

Interview – Yaser Alashqar

Written by E-International Relations

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Yaser Alashqar is adjunct assistant professor in the International Peace Studies MPhil programme at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland. He completed his PhD in civil society and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at Trinity College. Born in Gaza, Palestine, he holds a Master's Degree in Conflict and Peace Studies from the University of Coventry in England and a Bachelor's Degree in English Literature from Palestine. His teaching and research interests include peace and conflict issues, political and community mediation, and Middle East politics. He is widely published and a frequent media commentator on Middle East affairs and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He is also an academic member of the Centre for Palestine Studies at the University of London.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I work in the field of peace and conflict studies. It is an engaging and evolving field, focussing on complex and interconnected aspects beyond the traditional theories of international relations and political science. It also represents a hybrid combination of social psychology, international relations, political science and conflict resolution. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the wider conflicts in Middle East are an important example of this complex combination. This is one of my research interests.

Moreover, the field of peace and conflict studies pays special attention to the study and resolution of complex forms of violence — such as political violence, direct and indirect violence — as well as the role of local agency and civil society. Scholars and researchers working in peace and conflict studies have been doing exciting research. This ranges from Johan Galtung's pioneering theory of positive and negative peace and John Paul Lederach's concept of levels of leadership in peacebuilding and mediation processes, to Thania Paffenholz's research on civil society peacebuilding in many case studies, and the critique of the liberal peacebuilding model.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My personal journey of learning and developing my thinking has mostly been influenced by the realities of living through conflict and military occupation at home in Palestine. The sight of soldiers, tanks and armed groups right in front of my eyes as a young boy in Gaza can never be forgotten. This experience took place while world leaders were busy talking about the 'peace process' in the region. The second influence on my thinking is the experience of dislocation and distance while living in the diaspora. It brings both learning opportunities and constant challenges. At the intellectual level, the work of influential thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, Johan Galtung, Noam Chomsky, Edward Said and leading authors like Sara Roy and Ghada Karmi, helped to develop my ideas and understanding of the key issues in the modern world. You find strong references in their work to a range of historical and contemporary issues that have shaped my research interests today: the politics of power, ideas and concepts in national struggles, the relationship between knowledge production and colonial discourses, nationalism, ideology, hegemony, resistance, structural violence, representations, justice and human rights.

What does the newfound recognition of Israel by some in the Arab World, resulting from the normalisation deals, mean for Palestine?

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I talked about this critical issue in some of my recent published articles. In reality, the goals of the recent normalisation deals are concerned with the formation of a new regional order and alliance involving some key Arab states and Israel in order to undermine Iranian power in the region. Another important issue to consider while analysing this normalisation process is the promotion of US military interests and the consequent militarisation of the Middle East. For example, under the normalisation agreement between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel, the US is selling and providing new military technologies to the UAE such as advanced drones. I have described this situation as a form of militarised peace. In many ways, this militarised peace ensures the emergence of new wars and conflicts in the Middle East.

The impact on the Palestinian issue should also be recognised, though it is still evolving. The normalisation deals isolate the Palestinians and deprive them of regional support. It also breaks the historical understanding that normalisation and comprehensive peace between Arab states and Israel is conditional upon reaching: (1) a just resolution to the Palestinian issue, (2) ending Israel's occupation, and (3) the emergence of a Palestinian state. However, following the recent tensions in Jerusalem and the attacks on Gaza, two facts also became clear: (a) without the Palestinians and their national rights, there is no sustainable and just peace in the Middle East, and (b) Israel wants normalisation and strong relations with the Arab states and Europe, but it is equally unwilling to end its occupation and systemic oppression of the Palestinian people.

How do you view the role of external actors like the US, EU, and UN in the Israel-Palestine conflict? Given the failure of previous external efforts for peace talks and accords, are they more likely to worsen the conflict than alleviate it?

This is a big and important question about external actors. Let me deal with the role of the US first. The US claims to be a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it has facilitated Israeli occupation and war crimes in Palestine for decades. The US practices the role of 'Israel's lawyer' and ally more than being a credible mediator in the conflict. Take, for example, Trump's recent peace plan. It represents most of the Israeli right-wing ideas in relation to the Palestinian issue, including the questions of Palestinian statehood, Palestinian refugees and Jerusalem. I have written about this misleading 'peace plan' and mediation in more detail for Mondoweiss. Israel is a major ally of the US in the Middle East and it serves American interests in the region, including the arms trade, US military presence in the region, and access to energy resources. In return, the US continues to provide Israel with diplomatic protection at the UN and international level. The Biden administration, for example, prevented the UN Security Council from meeting earlier in May 2021 and discussing the escalating situation in Jerusalem and Gaza. Under the justification of needing more time for promoting diplomacy, the US allowed Israel more time to advance its military campaign and attacks against the Palestinians. In short, by providing Israel with unlimited support at the military, financial and diplomatic levels, and refusing to put pressure on Israel to accept Palestinian rights, the US is complicit in Israel's violations of international law and it undermines the prospect of a just peace in the region.

On the other hand, UN resolutions in the last seven decades have emphasised the legitimacy of Palestinian rights, including the right to self-determination, and the need for a just resolution to the Palestinian question. The UN recognition of Palestinian statehood in 2012 also represents a positive development. It upgraded Palestine's international status and highlighted the need for international justice. It also continues to provide Palestine with access to international organisations and treaties. One of my recent academic papers analysed Palestine's struggle for recognition and the implications of the UN recognition of Palestinian statehood.

I should also be realistic and say that the UN and statehood recognitions have limitations. For example, Palestinians have no control or sovereignty over the territory and borders of their claimed state in Gaza and the West Bank. Israel is still the occupying power, and it controls the Palestinian territories. Palestinians are still politically and geographically divided and dealing with internal divisions. The occupation has not come to an end on the ground, even after UN recognition and previous resolutions. In practice, therefore, the UN lacks the political will and the power to enforce its own resolutions regarding the Palestinian issue.

The EU represents the largest economic donor to the Palestinian people. It also maintains strong economic, research and trade relations with Israel. The EU's economic involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is stronger than its

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political engagement. In theory, the EU supports the application of international law and human rights in the Israeli-Palestinian situation, but it does not practically challenge Israel's colonial policies and apartheid system in the Palestinian territories in any way. The reasons for this weakness are complex: US dominance and power, the guilt of the past in relation to Jewish history in Europe, relations and alliances with Israel, and divisions within the EU member states. This does not justify the state of political inaction towards the issue of Israel/Palestine but it does put it in context.

What approach do you think should be taken to resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict? Should addressing the root cause of the conflict be prioritised over short-term international policy responses of aid and reconstruction, or is a more balanced approach required?

International aid has failed to facilitate a workable and sustainable solution. We know that international assistance does provide an important degree of support to Palestinian people, including Palestinian refugees and institutions. However, there is the question of mismanagement of resources by Palestinian elites at civil society and official level. These Palestinian elites have strong relations with external donors and benefit economically and politically from the existing aid model. They therefore align themselves with the political agenda of the external donors. I have addressed this critical point in my research concerning international aid and the changing role of Palestinian civil society in the Oslo peace process in the 1990s.

Academic research has also found that the dominant model of international aid in the Israeli-Palestinian situation contributes to the continuation of Israel's occupation of Palestinian land, and plays a key role in sustaining the blockade of Gaza. Not only can Israel manage a costless occupation and blockade regime, but it benefits from international aid to the Palestinians living under this oppressive regime. For example, external funds must be channelled through Israeli banks and converted to Israeli currency; Israeli firms and agents provide services to aid agencies; and Israeli government departments charge fees and taxes. Israeli leaders and the military establishment control key decisions about the allocation of aid resources and projects according to their military and colonial policies in the occupied Palestinian territories. Gaza is another example of aid failure and complicity. Israel causes massive destruction in this besieged territory and the international community is then handed the bill for reconstruction. All this absolves Israel from its legal obligations under international law to protect the welfare of the occupied population. Another key point to note here is that UN agencies have clearly stated that the Palestinian economy can reach twice its current size and sustain itself without the need for external aid if the Israeli occupation were to end. This is the level of failure and contradiction in the international aid model.

As for long-term solutions, it is true that some Palestinian groups, like Hamas, engage in armed and violent actions for political reasons, and I don't agree with it. At the same time, Israel is the occupying military power in the Palestinian territories and it is supported by the US. Israeli state violence must also be rejected and condemned. Decades of colonial practices, occupation, displacement, and oppression generate violence and resistance. This helps to understand the origin of the problem and the root causes. Therefore, any credible approach to resolving this historical conflict must prioritise the root causes, and should be based on the internationally recognised principles of human rights, self-determination and justice. There is simply no coexistence possible without the ending of Israel's occupation and apartheid regime, and the achievement of national rights.

How do you think Israel's change in Prime Minister from Benjamin Netanyahu to Naftali Bennet will affect the Israel-Palestine relationship?

The research records and the evidence are clear. Bennet and Netanyahu both come from Israel's right-wing movement, and belong to the Israeli religious-nationalist camp. Both leaders believe in the idea of maintaining permanent control and occupation over the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Both of them are strong supporters of the settler's movement in the West Bank, and they reject the idea of Palestinian statehood and sovereignty. Bennet and Netanyahu also believe in the idea of 'Eretz Israel', or the Land of Israel, meaning that the Palestinian people have no right to be there on the land, and it belongs only to the Jewish people. Referring to this exclusivist ideology, Bennet, who is now serving as the Israeli Prime Minister, is on record saying: "There is not going to be a Palestinian state within the tiny land of Israel". He further stated that the

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annexation of Palestinian land and the building of Israeli settlements are not “illegal under international law.” These are his positions and policies towards the Palestinian issue. Clearly, in the comparison between Bennet and Netanyahu regarding the denial of Palestinian rights, it will be a matter of continuity more than discontinuity.

There is a perception held by some that Israel and Palestine go through protracted periods of peace, separated by occasional large-scale violent clashes such as the Gaza War of 2014 and the recent conflict in May 2021. How accurate is this perception, and what is the implication of such perceptions on international responses to the conflict?

The protracted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is true but it does represent a policy choice. The reality is that Israel's policy has designed a complex and oppressive system of exclusion, racism, occupation, expulsion, displacement, blockade and apartheid against the Palestinian people in their land. Israeli and international human rights organisations have documented the construction of this oppressive system in recent decades. Hagai El-Ad, the director of B'Tselem (Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories) clearly acknowledged it in the public sphere in January 2021: “We are Israel's largest human rights group — and we are calling this apartheid”. Not long after, in April 2021, the internationally respected organisation, Human Rights Watch, issued a strongly-worded report. It indicates that Israel is committing the crimes of apartheid and systematic persecution of the Palestinian people. These oppressive policies and systems have led many human rights organisations, like Human Rights Watch, and civil society groups to call for the imposition of international sanctions against Israel as a means of protesting the apartheid practices and crimes against humanity in Palestine.

Palestinians will also continue to resist this oppression. Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) is another Palestinian and international campaign that is active on university campuses and among student and trade unions. It supports the boycott of Israel in many forms for as long as the state continues to maintain this oppressive regime of occupation and discrimination against the Palestinian people. All these civil society responses have emerged in recent years as an alternative to the state of inaction by international governments and their complicity, as well as their silence on human rights violations in the region.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

My first piece of advice is to stay committed to research and knowledge. This commitment will open up the space for new opportunities of learning and personal development beyond accepted notions and beliefs. The second piece is that while the field of IR has a special interest in international organisations and state actors, young scholars of IR should not overlook the importance of the civil society sphere. Civil society is the place where local agency is located and this is where the impact of international actors and policies can most be felt, negotiated and studied. It is also a centre of resistance, struggle, action and coexistence. Finally, solidarity is crucial. The silenced, the marginalised and the invisible groups must not be forgotten, especially in situations of conflict and repression. Their human experience must be recorded and acknowledged.