

ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE

PALESTINE

Background

Longstanding U.S. bias and favoritism towards Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians used to be mitigated by officially-stated U.S. opposition to Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands. Donald Trump's refusal to oppose Israel's settlement expansion in the Palestinian territories, or even refer to Israel's presence in those territories as an "occupation," has brought an end to decades of consistent, bipartisan US opposition to that occupation, along with the two-state solution as its vision for resolving the conflict. The Trump Administration's subsequent decision to "take Jerusalem off the table" by recognizing it as Israel's capital, as well as its plan to open a US embassy there in the coming weeks, did away with any pretense of even-handedness or neutrality in pursuing a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Cuts in US funding for UNRWA, the U.N. agency helping Palestinian refugees survive their displacement, and further threats to cut U.S. assistance to the Palestinians, have also revealed the Trump Administration's commitment to using coercive measures to impose an unjust vision on the Palestinians; a vision the administration expects to advance under the guise of "the ultimate deal."

Meanwhile, the situation for Palestinians continues to deteriorate on the ground. Israel's settlement expansion in the West Bank is accelerating, and deadly aggressions of the Israeli army or settlers against unarmed Palestinians, from the hills of the West Bank to the border with Gaza, continue unabated. The absence of hope for a just future leaves this crisis vulnerable to greater suffering and tragedy. The reality of occupation and discrimination will continue to erupt in tragic violence---violence that must be understood as a symptom of a prolonged and asymmetric conflict, and over 50 years of brutal occupation.

The Problem

Key members of the Trump Administration have promoted extreme views and policies on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Senior Adviser Jared Kushner and U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman are staunch advocates of Israel's takeover of the Palestinian territories through settlement expansion. U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley repeatedly reiterated her commitment to stamp out attempts to hold Israel accountable in international institutions, and National Security Advisor John Bolton encouraged Israeli officials to place pressure on the administration he was serving (under George W Bush) to give Israel free reign in its assault on Lebanon in 2006. During this sensitive phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the team comprising this administration is unlikely to pursue constructive policies on their own.

At home, there are real domestic implications of a continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in efforts to shield Israel from criticism by undermining fundamental American rights. We have already seen many states pass anti-BDS bills to limit political speech and participation in non-violent boycotts, both of which are protected under the First Amendment, in addition to similar bills being pushed nationally. Bias in U.S. policies is becoming more common, as policymakers continue to add exceptions to U.S. laws for Israel and its supporters—from not enforcing the Leahy Law, to attempts to admit Israel into the visa waiver or Global Entry programs, and state-based legislation restricting free speech. Despite some noteworthy statements by a few members of Congress, and a bill defending the rights of Palestinian children by Congresswoman Betty McCollum, Congressional action and inaction on Israel remains an impediment to a negotiated settlement. The positive shift in public opinion, particularly among young people, has yet to translate into shifting attitudes among elected officials, though the pressure on them is increasing.

Key Recommendations

1. At the local level:
 - Help monitor your local coverage of the conflict and weigh in constructively with your own story to shed light on the injustice of the occupation and the impact it continues to have on people.

2. At the state level:

- Find out if your state has, or is considering, “anti-BDS” legislation that penalizes First Amendment-protected boycotts to shield Israel from accountability, and advocate against such infringements on our rights.

3. At the national level:

Encourage Congress and the White House to:

- Assert U.S. leadership to achieve a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The United States can and should set out a list of U.S.-backed, non-negotiable requirements for resolving the conflict. Those requirements should include: the end of the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine; the lifting of the blockade on Gaza; a robust aid package to assist the Palestinian people in building a stronger economy to address their society’s needs; and equal rights for every citizen of Israel regardless of ethnicity or religion.
- Allow the negotiation process to be “internationalized” by empowering the U.N. Security Council members to increase their leadership role in bringing about a resolution. After decades of exclusive U.S. leadership of the peace process and no results for the Palestinians, it is time to try a different approach. The U.S. should refrain from thwarting Palestinian efforts taken at the United Nations General Assembly, or any resolutions that come before the UNGA during future sessions. There should be resolutions laying down consensus red lines in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- Hold Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu accountable for his rhetoric and racist policies impacting Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and Palestinian citizens of Israel. This includes the unlawful killing of unarmed protesters in Gaza.
- Make a considerably larger allocation of assistance to international organizations leading the reconstruction of Gaza given the extraordinary and urgent need for humanitarian relief and infrastructure materials.

¹ Michael Wilner, *State Dept. Drops ‘Occupied’ Reference to Palestinian Territories In Report*, Jerusalem Post (April 21, 2018), <http://www.jpost.com/American-Politics/State-Dept-drops-occupied-reference-to-Palestinian-territories-in-report-551365>.

² Noa Landau and Amir Tibon, *We Took Jerusalem Off the Negotiating Table, Trump Says Alongside Netanyahu in Davos*, Haaretz (Jan 25, 2018), <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-trump-netanyahu-meet-in-davos-1.5766434>.

³ Rosie Perper, *The US suspended \$65 million in aid to the Palestinian aid group UNRWA – and it could affect millions of lives*, Business Insider, (Jan 17, 2018), <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-65-million-in-aid-cuts-to-palestinian-refugee-group-unwra-will-affect-millions-2018-1>.

⁴ Chris Riotta, *Jared Kushner Failed to Disclose He Led a Foundation Funding Illegal Israeli Settlements Before UN Vote*, Newsweek (Dec. 3, 2017), <http://www.newsweek.com/jared-kushner-disclosure-form-west-bank-settlements-israel-white-house-729290>.

⁵ Peter Beaumont, *Trump’s ambassador to Israel refers to ‘alleged occupation’ of Palestinian territories*, The Guardian (Sept. 1, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/01/trump-ambassador-israel-david-friedman-alleged-occupation-palestinian-territories>.

⁶ At AIPAC, *UN Envoy Nikki Haley Vows No More Resolutions Against Israel*, Haaretz (Mar. 28, 2017), <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/nikki-haley-the-days-of-israel-bashing-at-un-are-over-1.5454148>.

⁷ Noga Tarnopolsky, *John Bolton Told Israel: ‘Condi Rice Sold You Out,’ Ex-Official Says*, The Daily Beast (Mar. 27, 2018), <https://www.thedailybeast.com/john-bolton-told-israel-condi-rice-sold-you-out-ex-official-says>.

⁸ *Anti-BDS Legislation by State*, Palestine Legal, <https://palestinelegal.org/righttoboycott/>.