group under the Convention and as victims. The political significance of the ICJ's initial ruling is difficult to overstate, as it legitimized discussion about Israel and its conduct in terms that had generally been avoided and considered taboo in many official and public forums.

In February, March, and May 2024, the Court issued additional provisional measures addressing Israel's responsibility for the growing humanitarian emergency in the Gaza Strip. In its May order, the Court directed Israel to refrain from military operations in Rafah, directly linking Israel's military operations to obligations under the Genocide Convention. Arguably empowered by the legal proceedings in The Hague, the world's leading human rights organizations began issuing reports unambiguously concluding that Israel was committing genocide—assessments echoed by Israeli human rights organizations in 2025.

Another major development—one with more immediate political consequences—occurred at the ICC, which focuses on individual criminal responsibility rather than state conduct. In November 2024, the court issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Two of Israel's most senior leaders thereby became fugitives from international justice. Notably, under the principle of complementarity, the warrants could only be issued after the Court determined that Israel's judiciary had failed to investigate and prosecute these crimes itself.

That same year, in July 2024, the ICJ issued a landmark advisory opinion at the request of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), determining that Israeli rule in the occupied Palestinian territories is illegal and that elements of the regime amounted to apartheid.⁷ As in 2004, the ICJ confirmed an array of Palestinian positions regarding their rights and Israeli conduct as the correct interpretation of international law.⁸ Shortly thereafter, several Western governments formally recognized the State of Palestine, suggesting a possible linkage between the legal findings and diplomatic positioning.

An additional advisory opinion in October 2025 addressed Israel's obligations toward UN agencies, international organizations, and foreign states operating in the occupied territories. The court affirmed the central, indispensable role of the United Nations Relief and Works

Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), dismissed Israeli allegations that UNRWA had violated its neutrality obligations as unsubstantiated, and required Israel to remove restrictions on the agency's operations.⁹ In January 2026, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres threatened to refer Israel to the Court once again if it did not repeal laws targeting UNRWA and return the property and assets it seized from the agency in violation of the October ruling.¹⁰

Also within the UN system, the Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese, issued multiple reports on Israeli policy and conduct, including one alleging international corporate complicity in the Gaza Genocide. Separately, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry established by the UN Human Rights Council concluded that Israel was guilty of genocide, and published multiple reports documenting related practices.

These institutional findings were reinforced by the assessments of numerous genocide and Holocaust scholars. Most notably, the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) adopted a resolution in August 2025 declaring "that Israel's policies and actions in Gaza meet the legal definition of genocide" pursuant to the Genocide Convention.¹¹

Across these rulings and reports, attention was repeatedly drawn to the obligations of states not only to punish genocide offenders but to prevent the crime. It was this principle, of collective global responsibility to uphold international law and ensure its universal application, that led to the formation of the Hague Group in early 2025. This coalition of states posed a direct challenge to those Western governments upholding Israeli impunity, despite their claims to champion a paradigm they termed the "rules-based international order," but from which Israel was clearly exempt.

Indeed, from the very outset of the war, enormous efforts were undertaken to prevent international institutions from fulfilling their mandates. In a notable example, the United Kingdom threatened to withdraw from the Rome Statute and terminate funding for the ICC if arrest warrants against Israeli leaders should proceed, confirming a widespread impression that Israel's Western allies were more devoted to its impunity than to defending the international system, which was being severely undermined as a result.¹²

Following Trump's return to office in January 2025, the United States imposed punitive measures on UN officials and ICC personnel associated with those investigations, while threatening others. These measures, normally reserved for designated terrorists and organized crime figures, suddenly made the lives of professional law enforcers extremely arduous. The subsequent resignation of all three members of the International Commission of Inquiry in July 2025 raised concerns about the cumulative impact of such pressures, although direct causation was not formally established. Notably, there was virtually no pushback from the ICC's Assembly of State Parties, while European states continued to permit Netanyahu to traverse their airspace during his visits to the United States.

Prospects and Pitfalls

The reality for Palestinians today is that unprecedented progress has been achieved within the international legal framework. Yet, ironically, the more success Palestinians have within this arena, the more the legal system is undermined and stripped of its implementing authority. Nevertheless, when viewed as instruments in a prolonged political struggle rather than as mechanisms for rapid implementation and change, the significance of these legal achievements can and should be calculated differently.

Considered collectively, the reports and rulings issued during the Gaza Genocide have had a genuine, transformative, and likely irreversible impact on international perceptions of Israel and the Palestinians. Whereas Israel and its apologists have tried assiduously to sow confusion over who bears responsibility for the horrors visible to all in Gaza, the assessments of legal bodies and human rights specialists—generally regarded as impartial and dispassionate arbiters—have played a critical role in dispelling uncertainty.

Compared to previous episodes, this professional work has helped normalize open discussion and debate about Israel and its actions. Although the extent of this shift is difficult to measure empirically, it is reasonable to view developments such as the ICJ genocide proceedings and ICC arrest warrants as important milestones in this evolution.

The longer-term political impact of these changes will take time to mature, and more importantly, is not inevitable. For Palestinians, the challenge is therefore to ensure they remain on the agenda. In this respect, they enjoy several advantages.

First, the current Palestinian leadership, which has acquiesced to Israel, the U.S., and the European Union on virtually every issue, has—somewhat surprisingly—remained engaged in the international legal arena, even if in attenuated form, despite enormous pressure to cease and desist. This appears to reflect a combination of pressure from domestic public opinion and the assessment that legal actions are one of its few remaining sources of leverage in the absence of meaningful political negotiations. The Ramallah-based leadership has not only assembled competent legal teams but also authorized its diplomats—particularly those at the United Nations in New York, who are among its most professional—to promote rather than obstruct these initiatives.

Second, international legal advocacy has been almost uniquely insulated from factional rivalry. Hamas, and other opponents of the Palestinian leadership, have not only refrained from criticism of its resort to legal activism but supported it. For instance, PA President Mahmoud Abbas refused to submit the Palestinian application to ratify the Rome Statute and join the ICC in 2015 unless he was first given a formal, public endorsement from Hamas, which he duly received.

Third, most ongoing legal proceedings are not contingent on Palestinian participation. The ICJ genocide case, for example, was brought by South Africa and would therefore not be affected by a Palestinian petition asking the Court to halt proceedings. Similarly, the ICC investigation of what it terms the Situation in Palestine is not subject to the discretion of the Palestinians.

Fourth, the Palestinians are neither working in isolation nor swimming against the tide. Repeated UNGA votes requesting ICJ advisory opinions and initiatives such as the Hague Group indicate that international support for an activist Palestinian legal strategy is growing rather than diminishing.

The above notwithstanding, Palestinian passivity is not an option. Particularly in the current environment of a frontal U.S. assault, allies and partners may be less motivated to engage in such initiatives if they conclude Palestinian institutions are less committed than themselves. The endorsement of the draft text that became UNSC 2803 by the PLO, as well as by key Arab and Muslim-majority states, is a case in point, as this helped ensure its passage through the Security Council. Moving forward, generating greater Arab involvement, particularly of key states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, would be a valuable approach.

For reasons that go far beyond Palestine but are not unrelated to it, the world is already immersed in a struggle about the nature of the global order, which presents both risks and opportunities for Palestinians. While current trends pose clear threats to the survival of international law and institutions, they may also compel states traditionally reluctant to confront violations to assume more active roles in its defense.

The priority for the Palestinian national movement is to ensure that, as posited by the Hague Group, Palestine remains at the very center of this contest, serving as both a catalyst and a beneficiary of these changes. On this basis, it will be possible to leverage legal achievements that may change nothing on the ground into significant political accomplishments, not only compensating for tremendous asymmetries in power but properly utilized, contributing meaningfully to Palestinian liberation.

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Palestine and the Arab World: The Decline and Possible Revival of Palestinian Regional Influence

Khaled Elgindy



A handout picture provided by the Saudi Press Agency SPA shows Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (C) posing for a group picture with leaders from member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab League during their joint extraordinary summit in Riyadh on November 11, 2024. (Photo by SPA / AFP)

During the first two years of the genocide in Gaza, Palestinians struggled to galvanize meaningful Arab support or intervention in their defense and met with limited success. Beyond the varying Arab governments' own calculations of interests and concerns for not acting more decisively, this outcome can best be understood in the context of the Palestinians' diminished political leverage with Arab states, which is the result of a steadily weakening Palestinian political leadership and an increasingly fragmented Palestinian national movement over the last few decades. Understanding the history and basis of Palestinian regional influence and its decline is thus important for understanding the present.

Sources of Palestinian Leverage

The Palestinian cause has always had a symbiotic—if highly fraught and inconsistent—relationship with the Arab states and with Arabism. For the stateless Palestinian people, Arab states provided strategic depth, a natural political constituency, and an essential source of moral, political, financial, and, at times, military support in the struggle against Zionism and Israel. Historically, this was as true of “revolutionary” Arab republics as of conservative, pro-Western monarchies, many of which funneled vast funds to the coffers of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) throughout the 1970s and 1980s.¹ At the same time, the causes of Palestine and Jerusalem resonate deeply with the Arab masses, transcending national, sectarian, and ideological differences and forming a key pillar of modern Arab identity. As such, Palestinian leaders traditionally wielded outsized influence with Arab regimes. In recent years, however, this sway has sharply declined due to two parallel and mutually reinforcing trends: the steady weakening of Palestinian political leadership and institutions, and the deprioritization of Palestine by Arab governments.

Until 1967, the Palestinian cause was largely the domain of Arab states, which often vied with one another over who was its greatest champion. The Arab defeat in the 1967 war disabused Palestinians of any hope of liberation by Arab states alone and forced them to take greater agency. By 1969, Palestinian guerrilla groups had taken control of the PLO, which had been established by the Arab League in 1964, and transformed it into a genuinely autonomous body for Palestinian decision-making.

Despite its obvious geopolitical constraints, the PLO succeeded in forcing itself onto the international political and diplomatic scene, reaching its peak influence in the decade and a half after the 1967 war. By 1974, under the charismatic leadership of Yasir Arafat and his Fateh movement, the PLO had secured recognition as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,” first from the Arab League—an outcome even Jordan's Hashemite monarchy, the PLO's archrival in matters of representation, was forced to accept—and shortly thereafter from the United Nations.²

The PLO's influence with Arab states flowed from three primary sources. The first was the physical presence of large Palestinian diaspora and refugee populations in certain Arab countries, most notably Jordan and Lebanon, where the PLO effectively operated as a “state within a state” with

a substantial demographic, political and military presence. Even after the PLO's expulsion from Jordan in 1970 and Lebanon in 1982, the demographic presence of Palestinians in both remained a source of influence, albeit a diminished one.

A second instrument of influence was armed struggle, which was pioneered by the guerrilla movements that became the constituent factions of the PLO and later taken up by Hamas and other Islamist resistance groups. Armed action against Israel—whether from inside occupied Palestinian territory or from neighboring Arab countries—helped galvanize Arab public opinion and, at times, forced Arab regimes to respond, either militarily or politically. Official Arab support for Palestinians was not merely altruistic but also helped bolster the domestic legitimacy of the regimes in the eyes of their citizens, for whom Palestine was widely viewed as a core Arab cause.

Lastly, Palestinian leaders often appealed directly to Arab public opinion, which has been—and remains—deeply sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle. Arafat was particularly adept at harnessing public sympathy for the Palestinians and wielding it over Arab leaders. His skillful navigation of intra-Arab rivalries also helped shield the Palestinian leadership from excessive external interference and preserved a measure of independent decision-making. By the late 1970s, Arafat's PLO had not only emerged as a serious national liberation movement but as a consequential regional player in its own right.

Lost Leverage

All three sources of leverage have significantly eroded over time due to two parallel and mutually reinforcing trends. First and foremost is the growing political weakness and dysfunction of Palestinian political leaders and institutions, which is both structural and self-inflicted in nature.

The PLO began its steady decline following its forcible removal from Lebanon in 1982 at the hands of Israel, severing the PLO from its only remaining autonomous territorial base on the border with the Palestinian homeland.³ The process of PLO debilitation accelerated following Arafat's decision-making during the 1990 Iraq-Kuwait crisis, which left the PLO financially strapped and politically isolated. In the aftermath, the PLO formally renounced armed struggle as the price for entering a U.S.-led peace process, relinquishing a key source of leverage (which Hamas and other groups happily took up). The signing of the Oslo Accords in the early 1990s provided a momentary boost for the PLO leadership but ultimately helped to deepen and institutionalize Palestinian weakness and erode Palestinian agency. Meanwhile, the fragmentation of Arab diplomacy into separate negotiating tracks under the U.S.-sponsored peace process further undermined Palestinian leverage.

Oslo was more than a peace process. Beyond reshaping Palestinian relations with Israel—and by extension with the United States—it fundamentally reorganized internal Palestinian politics, decision-making, and foreign relations. As both a peacemaking and state-building project, Oslo required the Palestinian leadership to relinquish a degree of internal autonomy in exchange for

access to negotiations and the expectation that Washington would ultimately “deliver” Israel and statehood. For the first time in the modern Palestinian national movement, the U.S. and Israel had a direct say—and oftentimes an effective veto—over internal Palestinian politics. This dynamic was most evident in Arafat’s sidelining after 2001 and the rejection of the 2006 election results, which precipitated the Fatah-Hamas schism.

Moreover, the organic and existential ties that bound the PLO to Arab states became secondary. Where the PLO had been largely reliant on, and responsive to, Arab states, the newly established Palestinian Authority became dependent on new patrons—chiefly the U.S., Israel, and Western donors—who were less sympathetic to Palestinian grievances and less susceptible to Palestinian pressure. As Oslo collapsed under the weight of settlement expansion, repression, failed negotiations, and the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, Arafat sought to escape its constraints and reassert Palestinian agency, implicitly through armed struggle, but was quickly contained and marginalized.

After the Second Intifada

Palestinian political weakness has deepened under Mahmoud Abbas, who has presided over a fractured, dysfunctional, and demobilized polity that has been easily ignored. The 2007 rupture with Hamas left the PA without a functioning parliament for 12 years before Abbas dissolved it in 2018,⁴ indefinitely forestalling elections and entrenching instability in Gaza. Rampant corruption and growing authoritarianism further shredded the PA’s domestic legitimacy. Despite numerous reconciliation accords, Abbas consistently chose national disunity over risking Israeli or American sanctions. Unsurprisingly, his domestic standing collapsed: even before October 7, 2023, 78 percent of Palestinians wanted him to resign—a figure that surged to 88 percent in late 2023 amid Israel’s war of annihilation in Gaza, its widening crackdown in the West Bank, and Abbas’s impotence in the face of both.⁵ Why then, one might ask, should Arab states prioritize Palestinian welfare over their own national interests, if Palestinian leaders have failed to overcome factional rivalries or meet their people’s basic needs?

Having internalized the lessons of Arafat’s marginalization, Abbas has doubled down on the original Oslo trade-off, deepening his dependence on the U.S. and Israel as a matter of survival.⁶ The leadership’s overreliance on American “deliverance” precluded the development of a more flexible diplomatic strategy, including in Arab and Muslim arenas, leaving it unable to identify diplomatic challenges or seize opportunities as the PLO once did. While not the decisive factor, Palestinian neglect of the Arab file did nothing to impede the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain’s normalization with Israel in 2020.

As Palestinian leverage declined, Arab states increasingly deprioritized Palestine, especially after the 2010-11 Arab uprisings. Beyond their shrinking bandwidth, the Arab revolts also exposed an ideological affinity between Palestinian liberation and Arab popular movements,⁷ prompting counterrevolutionary forces to suppress both.⁸ Resurgent authoritarianism, most notably in Egypt following the 2013 coup, recast Palestinian solidarity in Arab regional and local politics as a threat to regime stability rather than a useful pressure release valve. The result was to accelerate Arab

divestment from Palestine: between 2013-2020, Arab contributions to the PA plummeted by 95 percent, declining further after the Abraham Accords were signed.⁹ This was an unmistakable sign that Arab states were no longer willing to subordinate their bilateral or regional interests to the mirage of a Palestinian state.

Amid a genocide

The horrific and unprecedented Israeli assault on Gaza after October 7 has not been enough to overcome Arab officialdom's apathy—and in some cases hostility—toward Palestinians, despite clear signs of anger among Arab publics. The crackdown on pro-Palestinian solidarity activities since the start of Israel's genocidal war underscores regime insecurity over Palestine. This was starkly illustrated by the Al-Sisi government's violent disruption of the Global March on Gaza's "sumud convoy," as Arab and international activists converged on Egypt seeking to break Israel's near-total blockade on Gaza's starved population.¹⁰

Measured against the Palestinians' traditional sources of leverage, the overall picture has changed dramatically since the PLO's heyday in the 1970s. Although armed attacks against Israel remain relatively popular across the Arab world,¹¹ and can still compel Arab engagement (as seen with the crucial role played by Qatari and Egyptian mediation in the current war is one example), the costs have risen sharply as the returns have diminished. Gaza's devastation, the rather anemic Arab response to it, and the proliferation of violent regional conflicts over the past decade and a half, have eroded armed struggle as an effective source of Palestinian leverage. Demographic influence has likewise waned—with the possible exception of Jordan—owing to the absence of an organized and organic political movement among the populations. The Palestinians' chief source of influence with Arab states, therefore, remains the enduring potency of their cause in Arab public consciousness.

The combination of dysfunctional Palestinian leadership and Arab officialdom's downgrading of Palestine helps explain the tepid Arab response to Israel's genocidal war, whether in comparison to other governments around the world or to their own stances during previous crises in Palestine. Since October 2023, Arab action has largely been limited to ceasefire appeals, rhetorical support for Palestinians and criticism of Israel, and occasional symbolic gestures, without deploying real leverage against Israel or the U.S., its chief sponsor. Within a year of October 7, Colombia, Bolivia, and Nicaragua had severed diplomatic relations with Israel over its actions in Gaza, but no Arab state has done so; while Jordan and Bahrain merely withdrew their ambassadors from Israel. Arab states likewise refrained from sanctions, arms restrictions, or curtailing economic ties, lagging behind some European and Latin American countries. Even at a declaratory level, Arab states remain far behind countries like South Africa and Colombia in their advocacy for Palestinians. Apart from Palestine itself, only Libya has joined South Africa's genocide case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Apart from Egyptian-Qatari mediation, meaningful Arab interventions have been sporadic. The Saudi-French-led initiative to implement a two-state framework, following the 2024 UNGA vote adopting the ICJ's ruling on the illegality of Israel's occupation, was notable but detached from the more immediate catastrophe happening in Gaza. Meanwhile, Egypt's post-war Gaza

reconstruction plan, which gained Arab League backing, came about only after U.S. President Donald Trump's alarming call to depopulate the territory and construct a "Riviera" on its ruins. Arab reluctance to use leverage was again evident during Trump's visit to the Gulf in May 2025. Despite growing international outrage over Israel's blockade and starvation in Gaza, Gulf states declined to condition major U.S. investment pledges on a change in Washington's Gaza policy—even as they pressed for sanctions relief in Syria.

Regaining Palestinian Influence

Regaining Palestinian influence with Arab states will require the reversal of the aforementioned negative trends. This means strengthening Palestinian national leadership and re-embedding the Palestinian cause within broader Arab politics. The latter, however, is unlikely to materialize without narrowing the widening gap between Arab publics and their governments, and enabling greater democratization across the region, neither of which appears likely in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, the most effective step Palestinians and their allies can take is to focus on rebuilding their national movement and political institutions. This includes forging a unified national leadership that is broadly representative, enjoys domestic legitimacy, and—crucially—is capable of independent decision-making.

Widespread affinity for the Palestinian cause, while important, is insufficient on its own. Without a credible Palestinian political agent capable of channeling Arab public solidarity into concrete political support, the Arab street is likely to remain confined to expressions of frustration and moral outrage, rather than sustained mobilization on behalf of Palestinian objectives. Only a credible and autonomous Palestinian leadership will have the wherewithal to articulate a clear and coherent strategy for national liberation, including a viable diplomatic strategy. Arab inaction (and indifference) will be harder to sustain or defend before domestic audiences when faced with a unified and revitalized Palestinian national movement, much as Arab leaders felt compelled to rally behind the PLO in the 1970s.

Reasserting Palestinian political autonomy will entail tough internal choices. These include pivoting away from the current leadership's near-exclusive reliance on the West—and Israel—in favor of a more layered and diplomatic strategy that re-centers Arab states and the Global South and finds ways of integrating Hamas into a reformed and unitary polity. The era of a U.S.-led peace process has long since passed. Persisting with the failed and obsolete Oslo framework—especially as Israel and the U.S. openly work to dismantle it—is a recipe for continued marginalization and political paralysis.

In sum, the Palestinians' most enduring source of influence vis-à-vis Arab states remains the primacy of the Palestinian cause in the hearts and minds of Arab citizens across the region. However, this asset cannot be fully leveraged without meaningful reform of Palestinian internal politics and the re-emergence of a unitary, representative, and genuinely autonomous leadership that enjoys both domestic and international legitimacy. While such a revived leadership may not, on its own, reverse unfavorable regional trends or recapture the Arab imagination, it is difficult to imagine either occurring in its absence.

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Chapter 5

How to Rebuild Gaza: Land, Sovereignty, and the Right to the City

AbdalRahman Kittana



Displaced Palestinians gather for their fast-breaking Iftar meal amid the rubble of destroyed buildings at the Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan, on February 23, 2026. (Photo by Omar AL-QATTAA / AFP)

Introduction: The Crisis Beneath the Rubble

The destruction of Gaza after October 7, 2023, represents more than a humanitarian disaster—it signifies an existential assault on the Palestinian liberation struggle, as well as a global ethical and legal collapse. With over 70 percent of homes destroyed or damaged, hospitals and schools flattened, and entire neighborhoods obliterated, the sheer scale of devastation has been matched only by the world's silence. Gaza has become a global rupture point, exposing the selective application of international law, the erosion of humanitarian norms, and the subordination of justice to imperial interests.¹

In this context, the idea of “reconstruction” is already a battlefield. Historically, in Gaza, postwar recovery has operated less as a path to rehabilitation and more as a mechanism of containment, aiming to stabilize the crisis while leaving its colonial roots intact.² Today, this logic is magnified. Global discourse has shifted away from liberation and justice, centering instead on Israeli security, donor governance, and technocratic management. The dominant policy questions, like who will govern Gaza and how aid will be administered, cast the territory as a zone of humanitarian crisis rather than an illegally occupied homeland to be liberated. Palestinian sovereignty is sidelined, the problems at hand are depoliticized, and reconstruction becomes a tool for normalizing injustice and fostering Israeli superiority instead of rebuilding Palestinian society.

This article intervenes in that discourse, aligning its arguments with the Gaza Phoenix Framework of January 2025, the only reconstruction plan developed by Gazans and published by the Union for Gaza Strip Municipalities.³ The article argues that postwar reconstruction must be treated as a political battlefield over sovereignty, spatial justice, and the right to liberation. Rather than reducing Gazans to victims or aid recipients alone, it affirms them as agents of recovery and future-making. It centers the rights to housing, land, and public infrastructure, not as technical issues, but as essential pillars of liberation. At the same time, it calls for the reunification of Palestinian geographies and economies, rejecting the colonial fragmentation that isolates Gaza from the West Bank and fractures national recovery.

Ultimately, this article challenges the notion that Gaza's future planning must be primarily oriented around addressing Israeli security, as is the case with the so-called Trump peace plan endorsed by the United Nations Security Council on November 17, 2025.⁴ It insists that any meaningful reconstruction must be rooted in justice, dignity, and Palestinian agency. To rebuild Gaza is not to manage its people, but to empower them. The sections that follow explore what this empowerment could look like in practice, outlining a vision for reconstruction grounded in collective rights and national liberation.

Empower the People: From Survival to Sovereignty

In the aftermath of this catastrophe, the central priority must be empowering survivors to reclaim life on their own terms. This empowerment is not a gesture of humanitarian empathy or developmental charity. Rather, it is a political practice embedded in the right to self-determination, spatial justice, and popular sovereignty. As true liberation is never granted but reclaimed and fought for,⁵ in the context of post-genocide Gaza, this means restoring both political and material agency to the people of the land.

As Gaza endured relentless devastation, numerous “day-after” initiatives—political schemes, reconstruction plans, and recovery proposals—were produced by international powers, regional actors, corporations, and research centers. In a comparative study from June 2025, the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) concluded that most of these externally-driven frameworks reduced reconstruction to technical management, marginalized Palestinian agency, and obscured the colonial roots of destruction.⁶ Such visions risk remaking Gaza into a site of external control and neoliberal experimentation rather than liberation and indigenous sovereignty. By contrast, the Palestinian-led initiative Gaza Phoenix points to another path, one rooted in spatial justice, cultural continuity, and community participation. In other words, it is not just a plan for rebuilding but a framework for rights-based recovery.

Empowerment must be rooted in structural transformation. This entails guaranteeing multiple rights to the people—most importantly, securing the rights to dignified housing, to land, and to participate collectively in the ownership and governance of public infrastructure. These rights are not isolated entitlements, but interlocking foundations of what Henri Lefebvre described as the “right to the city.”⁷ This entails the right not only to access urban space, but to shape, inhabit, and claim it as a site of belonging, autonomy, and collective life. Hence, any plan to rebuild Gaza must enshrine the following rights:

1. The Right to a Dignified Home

Housing is far more than a humanitarian need or physical structure. In postwar contexts, housing plays a crucial role in restoring community life, rebuilding trust, and reweaving the fabric of kinship and social stability. In Gaza, the genocidal war has systematically destroyed the spaces that make dignified and communal life possible. Homes have been bombed, bulldozed, and erased; entire neighborhoods flattened; and the very basis of homing—providing shelter, safety, intimacy, continuity—devastated by design. As a result, the postwar period demands rapid housing production to meet the urgent and overwhelming need for shelter. Yet this necessity must not reduce housing to a commodity or a donor-driven product. The right to housing must be recognized as a cornerstone of dignity, stability, and recovery. A home is not a tent, a prefab unit, a concrete shell, or a modernist replica of failed post-World War Two housing projects, such as the Pruitt-Igoe Apartments in St. Louis, Missouri, or the Unité d’habitation in Marseille, France. It is the material embodiment of quality of life, including safety, privacy, family continuity, and a sense of belonging.

Therefore, design in this context is not an afterthought; it is central to recovery.⁸ How homes are designed now will shape how communities live, heal, and relate for generations to come. That is why the urgency of rebuilding must not come at the expense of quality, livability, and spatial dignity. Mass housing must not mean uniformity or neglect. Without dignified, habitable spaces, there will be no true recovery, only a continuation of displacement, this time under the guise of reconstruction.

As such, while Trump's plan calls for the construction of an Emirati metropolis-style "Gaza Riviera," the Gaza Phoenix plan advances a more socially rooted approach—rebuilding on original plots, tailoring designs to community needs, and ensuring genuine participation in the planning process. Crucially, it calls for serious research into the kinds of homes Gazans themselves aspire to inhabit. A survey prepared by Gaza's municipalities, launched after the ceasefire and currently underway, asks residents not only about preferred housing types but also about intimate details such as the number of bedrooms and bathrooms, underscoring that recovery must be grounded in people's lived desires, everyday needs, and practices.

2. The Right to Land

Access to land is foundational to autonomy. In settler-colonial contexts, land is not just territory; it is a tool of domination and survival alike. As scholars of settler-colonialism note, the elimination of the native is achieved through control of land and denial of its use.⁹ Nowhere is this clearer than in Gaza, where the extreme density, siege economy, and military restrictions have severed many people from access to the land beneath their feet. During the war, these constraints have been drastically intensified by massive amounts of rubble and debris, widespread soil contamination, and severe environmental degradation.¹⁰

Moreover, in postwar contexts, access to land is often determined by financial capacity, allowing elites and capital holders to dominate while the most needy are pushed to the margins. Without calculated intervention, land becomes a site of speculation rather than recovery. In Gaza, this dynamic threatens to reproduce inequalities unless a deliberate policy of land redistribution is implemented. A proper reconstruction framework must include the radical redistribution of state-owned land through long-term leaseholds or commons-based frameworks that prioritize marginalized and landless families.

This approach draws on deep-rooted indigenous and Islamic traditions, namely the concept of *Mawat* land—unclaimed or uncultivated territories that can be claimed by cultivation or building. By reviving such traditions, Gaza's reconstruction can challenge the colonial and neoliberal logic of land as a commodity.

Land redistribution would provide Gaza's poorest families with a foundation for dignity and productivity. With just 20 square meters, a household could establish a small workshop, plant vegetables, or produce handmade goods—shifting from being passive recipients of aid to active agents of community-based recovery. In this sense, land is not only a physical asset but a condition for social emancipation and empowerment.

3. Collective Ownership of Public Infrastructure

Alongside the right to land, a truly decolonial reconstruction demands a radical reimagining of public infrastructure not as a field for profit-making, but as a common essential to collective life. In many post-war contexts, international donors and private investors have instrumentalized infrastructure as a tool of neoliberal restructuring, promoting the privatization of basic services—such as electricity, transport, and water—under the guise of efficiency and modernization.¹¹ These models often exclude the very communities they claim to serve from ownership and operation, deepening dependency and undermining public sovereignty.

To resist this logic, Palestinians must be empowered to co-own and co-govern public infrastructure projects through mechanisms such as community shareholding and cooperative management. This approach transforms infrastructure from a target of extraction into a platform for redistribution and solidarity. Whether in solar energy networks, public transport systems, or water desalination plants, these collective ownership models foster economic justice, civic accountability, and long-term social resilience.

From ‘Bare Life’ to Political Life

Too often, humanitarian interventions focus entirely on a population’s survival while ignoring their other needs and demands. In this context, it is vital to understand how reconstruction must restore not only homes or jobs but the political presence of the people. As Giorgio Agamben warned,¹² humanitarianism often reduces people to bare life-subjects to be managed, not citizens to be empowered. But Palestinians are not passive survivors of a natural disaster; they are political actors demanding their right to liberty, and their rights to build, dwell, and self-govern in their homeland.

The neglect of Palestinian agency obscures a critical question: How have Palestinians in Gaza managed to endure two years of unprecedented bombardment, infrastructural elimination, and deliberate efforts to dismantle governmental, international, and civic institutions? Overlooked, too, are the ways in which municipalities, organizations such as the ‘Arab and International Organization to Construct in Palestine’ (AIOCP), neighborhood committees, local NGOs, charities, companies, families, and individuals have stepped in to sustain life under genocidal conditions. These actors have worked to reconnect water networks, clear rubble, assess building safety, establish camps, deliver food, and carry out countless other essential tasks—all while facing relentless attack, displacement and deprivation.

To truly empower the people, then, is not to delegitimize or neglect local agency and administer aid within the limits of the existing order, but to dismantle the structures of domination that made this war possible, and that continue to center reconstruction around Israeli concerns. In the international discourse on reconstruction, Gazans are spoken about but rarely listened to; they are framed as problems to be managed. Most non-Palestinian Gaza reconstruction plans frame Palestinian agency—if they acknowledge it at all—within donor-defined hierarchies and technocratic control. The UNDP’s Gaza Early Recovery Programme,¹³ the so-called Egyptian Plan,¹⁴

the Al Habtoor Gaza Reconstruction Plan,¹⁵ and the Trump Plan all invoke “local ownership” but, in practice, reduce Palestinian institutions to implementers. Strategic authority, however, lies with international agencies, regional states, or private investors.

By contrast, the Gaza Phoenix Plan reasserts planning as a political act of resistance, situating reconstruction within local knowledge, community participation, and decolonial governance. The contrast reveals how institutional design itself has become a battleground: External plans depoliticize and subordinate Palestinian agency, while indigenous frameworks insist on sovereignty from below.

A large part of the problem is that the absence of a unified Palestinian national leadership undermines Palestinian agency and its influence in international discourse. Institutions in Gaza are dismissed as illegitimate under the label of being Hamas-led, while the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank is deliberately sidelined, further dismantling Palestinian national representation. This political fragmentation and institutional failure severely constrain Palestinian agency, underscoring the urgent need to address the question of unified and legitimate leadership.

As such, Palestinians should go beyond geographic, political, and economic fragmentation to reclaim a unified political and territorial space. Despite the international consensus that the West Bank and Gaza Strip constitute a single geopolitical unit under illegal occupation, postwar policy planning continues to reinforce Palestinian territorial and political fragmentation. The Trump plan, for instance, largely excludes the PA until some ill-defined point in the future, while concentrating Palestinian agency in an apolitical “executive committee” tasked with narrow administrative functions and implementing directives from an externally-composed executive board. This technocratic framing not only echoes the failures of previous postwar governance models in Gaza but also reproduces the colonial logics of foreign domination and divide-and-conquer.

This territorial and political division further impacts the social and economic recovery of Palestinians. For example, the West Bank is home to a dense landscape of small-scale industries, workshops, and light manufacturing sectors, ranging from food processing and textiles to construction materials and household goods. These sectors have been systematically undermined by the dual pressures of Israel’s military occupation and aid-dependent development. Yet they remain vital assets for a national recovery rooted in self-reliance and interdependence. Their potential, however, remains unused—stifled by artificial borders and Israeli movement restrictions.

A decolonial reconstruction strategy must reimagine Gaza’s recovery within the broader Palestinian geography, activating latent capacities and reconnecting severed spaces. For example, enabling producers in Hebron or Nablus to supply goods and materials for rebuilding homes, schools, and markets in Gaza would reduce the time and costs of reconstruction, revitalize West Bank industries and support long-term material and economic recovery in Gaza. This is not a matter of aid—it is a strategy of intra-national solidarity and economic decolonization.

Why is it that Palestinians with Israeli citizenship from Haifa can own weekend homes in the West Bank town of Rawabi, yet no serious policy considers allowing displaced Gazans to rent homes there? Why is the idea of Gazan workers commuting to Hebron factories unthinkable, while Jewish

settlers commute daily across “apartheid roads”¹⁶ from illegal colonies to workplaces in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv? These questions lay bare the deep structural conditions of dispossession that define Palestinian life under an entangled regime of settler-colonialism military occupation. They reveal a system in which mobility, residency, and spatial access are not rights, but privileges distributed along ethnonational and religious lines.

This is not to say that Gaza’s future lies in dependency on the West Bank. Gaza must be rebuilt with its own thriving, autonomous economy and urban future. But in the short-to-medium term, reactivating West Bank industries, ensuring freedom of movement, and resisting enforced fragmentation will allow Palestinians to harness their full collective capacity in rebuilding what has been destroyed.

Conclusion

The imposition and adoption of the Trump plan in late 2025 largely sidelined other internationally produced “day after” visions and reconstruction plans, which similarly reduced recovery to a technical or financial exercise while ignoring the colonial conditions that produced the destruction in the first place. The Gaza Phoenix Framework, developed by the Union of Gaza Strip Municipalities, offers an alternative that treats planning as a form of liberation and a tool to restore dignity, agency, and self-determination.

Accordingly, this article insists that reconstruction is not a neutral logistical task but a political struggle over sovereignty and emancipation. True recovery cannot emerge from donor-driven mechanisms or security-centered frameworks that marginalize Palestinian voices. It must instead center the rights of Gazans to housing, land, and collective ownership of infrastructure, while also resisting the colonial fragmentation that separates Gaza from the West Bank. Only a reconstruction effort that is just, people-centered, and politically grounded—one that affirms the national rights of the Palestinian people—can break the cycle of destruction, bring an end to the war, and lay the foundation for dignity, liberation, and peace.

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Solidarity or Indifference? Charting Global South Responses to the Assault on Palestine

Sarang Shidore



Protesters hold placards and Palestinian flags as they march through the city centre during civil society and faith-based organizations' mass rally for Gaza, in Cape Town on September 27, 2025. (Photo by RODGER BOSCH / AFP)

Introduction

Israel's brutal assault on Gaza following Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack—which also targeted civilians—has triggered widespread global condemnation. While public opinion in the United States and Europe has increasingly shifted in favor of the Palestinian cause, Western governments have, by and large, strongly backed Israel.

To the extent that vigorous state-level opposition to Israel's actions has emerged, it has come from the Global South. South Africa led the charge early by lodging a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2023, alleging violations of the UN Genocide Convention.¹ Global South states also repeatedly and overwhelmingly voted in favor of an immediate ceasefire at the United Nations throughout the war.

There is a long history of solidarity with the Palestinian cause in the Global South, including at the landmark 1955 Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia, and within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This tradition weakened after the Cold War, as NAM was marginalized and attention to Palestine waned following the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the U.S.-led monopolization of the “peace process.”

This paper assesses the recent surge of Global South solidarity with Palestine by charting state responses.² It asks how extensive and impactful this renewal is, what drives and constrains it, and what implications it holds for Palestine and the broader global order.

The paper argues that while Global South solidarity with Palestine has indeed increased significantly, its leverage over Israeli policies remains limited, with material sanctions aimed at changing Israeli policies only adopted by a small subset of states. Nevertheless, these responses have helped prevent the erosion of international humanitarian law at a moment when the great powers and most of their core allies are not only absent from safeguarding these norms but, in some cases, are flagrantly complicit in their violation. In doing so, Global South states are defending the principle of a world governed by a common minimum code of conduct amid multiple converging global crises.

The New South as a “Geopolitical Fact”

The Global South, previously known as the “Third World,” was born in the wake of decolonization of Asia and Africa.³ The 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung marked a seminal moment for Third World solidarity. The Non-Aligned Movement was subsequently founded in 1961, and Cuba hosted the more revolutionary components of the Third World at the Tricontinental Conference in Havana in 1966. Southern solidarity reached its peak in the 1970s, with the New International Economic Order debate at the United Nations and a near consensus on Palestine and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

However, the Global South today is not the same as it once was. The broad push for autarky has been replaced by a qualified welcoming of foreign trade and investment. A set of developing states, predominantly in Asia, has broken out of the low-income category and achieved rapid industrialization, prioritizing exports over import substitution. The upshot of all this is that the Global South has become economically more disaggregated in terms of wealth and income.

This diversity is also reflected in a shift in geopolitical identities, further buttressed by the receding memory of formal colonialism. Consequently, Global South states are prioritizing their own interests rather than attempting to form a NAM-like bloc.⁴ Their focus is national rise with a narrower interpretation of national interests in most cases. The new Global South may be described as a “geopolitical fact,” in which self-help behavior dominates.⁵ This is the world that Palestinians must reckon with.

Waging Lawfare

The horrors of Gaza have been met with a renewal of Southern solidarity in upholding international law. Lawfare has been the principal tool used by Global South states to counter Israeli actions in Gaza. Votes taken at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) demonstrated overwhelming support across the Global South for halting the fighting, enabling humanitarian assistance, and releasing all hostages.⁶ Four key resolutions demanding a truce or a ceasefire were passed with large majorities after the Gaza conflict began. Arab states, especially Jordan and Egypt, took a key role in drafting and introducing these resolutions, mobilizing broad coalitions of sponsors later joined by Spain.⁷

The first major step came on October 27, 2023, when the UNGA adopted a resolution calling for an “immediate and sustained truce” and cessation of hostilities. The text condemned all acts of violence aimed at civilians and demanded that all parties immediately and fully comply with international law. It was backed by a large majority of Global South states with 96 yes votes.⁸ However, a small but significant set of states chose to abstain, including Cameroon, Ethiopia, India, the Philippines, Panama, Uruguay, and Zambia. A handful, including Guatemala, Paraguay, Fiji, and several other Pacific Island states, voted against.

The next significant UNGA vote on December 12, 2023, called for “immediate humanitarian ceasefire” in the Israel– Hamas war, “immediate and unconditional release of all hostages hostage release, ensuring humanitarian access, and that all parties comply with their obligations under international law.” It was backed by an even bigger Global South majority, with the yes vote tally jumping to 109. In contrast to their October votes, Ethiopia, Fiji, India, the Philippines, and Zambia came out of the shadows to support the resolution.⁹

The next major UNGA vote was about a year later, on December 11, 2024. The resolution demanded an “immediate ceasefire” in Gaza and an end to the Israeli blockade. It passed handily, also with 109 votes from the Global South.¹⁰

Action at the UNGA resumed after a negotiated ceasefire in Gaza (that lasted for about two months) collapsed in March 2025 after Israel unilaterally resumed its attacks. The June 12, 2025, roll call represented a slight setback on Global South support, with the yes vote tally slipping to 99. Ecuador, Ethiopia, India and Panama were among the states that switched their votes to Abstain.

Looking under the hood of these numbers reveals major solidarity. But it also points to some subtle but important differences within the Global South. A revealing moment was a vote in December 2023 on an amendment sponsored by the United States citing Hamas (but not Israel) by name and condemning its “heinous terrorist attacks.”¹¹ A contiguous belt of Muslim-majority countries stretching from Mauritania at the western tip of Africa to Pakistan, as well as Indonesia and Malaysia, opposed this amendment. They were joined by South Africa, Cuba, Bolivia, Nigeria, Uganda, and a few other non-Muslim majority countries. But the rest of the Global South — including key states such as India, the Philippines, Singapore, Chile, Peru, Kenya, and Ghana — supported the U.S. amendment, while Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Jamaica, Ethiopia, and Thailand (among others) abstained.¹²

If the UNGA is the closest thing that exists to the world’s parliament, then the ICJ and the International Criminal Court (ICC) comprise the world’s judiciary. South Africa’s early filing of a case against Israel at the ICJ in December 2023, alleging the violation of the Convention on Genocide, was a landmark development. Pretoria explicitly invoked the historical context and root causes in its filing, including references to colonialism and apartheid

But this case has gone well beyond being a bilateral affair. Several Global South states have formally intervened in support of South Africa’s case. These include Belize, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Libya, Mexico, and the Maldives. In July 2025, Brazil announced its intention to join the case.¹³ Additionally, in April 2024, Nicaragua lodged a separate case at the ICJ against Germany, alleging Berlin was breaching its obligations by continuing to support Israel and demanding an end to its arms sales to Israel.¹⁴

The ICC, which prosecutes individuals and not states, is also a focus of the Global South’s lawfare. In November 2023, South Africa, Bolivia, Bangladesh, Comoros, and Djibouti made a referral to the ICC on possible crimes committed against Palestinians. In January 2024, Mexico and Chile made a referral to the ICC asking it to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity conducted in Palestine since June 13, 2014.¹⁵ In a major victory for the complainants, the ICC prosecutor issued international arrest warrants for the Israeli prime minister and former defense minister (along with three Hamas leaders, including its military commander) for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹⁶

Taking Material Action

A set of states has gone beyond diplomatic and legal steps and taken materially significant actions with respect to Israel. Outside the MENA region, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Bolivia, Honduras, Chad, and South Africa recalled their ambassadors, while Belize, Bolivia, and South Africa cut or suspended diplomatic ties with Israel. Chile recalled its military attachés.

Some states have taken economic measures against Israel. Malaysia imposed a maritime ban on vessels from the largest Israeli shipping company, ZIM.¹⁷ In June 2024, Colombia announced a prohibition on coal exports to Israel (valued at \$300 million a year) and terminated its free trade agreement in October 2025.¹⁸ Chile's President submitted a bill that would ban all goods produced in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank.¹⁹ Brazil signed a free trade agreement with the Palestinian Authority in a show of support for Palestine.²⁰ Indonesia announced it will treat 2,000 wounded Palestinians from Gaza in a medical facility on its territory.²¹

Curbs on defense ties with Israel have been undertaken by Chile, which canceled military training and stopped buying Israeli military and security systems,²²

In January 2025, a set of Global South states founded The Hague Group in solidarity with Palestine and in opposition to Israel's actions in Gaza.²³ South Africa described the group's efforts as "advancing] international law in an era of impunity."²⁴ During the group's Bogota meeting in July 2025, 13 states committed to implementing six specific measures to pressure the Israeli state to change course.²⁵ These measures included the prevention of the provision or transfer of arms to Israel, the prevention of the transit, docking, and servicing of any vessels suspected of carrying military materials to Israel, ensuring that no public funds are supporting Israel's occupation of Palestine, supporting national and international judicial actions to ensure accountability and justice, and backing international jurisdiction mandates.

Palestinian Efforts

On the ground in Global South countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Palestinian ambassadors and other officials have made concerted efforts to press the Palestinian case in the media, at social gatherings and events, and to government officials directly since October 7, 2023. There are numerous examples of this in Mexico, Chile, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and South Africa, among others.^{*26}

Palestinian civil society groups have also played a significant role in shaping the discussion and policy outcomes in the Global South. The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, for example, maintains activist coordinators dedicated to each region of the Global South where it has rallied support for years. In 2020, for instance, 10 ex-presidents and more than 700 members of parliament, distinguished individuals, and civil society leaders from across the Global South signed a statement endorsing BDS demands for punitive measures against Israel for its oppressive actions in Palestine.²⁷

Of Leverage and Lenses

What patterns can be deduced in the empirical record of the Global South's responses to Gaza? At the outset, it should be emphasized that the demand for an immediate ceasefire, provision of humanitarian aid, and release of all hostages has been consistent from practically the entire Global South, which Israel and its Western backers have systematically rejected.

When it comes to more concrete actions beyond lawfare, however, only a smaller set of Global South states have stepped up. The Hague Group is a significant, plurilateral move in that direction. In a sense, the coalition is trying to intervene where the United Nations has failed. However, the 13 signatories of the Hague Group's pledge represent a clear minority—11.5% and 20% of the Global South's population and GDP, respectively.²⁸

The Hague group is further handicapped by the fact that the Global South has far less direct material influence over Israel compared to the U.S. and major European powers, such as Germany.²⁹ Only India and Brazil count among Israel's top fifteen export destinations,³⁰ and Türkiye, India, and Vietnam are among Israel's top fifteen sources of imports.³¹ Significantly, however, India is the biggest customer of Israeli arms worldwide. The Philippines is also an important Israeli defense customer. Of these five Global South states with significant material ties to Israel, only Türkiye and Brazil attended the Bogota meeting, and only Türkiye signed on to the Hague Group's six concrete measures.

About 25-30 Global South states—roughly 20% of the total—either voted only sometimes or never at the UNGA in support of a ceasefire in the Gaza conflict.³² Various factors explain their ambiguity or opposition. Domestic politics is one of them. India's ultra-conservative government has developed a deep ideological affinity with Israel since it came to power in 2014, although the trajectory of relations was moving in that direction since India's recognition of Israel in 1992.³³ Israel also provides arms and high-tech security assistance to India with few strings attached.

During the Cold War, many Latin American states, then under U.S.-backed military dictatorships, were supportive of Israel as an anti-communist bulwark. Contemporary views toward Israel in the region have more diversified drivers. The Left in the region has been a strong opponent of Israeli actions in Palestine. Leftist governments in Latin America, such as Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, and Nicaragua, have been at the forefront of activism on the issue, also informed by the history of past Israeli backing for military dictatorships in some of these countries. On the other hand, Argentinian President Javier Milei and, to a lesser extent, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa have strong ideological alignment with Israel. Moreover, large segments of Latin America's population are now Evangelical Christians, and Christian Zionism has consequently surged in the region.

Christian Zionism is also influential in the Pacific, where deeply evangelical orientations are common among the citizenry. Additionally, several Pacific states, such as Papua New Guinea and Palau, have close and dependent security relationships with the United States, which nudges them toward a neutral or pro-Israel/U.S. position.³⁴

Strong personal relationships also matter. Cameroonian President Paul Biya, among the longest reigning leaders in the world, has a four-decade-long history of alignment with Israel. Cameroon, along with Eritrea in Africa, has never recognized Palestine. Ethiopia, too, has long-standing historical ties to Israel. It abstained from voting on the UN partition resolution in 1947 and recognized Israel only in 1961.

At a more fundamental level, two lenses are in play on the Palestine question. When presented with a frame of terrorism, many Global South states react with a statist, counterterror lens that tends to turn more sympathetic toward Israel, splitting the Global South coalition roughly down the middle. Postcolonial insecurities explain some of this shift, along with a general wariness of violent non-state actors. Many of these states are themselves products of colonial partitions and divide-and-rule strategies, resulting in incomplete projects of territorial integrity and nation-building. This lens came into play during the vote on the U.S. amendment condemning Hamas at the UNGA in December 2023, mentioned previously.³⁵ Also revealing were the characterizations of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack as a terrorist attack by key states such as Brazil, India, and Singapore in their immediate reactions.³⁶

On the other hand, the Global South tends to rally in solidarity when the frame of discussion is neocolonialism or Western-backed foreign occupation. Palestine is among the oldest unresolved questions of decolonization under international law, with a long history of support in the Global South, and those memories still endure.

The solidarity-indifference spectrum may point to a tussle between postcolonialism and realism. Most Global South states possess both in good measure. However, realism is ascendant and postcolonialism is weakening as memories of the formal colonial era slowly recede.

Conclusion: A Glass Half Full

A widely heard question on Gaza is: How can the international community be so feckless in the face of such horror? But in a realist, self-help world, we should expect little different. This is especially true in the Global South, which has much to lose, relatively little influence to exert, and little to gain in confronting Israel and its powerful Western backers. A purely interests-based motivation would lead Global South states to be essentially indifferent to the plight of Gaza and Palestine.

The surprise, then, is that so many Global South states have acted against their material interests and stood up to censure, prosecute, and, in a few cases, even sanction Israel. As has been argued above, this indicates that the postcolonial lens and a sense that international law matters remain very much alive in the Global South.³⁷

Whereas great powers could survive and defend themselves in a lawless world, middle powers and smaller states cannot. This gives the far-sighted among them an incentive to defend international law when it is violated most egregiously to prevent a future world in which anyone may be subject to the untrammelled domination of the weak by the strong.

States taking actions in response to Gaza are aware of the constraints of lawfare and their limited leverage in changing Israeli behavior. But in using diplomatic and legal tools, these states also ensure that international humanitarian law, battered as it may be, remains standing. Israel recognizes the significance of its actions; otherwise, it would not have fought hard at the ICJ with the best lawyers it could muster.

By forcing a sustained, structured international debate on the atrocities in Gaza, the Global South has ensured that international law lives on to fight another day and waits for a world in which all powers, big and small, fully recognize the indispensability of a common minimum code to live by. This is especially urgent when all of us, without exception, are increasingly threatened by global challenges such as war, environmental collapse, and disease.

Endnotes

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8. Eight Global South states voted no, 16 abstained, and 13 did not vote.
9. Though Argentina, reflecting a change of government during an intervening election, switched to vote no. Six Global South states voted no, 12 abstained and six did not vote.
10. Also, a December 17, 2024, UNGA resolution on a broader but related matter of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination received as many as 115 affirmative votes from the Global South. See <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4069726?ln=en>. In this and other tallies in this study, a total of 133 votes are attributed to Global South states.
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26. ***Addendum:** In Latin America, Palestine's Ambassador to Mexico, Nadya R.H. Rasheed, went to Guadalajara to [meet](#) with human rights organizations and request humanitarian aid for Gaza, [addressed](#) the country's most prominent public university in Mexico City, and [met](#) with the President of the Mexican Senate and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum to win broader support in the country.

Palestine's Ambassador to Chile, Vera Baboun, [spoke](#) at a Catholic mass held at a cathedral in Santiago meant to bring together Chile's Muslim and Christian communities, and gave [interviews](#) to multiple Chilean [media](#) outlets. She also met top Chilean and UN officials, including the Chilean foreign minister, Alberto van Klaveren, and [spoke](#) of the importance of international recognition for a Palestinian state. At the invitation of the Palestinian-Chilean Community, the ambassador [raised](#) the Palestinian flag on the town hall of San Felipe. Chile hosts the [largest community](#) of Palestinian descent outside the Arab world.

In next door Brazil, President Lula de Silva [met](#) with Palestine's Ambassador to Brazil Ibrahim Alzeben to discuss the ongoing crisis in Palestine. The ambassador also [addressed](#) the ruling party's (Worker's Party, or PT) national meeting. Palestine's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Varsen Aghabekian [visited](#) Brazil in March 2025 and held a press conference focused on Israel's atrocities in Gaza, Palestinian statehood, and Brazil-Palestine relations.

Palestinian diplomats have also been active in Asia. Palestine's ambassador to India, Adnan Abu Al Hijah, gave interviews to prominent Indian newspapers [The Hindu](#) and [Indian Express](#), in which he emphasized India's role as a friend to both Palestine and Israel before advocating for India to mediate peace efforts.

Palestine's Ambassador to Indonesia, Dr. Zuhair S.M. Al Shun [met](#) with the President of Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, [Sugiono](#), and expressed Palestine's gratitude for Indonesia's solidarity with Palestine and its people. Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Central Committee, Phan Dinh Trac, [met](#) with the Palestinian Liberation Organization Secretary General Azzam Najib Mustafa Al-Ahmad in Hanoi. During the meeting, Secretary Trac reaffirmed Vietnam's steadfast support for Palestine and the Palestine liberation movement.

In Africa, the Palestinian ambassador to Nigeria, Abdullah Abu M Shawesh, was active in [print](#) and [broadcast media](#) on making his case. He also met with the Nigerian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yusuf M. Tuggar. Palestine's Embassy in South Africa [hosted](#) an event in support of South Africa's legal case at the ICJ. The attendees watched the first hearing of the South African case against Israel. The Palestinian ambassador Hanan Jarrar also [engaged](#) with multiple [media](#) outlets in the country.

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33. The main Indian opposition party, the Congress Party, has more recently taken a tough stand on Israel. See <https://x.com/INCIndia/status/1933786778869354770>. It is also noteworthy that India voted yes on other important UNGA resolutions on Palestine during the Gaza conflict, including a resolution on December 4, 2024, condemning Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories as illegal which garnered 97 yes votes from the Global South.

34. This is also true to a degree for the Philippines.

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Palestinian Activism in the West after October 7: Opportunities and Challenges

Zaha Hassan



People take part in a "Palestine Solidarity" march in San Francisco, California, on November 4, 2023. (Photo by Amy OSBORNE / AFP)

Introduction

The Palestinians living outside the Middle East constitute only a small fraction of the total population of the diaspora, roughly between 5-8%, ranging from 740,000 to 1.1 million persons.¹ However, because most of this population lives within liberal democracies, they have an outsize influence on global activism in support of Palestinian national self-determination and rights and have been instrumental in shaping the global debate on Palestine/Israel. With wide socioeconomic differences and diverse lived experiences, political activism and organizing have offered Palestinian diaspora communities a point of unity and an opportunity to build social cohesion outside their ancestral homeland. Both the character and quality of diaspora activism have changed with the different waves of Palestinian immigration to the West, political events, the institutional decay of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and discrimination by host states that aimed to circumscribe or suppress such activism.²

This chapter examines diaspora communities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe to understand: (1) how diaspora activism has evolved and what role it plays in the global movement for Palestinian rights; (2) the challenges and opportunities activists are facing since October 7, 2023; and (3) what lies ahead for the U.S. “peace plan” for Palestinians and Israelis amid a declining international legal order.

The Recent History and Character of the Palestinian Diaspora in the West

Palestinian immigrants moving to the West in the late 1960s, in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, arrived without national institutions capable of supporting or providing direction for political activism in their adopted countries. The small Palestinian communities already established in North and South America were largely Christian and had some post-secondary education, which facilitated their social integration, often with the assistance of their local churches. Their activism tended toward political writing and direct engagement with policymakers and officials rather than street protest.³ Subsequent waves of regional conflict and political turmoil, however, brought increased Palestinian immigration to the US and Europe, including the 1970 PLO-Jordanian conflict, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and civil war, the 1990 Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, and the mass expulsion of Palestinians from the Gulf that followed.⁴

Following the Fatah-led takeover of the PLO in 1969, its international recognition in 1974, and the opening of diplomatic offices in Western capitals, diaspora communities gained an institutional umbrella under which their cultural and political activism could be coordinated and supported. Central to this effort was the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), a founding constituent member of the PLO, which linked university students worldwide to the national movement, promoted cultural programming, and helped direct activism on Palestine. At its height in the 1970s and 1980s, GUPS students—many of whom were first-generation immigrants to the West—maintained active affiliations with Palestinian political movements and factions, fostering sustained debate over the national movement’s direction, priorities, and strategic objectives.⁵

These movements were nationalist, leftist, secular, and anti-colonial, including Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the Palestine Communist Party (PCP). Owing to their revolutionary character, they found common cause with similar counterparts in the West, including civil rights campaigners and the South African anti-apartheid movement. In Europe, where Palestinian populations were smaller and more dispersed, activism was channeled through a mix of cultural associations and solidarity groups. In 1986, the European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine was established to amplify the work of the disparate organizations. In the US, village-based social groups originating from towns such as Ramallah, El Bireh, Deir Debwan, and Birzeit also helped mobilize protests to respond to events in the homeland.

The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 marked a fundamental shift in the Palestinian national movement away from national liberation and toward state-building in Gaza and the West Bank, with significant implications for diaspora communities. A rupture emerged between the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership and activists affiliated with Palestinian political factions and diaspora constituencies opposed to Oslo.⁶ The principal critique concerned whether Oslo's "land for peace" formula sacrificed refugee rights and claims, and shifted the liberation movement's center of gravity away from restitution and return to historic Palestine toward state-building within the occupied Palestinian territories.

As the PLO lost traditional sources of funding from Arab Gulf states, and donor assistance was redirected toward constructing the Palestinian proto-state, the organization and its institutions were hollowed out in favor of the PA. The result was that diaspora activism became unmoored from an organized national political framework. Without such PLO coordination and direction, the Palestinian diaspora in the US, for a period, also lost some of its connectivity with other anti-imperialist struggles. But even among those in the diaspora who supported the Oslo peace process and negotiations with Israel, political organizing around Palestine largely went dormant during the years of on-and-off-again Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.

Movement organizing would re-emerge when the Al Aqsa Intifada erupted in September 2000. Mobilization around Palestinian refugee rights also gained renewed prominence, including through the founding of US-based organizations like Al Awda Right to Return Coalition, a non-partisan, global, democratic association of grassroots activists and students, and as knowledge production on the right to return increased from Palestine-based organizations like Badil Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights in Bethlehem.

Palestinian Diaspora Activism After the Demise of the Oslo

During and after the Second Intifada, diaspora activism in the West increasingly centered on Israeli human rights violations, particularly extrajudicial killings and the complicity of Western governments in supplying military aid and weapons to Israel. As the Oslo peace process unraveled, anti-apartheid framing also became more widespread.⁷ In the United States, diaspora Palestinians and solidarity groups—such as Al Awda and the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation

(later renamed as the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights), an umbrella organization comprising more than 200 grassroots groups nationwide—focused their advocacy on either specific rights claims, most notably refugee rights, or on exposing U.S. involvement in human rights abuses abroad. Most organizing efforts deliberately avoided promoting a particular political outcome, both to sidestep intra-Palestinian divisions over the one-state versus two-state debate and because many organizations included substantial non-Palestinian memberships with limited stakes in any particular political framework. Consequently, activism by diaspora Palestinians and their allies tended to focus on their respective country's role in furthering Israel's military occupation and rights violations.

When the United States launched its “war on terror” following the September 11 attacks in 2001, the political space for Palestinian organizing in the West narrowed considerably. As armed Palestinian groups began using suicide bombing attacks against Israel, pro-Zionist organizations successfully cast all Palestinian resistance abroad and even human rights advocacy as forms of support for terrorism.⁸ Moreover, intensified surveillance and policing of Arabs and Muslim communities in the United States—through mechanisms such as “joint terrorism taskforces”—combined with Washington's global leadership role on counterterrorism and tracking terrorism financing, made it more challenging for diaspora Palestinians to organize explicitly as Palestinians.⁹ Much of the diaspora activism for Palestine, therefore, tended to take place in coalition with other human rights, faith-based, and civil rights activity and organizing.

As the Second Intifada subsided in 2005, the Palestinian-Israeli peace process resumed, and the perceived threat to the American homeland from transnational terrorism diminished, Palestinian diaspora political organizing re-emerged more forcefully in the West. New and revitalized networks formed within major Christian denominations, Arab-American community organizations, the American Muslims for Palestine, and Students for Justice in Palestine, with parallel structures emerging across Europe and the UK. Though Palestinians tend to be a minority in these groups, they held leadership positions or were part of the steering committees.¹⁰ A central pillar of the early activism of these organizations, particularly after 2005, concerned supporting the global Palestinian call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel.¹¹

Among more left-leaning organizations, a resurgence of cross-movement solidarity that linked the Palestinian struggle to campaigns focused on women's rights, anti-Black racism, and concerns related to immigrants and indigenous peoples.¹² These engagements fostered greater awareness, education, and appreciation of the lived experiences of marginalized communities in Western societies and encouraged a shared understanding of and the common systems of oppression deployed domestically and abroad to control these populations. Given the relatively small size of Palestinian diaspora communities in the U.S., the UK, and Europe, this intersectional analytical framework has been critical to building political influence and sustaining long-term organizing capacity within their respective host countries.

Suppression of Diaspora Activism in the Age of Genocide: Opportunities and Challenges after October 7

Palestinian diaspora activism—particularly its investment in cross-movement coalition-building, engagement within solidarity networks, and narrative production through nontraditional media platforms—has been critical in reshaping the Western discourse on Palestine and Israel. Long before October 7, polling data in the U.S. pointed to shifting perceptions of Palestinians and their “conflict” with Israel among Democratic Party voters.¹³ Following the launch of Israel’s genocidal campaign in Gaza after October 7, 2023, however, these trendlines accelerated dramatically. According to a 2025 poll, 60 percent of Democrats reported greater sympathy for Palestinians, compared to only 12 percent for Israel,¹⁴ while more than half of American adults expressed an unfavorable view of Israel¹⁵—a figure that rose to 70 percent among adults aged 18 to 49.¹⁶ Sentiments have also shifted meaningfully among Republican Party voters: in March 2025, 37 percent of Republicans,¹⁷ and half of Republicans under 50, reported unfavorable views of Israel. More than 60 percent of Americans now agree that “Israel is playing a negative role in resolving key challenges in the Middle East.”¹⁸

Comparable shifts have occurred across Europe, where Palestinian-led and solidarity activism has achieved unprecedented public visibility and mobilization. Hundreds of thousands of people have turned out for pro-Palestine protests in Italy, the UK, France, Spain, Ireland, and elsewhere.¹⁹ For example, in Italy, a general strike held in October 2025 in solidarity with Gaza and a flotilla of international activists rallied 400,000 people nationwide and effectively shut down the country.²⁰ In the UK, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign co-organized more than half a million people to protest the Gaza war in 2025.²¹ These mobilizations reflect not episodic outrage but a durable cultural and political shift in how Palestine is understood across broad segments of European societies.

Mounting grassroots pressure and widespread criticism of government inaction arguably pushed several European states and the UK to recognize the State of Palestine in 2024 and 2025. The European Union and individual member states began implementing—or seriously considering—punitive measures against Israel, including arms embargoes,²² divestment from companies complicit in human rights abuses,²³ and the suspension of certain bilateral trade arrangements.²⁴ Civil society-led efforts in support of BDS have been further mainstreamed. European artists, including prominent actors, joined hundreds of international counterparts in pledging not to screen, appear in films, or work with Israeli film institutions.²⁵ Human rights groups and football/soccer fans launched the #GameOverIsrael campaign to exclude Israel from international tournaments, while Amnesty International (UK) and UN mandate holders called for teams based in illegal settlements to be banned from international sporting competitions and cultural events.²⁶

These advances in Palestinian-led and solidarity activism, however, have provoked a fierce and coordinated backlash. Confronted with Israel’s rapidly deteriorating global public image—and the strategic openings this creates for Palestinians, Israeli partisans and allied institutions in the West have responded with unprecedented levels of punitive action. Drawing on entrenched institutional, financial, and political influence, Israel’s supporters have sought to brand virtually

all criticism of Israel as antisemitic hate speech; criminalize pro-Palestine advocacy as material support for terrorism; and to suppress academic and cultural engagement with Palestinian history, identity, and lived experiences. In the U.S., this has included efforts to weaponize federal anti-discrimination statutes to legally proscribe criticism of Israel on university campuses.

Mainstream Western media has also had a significant role in manufacturing consent for Israel's criminal military campaign and Western government support for it. While social media platforms have been instrumental in democratizing information flows from Gaza and Palestine, these same platforms have intensified content moderation practices that disproportionately target pro-Palestinian speech—through post removals, account suspensions, and algorithmic suppression. Although such practices have been well-documented,²⁷ their scale and coordination have only expanded.

State repression has likewise intensified. In the United States, Palestinian student groups and solidarity organizations have been banned or had their non-profit status challenged.²⁸ For instance, the Samidoun Prisoner Solidarity Network was designated as a terror organization by the United States and Canada because of its alleged association with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a previously-designated Palestinian political faction, despite an absence of evidence.²⁹ In the UK, individuals have been arrested in large numbers for simply displaying signs showing support Palestine Action, a group whose protest activities—mainly involving property damage—do not qualify as terrorism under British law, according to a leaked British intelligence report.³⁰ In Germany, an academic institution was prevented from hosting a British physician with firsthand experience in Gaza from speaking via video conference, on the grounds that his anticipated criticism of Israel could be construed as antisemitic.³¹ More broadly, applicants for naturalization as citizens of Germany must now declare their support for Israel's right to exist before qualifying.³²

Taken together, these developments illustrate the depth and scope of repression now confronting Palestinian diaspora activism. Liberal democracies that formally enshrine freedom of expression have, in practice, constructed expansive regimes of censorship, surveillance, and punitive regimes to shield Israel from accountability. Yet the very intensity of the backlash also underscores the effectiveness of diaspora organizing: repression has escalated not despite the success of Palestinian-led activism, but because this activism has succeeded in reshaping public consciousness, undermining entrenched narratives, and threatening long-standing structures of impunity.

Conclusion

If measured by visibility in the public square, influence within civil society, and its growing traction in political and policy spaces, then Palestinian diaspora activism has undeniable punched far above its weight. Through coalition-building, narrative intervention, and sustained engagement across cultural and political arenas, the diaspora has helped shift public discourse in ways that would have been difficult to imagine even a decade ago.

Yet these advances remain structurally constrained. Diaspora advocacy continues to be hamstrung by severe repression at home, while the absence of a credible, accountable Palestinian national representative institution has prevented the translation of discursive and normative gains into political leverage. Rather than mobilizing the new rights-respecting discourse that has been advanced, the current leadership of the PLO and PA has largely accommodated the political initiatives of Western powers, including the so-called Trump Peace Plan for Gaza that effectively sidelines Palestinian national institutions in favor of an unaccountable international executive led by the US.³³

At present, Palestinian national reconciliation, institutional reform, and the holding of Palestinian elections are not being pursued seriously by the existing leadership, while effective diaspora-led campaigns to impact internal Palestinian decision-making have not yet materialized. The result is a widening disconnect between international momentum and domestic political stagnation. Unless the diaspora and their compatriots in historic Palestine can also direct their collective power toward revitalizing their failing national institutions, the gains achieved internationally in reshaping the discourse on Palestine and Israel are unlikely to be translated into advances for national liberation.

Endnotes

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Conclusion

Mouin Rabbani and Omar H. Rahman



Young Palestinians stand in front of a damaged Israeli tank while holding a Palestinian flag in Gaza City, Gaza, on October 7, 2023. (Photo by Hani Alshaer / Anadolu via AFP)

The contemporary struggle for Palestinian liberation has endured many low points over the past century. Few have plumbed the depths of the current one. The chapters in this volume converge on a shared assessment: the events set in motion on October 7, 2023, constitute not merely a crisis, but an historical rupture for the Palestinian national movement. While Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza has impacted Palestinian life in ways that will reverberate for generations, the expert contributions collected here demonstrate that underlying and aggravating the unfolding catastrophe is a longer-running political unraveling. Fragmentation, institutional decay, and the erosion of representative authority have been fully visible and intensified, at precisely the moment when Palestinians most required collective agency.

Several chapters emphasize that this rupture did not originate in October 2023 and, in fact, helped produce it. As Nour Odeh and Omar H. Rahman show from complementary perspectives, the Palestinian national movement entered this period at a time when it was already structurally and representatively debilitated. The hollowing out and subordination of the PLO to the PA, the Fatah-Hamas schism, the indefinite suspension of elections, and the conflation of the liberation movement with governance under occupation produced institutions and leaders incapable of strategic action. October 2023 did not create this crisis; it rendered it unmistakable. The result has been a profound strategic vacuum, in which neither Hamas's unilateral resistance program nor the PA's acquiescent survivalism and commitment to an expired political project could offer the Palestinians protection, legitimate representation, or a viable pathway toward liberation.

This absence of effective leadership constitutes a central thread running through the volume. In arena after arena—international law, regional diplomacy, reconstruction, diaspora activism, and Global South engagement—the same paradox recurs. Palestinians today command unprecedented moral authority, legal recognition, and international public support, yet lack the political infrastructure required to convert these assets into either leverage or, more importantly, concrete achievements. As Rahman argues, a previously representative liberation movement under the Oslo process gave way to a governance structure subordinated to military occupation, alongside a resistance movement operating outside a unified national decision-making framework. This led, arguably inevitably so, to the steady erosion of popular legitimacy and international relevance. While Palestinians maintain a residual presence within international fora, it lacks its former underlying dynamism, political coherence, and authority to exercise effective agency and confront the challenges at hand.

Mouin Rabbani's chapter situates this paradox within the realm of international law. Since October 2023, Palestinians have achieved historic breakthroughs at the ICJ, ICC, and across the global human rights ecosystem, fundamentally altering the legal and discursive landscape. Israel now stands credibly accused of genocide and apartheid, and top Israeli officials are fugitives of the international justice system and the state itself an accused defendant. Yet these advances have coincided with an escalating assault on the international legal order itself, led by Israel's Western allies. Lawfare, Rabbani shows, emerges as a vehicle for inserting the Palestinian cause at the center of the broader struggle for the survival of international law as a universal framework. Crucially, the chapter underscores that legal victories cannot substitute for political leadership, even as they expand the terrain on which the political struggle can be waged.

A similar pattern emerges in the regional and international arenas examined by Khaled Elgindy and Sarang Shidore. Elgindy argues that Arab passivity during the Gaza genocide is not simply a failure of solidarity, but a consequence of the Palestinians' diminished leverage—rooted in institutional weakness, strategic dependency, and political fragmentation. Although Arab public sympathy remains robust, without a credible Palestinian interlocutor it has proven difficult to mobilize popular support and translate this into sustained state action. Shidore extends this analysis to the Global South, documenting a significant resurgence of diplomatic and legal solidarity with Palestine. From UN General Assembly votes to ICJ interventions and the formation of the Hague Group, many Global South states have acted to defend international law and Palestinian rights, often at material cost. Yet this solidarity has been uneven and constrained by realist calculations, limited leverage over Israel, and competing interpretive frames.

Together, these chapters complicate narratives of either growing abandonment or support. They suggest instead that Palestinian marginalization in regional and global politics is inseparable from the internal Palestinian political crisis itself. Where leadership has been absent, international solidarity—however principled—has lacked a focal point. Where Palestinian institutions have been perceived as illegitimate or incapacitated, other actors have filled the void or steamrolled them with technocratic, security-driven, or externally imposed frameworks.

Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in the struggle over Gaza's reconstruction. AbdalRahman Kittana's chapter frames this as a political contest over sovereignty, land, and lived experience rather than a sterile exercise in redevelopment. The predominant "day-after" frameworks—including the Trump Plan—deliberately depoliticize Palestinians, casting Gaza as a humanitarian problem to be managed rather than a homeland to be rehabilitated under conditions of Palestinian agency. By contrast, the Gaza Phoenix framework articulates a vision centered on equitable land redistribution, the "right to the city," and the reintegration of Gaza into a unified Palestinian political and economic space. Yet even this locally grounded initiative remains constrained by the absence of a legitimate national leadership capable of defending Palestinian agency against external encroachment.

Zaha Hassan's analysis of Palestinian activism in the West completes the picture by examining the arena in which Palestinian agency and public solidarity with it has been most dynamic since October 2023. Diaspora activism has reshaped public opinion, influenced policy debates, and contributed to legal and political shifts across North America and Europe. The effectiveness of this activism has been underscored by the intensity of the repression it has faced. Yet the chapter reinforces a core conclusion of the volume: diaspora mobilization, like international law and Global South solidarity, cannot substitute for the strategic leadership of representative national institutions. Without immediate and credible processes for internal political renewal, the diaspora-driven momentum risks losing traction.

Across all seven chapters, a shared diagnosis emerges: The Palestinian question today is defined not only by occupation, apartheid, and genocide, but by a crisis of political mediation between the Palestinian people and the arenas in which their fate is being decided. The recurring analogy

to the post-Nakba period is therefore instructive. Then, as now, catastrophe produced an organizational vacuum followed by a prolonged and uneven process of political reconstitution. Whether the current rupture will yield a comparable trajectory remains uncertain. What is clear is that neither the preservation of the status quo nor externally imposed “solutions” can resolve the Palestinian question.

This volume does not offer a blueprint for Palestinian political reconstruction. It does, however, advance a set of analytically grounded propositions: Legal clarity without political mobilization is inconsequential; state solidarity unguided by the agency of Palestinian leadership remains symbolic; reconstruction without sovereignty reproduces domination and resistance; and activism without institutional renewal risks tactical exhaustion. At the same time, the chapters reflect that Palestinian nationalism, resilience, and international support remain powerful, if presently unmoored.

The future of the Palestinian national movement will ultimately depend not on the coherence of international plans or the goodwill of external actors, but on the emergence or revival of political structures capable of uniting Palestinians across geographies, restoring independent decision-making, and aligning moral legitimacy with strategic capacity to achieve power and leverage. Whether such a transformation is imminent is doubtful. That it is essential is the shared—and sobering—conclusion of this volume.

Yet historical precedent, emerging trends, and Israel’s own eroding global standing offer Palestinians strategic assets they lacked in the aftermath of the Nakba. This, in principle, better positions them for a national resurgence compared to the 1950s. By drawing the proper lessons outlined in this collection, it could help them achieve more concrete results.



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