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Article

The Palestinian Authority and the Reconfigured World Order: Between Multilateralism, Unilateralism, and Dependency Relationships

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of changes in the power structure of the international system at the end of the twentieth century, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) entered into a peace process with Israel in 1993. Initially characterized by the influence of a multilateral order and then by the unipolar order dominated by the United States, in addition to the asymmetry of power between the two parties, the process ended up failing. The heir to that political legacy, the Palestinian Authority (PA), has tried to compensate for this weakness—despite its dependency relationships—with an internationalization strategy the continued advance of which appears to be severely limited. Added to this is the setback brought about by the political and diplomatic offensive of the Trump administration (2017–2021), one of unilateral support for Israel and absolute Palestinian exclusion. However, the increasing reconfiguration of the world order, the arrival of the new Biden administration, and the receptiveness of the International Criminal Court to investigate war crimes in Palestine seem to indicate a new political juncture. In this situation, the PA could also try to counterbalance the power asymmetry by seeking greater involvement from countries such as Russia, which has returned to the region as a great power, and China, whose presence there is growing. In turn, the PA will have to deal with different issues (unity, elections, a renewal of leadership) and try to boost its political legitimacy and international alliances to three ends: the prominence and reactivation of the PA, the recognition of Palestine as a state with in situ results, and international protection from Israeli policies.

Keywords

dependency relationships; international system; legitimacy; Middle East; multilateralism; Palestine Liberation Organization; Palestinian Authority; unilateralism; unipolarity; world order

Issue

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1. Introduction

This article examines how changes in the international order have affected the Middle East due to the marked penetration of the international system into this regional subsystem. In particular, it analyses the emergence of the Palestinian question as a result of this strong international influence, manifested through the interventions of the colonial and Western powers, along with the limitations of a deficient multilateral system in crisis concerning taking on this entrenched problem in the international community. To that end, the article applies

process tracing to the Palestinian question, its leadership, and the configuration of the world order, dividing it into three parts: (a) an analysis of the evolution of the Palestinian leadership and multilateralism; (b) the dependency relationships established with or imposed upon the Palestinian leadership; and (c) the resulting complete foreign and economic dependency of the Palestinian Authority (PA), all of which have brought about a crisis of legitimacy.

The specific case of the PA demonstrates the failure of the multilateral order—since the Palestinian question first came to the fore—to resolve a conflict that

is colonial in origin and continues today in the form of a military occupation. Therefore, it could be said, as Chowdhry and Nair (2004, p. 12) argue, that there is a direct correlation between the experience of colonialization and the power that shapes the past and current situation at local, national, and global levels. In that vein, the example of the PA highlights the deficiencies of the world order and its transformations when it comes to implementing a solution on the ground. The time frame for this article, briefly, spans the multipolar world order characterized by colonial primacy during the interwar period, the bipolar order of the Cold War, the post-Cold War unipolar moment, and, finally, the current transformation of the power structure in the international system towards a more complex multipolar world order where a few great powers stand out, but in which a growing number of actors and different power dimensions are creating what Haass (2008) has termed the “era of non-polarity.” One common denominator throughout these transformations is the notable influence of a few primary external actors as the Palestinian question has evolved, been recognized, and come to a stalemate.

At this juncture, also, the question arises whether the crisis in the multilateral order has influenced or been able to change (Ikenberry, 2018; Newman et al., 2006) the resolution of the Palestinian question. As discussed in this article, the unipolarity of the world order has been a constant since the fall of the Soviet Union, when the United States established itself as the sole mediator between the two parties in this conflict and impeded any intervention at odds with its interests. Understanding the evolution requires a political and historical contextualization of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)/PA’s foreign relations to determine whether intermittent multilateralism was co-opted by American dominance. In turn, this approach will demonstrate the hypothesis that it is impossible for the United States to be a neutral party as the sole mediator in the conflict, since its strategic interests, amongst other factors, are associated with those of Israel. The American monopoly over the conflict makes true internationalization of the Palestine question very difficult and means that the PA must abide by US and Israeli impositions because of its total foreign dependency. Implicit in this is a loss of internal legitimacy, which is currently a fundamental factor that could change the Palestinian government and shake up the domestic, regional, and even international chessboard. Moreover, there is a pressing question given the gradual loss of American power and the urgent need for Palestinian legitimacy regarding the option that the future government will choose to internationalize the conflict and get around this deadlock: Should it try to involve the European Union or BRICS countries, like Russia or China, as emerging powers in the region, or turn to international law and definitively join the International Criminal Court (Cobban, 2021)?

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of reference draws on two perspectives from the discipline of International Relations: neo-realism and constructivism. With its emphasis on power politics on the world stage (Williams, 2005), realism focuses on how the great powers usually prioritize their own geostrategic interests and security above international standards or principles when they conflict with each other. Together with the search for security (Waltz, 1979), there is a continuing systematic competition over the distribution of power and wealth (Gilpin, 1981). With the idea of hegemonic stability, neo-realism argues that, to guarantee its particular interests, the hegemon establishes new guidelines for an international political and economic order that also benefit the other states. This order is not only based on military coercion (a balance of power) but on legitimacy also (Gilpin, 1987, p. 73). In this respect, realism is the theory that best encapsulates the dynamics of the states in the Near East. However, constructivism also makes an important contribution to the ideas, values, norms, identities, and interests related to the construction and representation of social reality (Bertucci et al., 2018). Despite the apparent opposition between the arguments, realist and constructivist perspectives intersect and complement each other, with realism revealing “how politics work” (without explaining how to study them) and constructivism showing “how to study politics” (but without saying how politics work; Barkin, 2020, p. 4). In short, far from being completely independent entities, international institutions are the product of the interactions between the actors that comprise them and the correlation of the forces or power that they establish there.

Thus, American predominance in the international system, in general, was reflected in the construction of a complex institutional framework of security, economic, and political order after World War II. The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about “the collapse of one part of the postwar order and the continuing stability of the others” (Ikenberry, 2000, p. 216). It also gave rise to a new power asymmetry, a “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1990) that lasted approximately fifteen years. The consequent crisis in the liberal world order marked a turning point in this trend (Ikenberry, 2011) related to the American neoconservative administration’s commitment to hegemony following the September 11 attacks; it witnessed the erosion of that country’s geostrategic supremacy, the emergence of other powers (primarily the BRICS countries) that began to reduce this strategic advantage (Zakaria, 2008), the growing trend towards multipolarity, and the authoritarian nature of the two principal emerging powers—Russia and China—which benefitted from the liberal international system without adopting liberal principles (Kroenig, 2020), not to mention the domestic causes (tension, fragmentation, and asymmetry) within the structure of the liberal order (Cooley & Nexon, 2022, p. 117).

These transformations were reflected in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regional subsystem, where Washington enjoyed a clear geostrategic predominance during the Cold War. The failure of America's hegemonic interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq altered the regional power balance, strengthening Iran. This alteration in the regional status quo intensified after the cycle of anti-authoritarian protests in the Arab world in 2010 and 2011, government repression, the reinforcement of authoritarianism, a number of conflicts, and the collapse of the state in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Additionally, some Arab states (Bahrein, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Sudan) strategically realigned with Israel, as did Saudi Arabia. In this context, the United States seemed—whether this was real or perceived—to be both less committed to and retreating from the MENA region, at the same time that Russia returned and the Chinese presence grew there, without any definitive handover from one power to another.

However, this trend towards multipolarity has not translated into a more effective multilateralism, or at least not enough to prompt a resolution of the Palestinian question. On the contrary, the situation of competition between the great powers in world politics, along with turmoil in the region, has only further sidelined the issue. The end of the Cold War, along with other events in the region (the visibility of the Palestinian question during the first Intifada and the regional instability associated with the Gulf War after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait), seemed to foster a climate conducive to resolving this question. To some extent, the Peace Conference held in Madrid in 1991 reflected this moment, but it also highlighted the deficiencies of the time, as the UN—and its resolutions, provided as guiding principles for the peace process being inaugurated—was marginalized. In short, multilateralism was tarnished by the growing prominence of the United States as the sponsor and mediator during the negotiations. This process became even more acute when the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, as they left the two parties at the mercy of their own forces, with a clear power asymmetry, but no multilateral counterweight to correct this anomalous situation. The failure of the peace process, the decision to abandon it, and the imposition of Israeli and American unilateralism spurred the PLO/PA in its internationalization strategy in a context of a crisis of multilateralism, but without the necessary force to impose unilateralism.

Finally, this work applies a historical focus to the study of the Palestinian leadership, the PLO/PA, and their place in the reconfiguration of the international order through a comparative analysis of the different political scenarios that have developed. It uses a qualitative methodology based on process tracing. The sequence of events studied to confirm the study's objectives begins with the origins of the Palestinian question and continues to the current day. The following section focuses on the old and new dependency relationships established with or imposed upon the Palestinian leadership in the

world configuration, followed by an examination of the foreign economic and political dependency of the PA and its consequent crisis of legitimacy.

3. Contextualization

The Palestinian question is associated with changes in the power structure of the international system at the dawn of the twentieth century. Since then, each new reconfiguration of world power has been reflected in the MENA region, with the international system being actively present (Brown, 1984, pp. 3–4). After World War I, the European powers replaced the regional domination of the Ottoman Empire. The territorial division between Great Britain and France instituted by the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement established the foundations for the current interstate MENA arrangement (Halliday, 2005, p. 76), with the primary exception of Palestine, a territory promised to the Zionist movement by Great Britain in the 1917 Balfour Declaration. London facilitated the Zionist colonization of Palestine along with the establishment of its parastatal apparatus, repressing Palestinian sociopolitical development and hindering the right to self-determination (Khalidi, 2006); the country only withdrew from Palestine once it had altered its demographic and political balance (Pappé, 1988; Thompson, 2019), an event known as *al-Nakba* (“the catastrophe”) in Arabic.

After World War II, the two emerging superpowers replaced the European colonial powers, although they maintained their influence until the 1956 Suez Crisis (the second Arab-Israeli War). For distinct reasons and based on different interests, the Soviet Union and the United States coincided in their decisive support for Resolution 181(II) calling for Palestine to be partitioned into two states (United Nations General Assembly, 1947), and the subsequent recognition of the State of Israel proclaimed in May 1948. Although the Arab-Israeli conflict was not inherent in the political and ideological confrontation of the Cold War, the actors involved could not escape the bipolarization of the conflict in the international system. The 1967 Arab-Israeli War marked a turning point in this trend, with a rupture of diplomatic relations between Moscow and Tel Aviv because of Israel's refusal to withdraw from the Arab territories occupied during this war, as called for by United Nations Security Council (1967) Resolution 242, which was influenced by the growing alignment between Israel and Washington and between the nationalist Arab republics—primarily Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—and Moscow in the bipolar conflict.

The end of the Cold War, the decline of the Soviet Union, and the multinational intervention in the Persian Gulf led by the United States, with the announcement of a “new world order” by President George H. W. Bush, all paved the way for Arab-Israeli negotiations (Cox, 1992). The 1991 Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid initiated a new political cycle in the region. In this dynamic, the PLO and Israel signed a Declaration of Principles in

1993. Known as the Oslo Accords, this process was characterized by the ambiguity of its guiding principles, the power asymmetry between the parties, and the partiality of the American mediation. In addition, as a consequence of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian National Authority, which later changed its name to the PA, was created in 1994.

On the other hand, the new international order that emerged after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, combined with the unilateral, militaristic response of the neoconservative administration of George W. Bush (2001–2009), which sent forces to Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, was exploited by Israeli leaders to criminalize all expressions of Palestinian resistance, whether peaceful or armed. The Israelis also took advantage of the situation to marginalize the Palestinian leadership and weaken the PA, increasing its dependency and vulnerability.

With the new administration of Barack Obama (2009–2017) in the White House, expectations ran high. In a speech given by the president at the University of Cairo in 2009, he made the case for restoring relations between the United States and the Muslim world. However, events unleashed by the anti-authoritarian Arab uprisings in 2010 and 2011 revealed the limitations of his power and influence in the region. Repeated attempts to restart the derailed peace process between Israel and the PA were also frustrated. At this juncture, the PA opted for an agenda of internationalization to involve other world powers and institutions, for instance requesting full United Nations membership in 2011. The PA was recognized as a non-member observer state in 2012.

During the presidency of Donald J. Trump (2017–2021), relations between Washington and the PA deteriorated due to some unilateral and punitive measures taken by the Americans, namely the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, political and economic pressure on the PA for rejecting their peace plan (the so-called “agreement of the century”), the cessation of funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, support for political normalization between Israel and several Arab states (Bahrein, United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Morocco), and the suspension of official relations with the closure of the Palestinian delegation in Washington DC and the United States consulate in East Jerusalem.

Although the Arab-Israeli conflict during the Cold War facilitated Moscow’s entry into the region, at the current time, the Palestinian question does not seem to be the focus of the attention of the principal international actors. On the contrary, with occasional exceptions like the recent confrontation between Israel and the militant movement Hamas in May 2021, it is merely another reference point in the complex regional agenda, which reflects a new era, characterized by the burgeoning competition between the great world powers. Everything indicates that, with the post-Cold War era and

Washington’s clear geostrategic supremacy now in the past, there has been a considerable erosion of American influence on the international and regional stages (as the country’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 seems to confirm), where other great powers like Russia and China are progressively reducing the country’s strategic advantage (Acharya, 2018). There is no doubt that these changes in the structure of the international power system are going to affect the MENA region, raising the question of whether this potential reconfiguration of the world order will be accompanied by a new approach to resolving the Palestinian question and, specifically, whether the ongoing crisis in the multilateral system, which is seriously limited concerning efficiently dealing with this question, will be overcome by a new balance of power that compensates for the current deficiencies.

4. Old and New Dependency Relationships

The Achilles’ heel of the Palestinian national movement has been foreign dependency to reach its objectives. The particular configuration of the colonial conflict exposed the Palestinian movement to certain strategic disadvantages, dependencies, and vulnerabilities compared to other movements in more classic colonial situations. The initial dismantling of the movement during the interwar period created an important political vacuum and foreign dependency on Arab governments and international institutions like the United Nations in the fragmented, occupied Palestinian society.

In addition, the PLO had a considerable track record in international relations and in the multilateral system that existed during the Cold War. In fact, as a national liberation movement, it was a pioneer amongst non-state actors, addressing the UN General Assembly in 1974, where it was recognized as “the representative of the Palestinian people” (United Nations General Assembly, 1974, p. 3), given observer status, and allowed to participate in debates on the Palestinian question in the General Assembly and other UN bodies, albeit without voting rights. The Palestinian commitment to multilateralism was clear, even if it was only to compensate for its weakness. This growing participation in international institutions was not unlike the gradualist strategy adopted by the PLO in the expansion of its foreign relations, which broadened from the Arab world to a more expansive Islamic sphere, and from the Third World states that made up the Socialist bloc to knocking on the door of the countries that comprised Western Europe. The first official visit of PLO President Yasser Arafat to a European country was to Spain in September 1979, a historic landmark preceded by an encounter a few months earlier in July 1979 in Vienna between Arafat and Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, regarding a meeting of the Socialist International.

In this context, the PLO slowly expanded its foreign circles, joining regional and sectoral multilateral organizations that began with recognition by and membership

in the Arab League, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the Non-Aligned Movement, amongst others, until reaching the most universal and multilateral of all, the United Nations and its specialized agencies. In parallel, and in line with the PLO's growing clout in its multilateral and bilateral relations, the organization designated duly qualified representatives to the various multilateral groups it had joined or where it had been granted observer status, as well as in the states with which the PLO maintained formal or informal relations, in a broad spectrum that ranged from embassies to information bureaus. In short, the PLO built up an important political foreign affairs department and, in its day, was considered the most powerful national liberation movement in the world.

Despite these achievements, multilateralism during the Cold War had obvious limitations, and the organization was basically limited to exercising the right of veto in the UN Security Council, as confirmed by the available roster. However, non-state actors like the PLO were given significant room for maneuver, allowing them to have a voice in multilateral forums and bodies in addition to representation and legitimacy. After the Cold War, the situation changed dramatically as American geostrategic dominance undermined multilateralism, sometimes subtly and sometimes crudely (Newman, 2007). A comparison of the two Bush presidencies—with the unipolar moment particularly evident under the first Bush president—suffices as an example, as will be discussed further below.

During this phase, the PLO also depended on the cooperation of the Arab states, constantly circumventing pressure, meddling, and contradictions. In the early 1990s, the ambiguity of the leadership of the PLO regarding the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990–1991) exacted a heavy toll. The political capital accumulated by the First Intifada was squandered by a populist leadership. It was not acceptable to be half-hearted about the occupation of another country while criticizing the occupation in their own. In addition to political and diplomatic isolation, the PLO was also subject to sanctions and economic reprisals by important benefactors in the Gulf states. From this position of weakness, political crisis, and financial bankruptcy, the PLO entered a crucial phase: the 1991 peace process in Madrid and the secret negotiations that began the Oslo accord process in 1993.

In this respect, the 1991 conference in Madrid, which was theoretically co-sponsored by the two superpowers, was really mediated under the aegis of the United States, given the weakened condition of the Soviet Union, which disappeared as a state in December of that same year. Washington then supplanted the role played by the United Nations, establishing a deficient negotiating framework which, lacking the guiding principles of international law enshrined in UN resolutions, left the parties at the mercy of its clearly asymmetrical powers. These same behavioral patterns were reproduced during the Oslo Accords two years later. In that case,

the American commitment to hegemony did considerable damage to the weakened multilateralism in a world understood to be unipolar.

During this new stage, while the negotiation process was in effect and with the PA established as the interim government, foreign dependency intensified in practically every area. The Palestinian vulnerability was exposed during the negotiations, giving Israel and the other international actors like the United States and the European Union an important tool to pressure the PA politically, diplomatically, and financially. The failure of the Oslo Accords was followed by the Second Intifada (2000–2005) and Israeli unilateralism (colonial expansion, the separation wall, and the Gaza withdrawal and blockade). At the same time, George W. Bush's neoconservative administration was demanding that the PA reform, incorporate the figure of a prime minister in 2003, and hold legislative elections in 2005. This roadmap, presented in 2002 and seconded by the Quartet on the Middle East, emphasized the problem of the PA's poor governance under Yasser Arafat over the Israeli occupation.

In his assessment of this American supremacy, or unipolar moment, former Carter administration National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski contended that the presidency of George H. W. Bush lost a unique opportunity provided by a time when the United States enjoyed unprecedented power and prestige to have been more ambitious and demanding about implementing an agreement, with an "explicit definition of the central quid pro quos" (Brzezinski, 2007, pp. 76–77). On the contrary, the country's mismanagement of the Arab-Israeli conflict backfired. By neglecting to accept a role as an innovative power, Washington "came to be perceived as wearing the British imperialist mantle" (Brzezinski, 2007, p. 78). In his assessment of the parameters set forth by the Clinton administration, designed in a race against the clock, they were not the basis for a true settlement, which would have required more time. Finally, concerning the presidency of George W. Bush, which he openly describes as "catastrophic," the country's limitations when trying to use military force to impose its will and the loss of prestige and credibility that resulted from becoming a "partisan of Israel" reduced America's ability to "decisively influence events" (Brzezinski, 2007, pp. 125, 127).

Despite the international recognition of the PA and the expectations raised by the Obama administration, nothing was able to strengthen or rescue the stranded peace process. In this context, the PLO/PA opted for a strategy of internationalization that would compensate for its weakness and the partiality of the American mediation. Its diplomatic achievements, its new status as a non-member observer state of the United Nations, and the recognition of the Palestinian state by 134 other states, however, had no real impact on the ground, due to the persistent Israeli occupation.

The PA's internationalization strategy seemed to reach its limit. The new international dependency of

both the PA itself and, most particularly, its primary actors was exposed. No great power showed any political willingness or commitment to actively counteract the aforementioned unilateral measures taken by the Trump administration. The atmosphere of crisis and instability in the region also contributed to the marginalization of the Palestinian question, while the international ambiance was one of indifference, with no counterweight in sight. The European Union seems to have acquiesced to the status quo imposed by Israel in the Palestinian territories. Neither have the return of Russia to the region after its military intervention in Syria in 2015 nor the growing financial, economic, commercial, and technological presence of China had any political repercussions as yet. Finally, the presidency of Joseph R. Biden has not yet reversed course or taken a more even-handed approach in its foreign policy, beyond humanitarian and financial assistance (with the attendant political costs).

Parallel to these changes in the power structure in the international system, transformations have also taken place in the regional power balance. The main Arab states (Egypt, Syria, Iraq) have lost their centrality to non-Arab or so-called peripheral states (Turkey, Iran, Israel). The loss of regional power has been quite significant for Iraq and Syria, while Egypt looks weak, vulnerable, and dependent, with considerably less clout in regional politics. No longer the epicenter of the regional subsystem, Cairo is now marginalized. In turn, the Arab states that were traditionally more peripheral in regional politics, like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, have seen their importance increase. Amidst this displacement of the balance of regional power, and without any hegemonic power, new alliances have been forged, including those between Israel and some Arab states, as discussed above. The primary cohesive factor in these new realignments is hostility towards Iran, which became markedly more powerful after the United States intervened in Iraq in 2003. In short, the states in the region are more focused on re-establishing a power balance that is favorable to their security and interests than on the Palestinian question, which had thus far been a (theoretical) element of cohesion but was also used for individual strategic objectives.

5. The Political and Economic Dependency of the PA: Internal and External Pressures

The PA was created in 1994 as a consequence of the Oslo Accords, whose Declaration of Principles established provisional interim self-government for a period not to exceed five years. The PA was not allowed to create an army, control borders, exercise any authority over the settlers, the settlements, or East Jerusalem, or have any powers regarding foreign policy or the economy. The only powers that Israel consented to transfer involved health, education, and culture, in addition to specific areas related to the different municipalities,

direct taxation, tourism, and the creation of a police force. The agreement also maintained the status quo of the usurped lands and the Palestinian water resources under Israeli control and it contained a general amnesty for 27 years of Israeli actions (Shehadeh, 1997), using 1967 as the starting point and not 1948, the year of the creation of the State of Israel, and the resulting *al-Nakba* for the Palestinians.

Despite the general initial “euphoria,” resulting from the fact that the military occupation would end and be replaced by self-determination, the mood quickly soured when the imbalance inherent in the Oslo Accords and the subterfuge involved became evident. According to Said (1996, p. 147), the agreement in principle was detrimental to the Palestinians, because it implied official Palestinian acceptance of the Israeli occupation and its continuity, with the PLO simply acting as a fawning minion. As an occupying force and with no obligation to comply with the UN resolutions, Israel would continue to have direct or indirect military, economic, and political control over the entire territory. Despite the fact that the Oslo Accords diminished Palestinian rights, the PA, Fatah (the PA majority party), and Yasser Arafat were all able to use them to gain international legitimacy, which translated into an imposed internal legitimacy. Yasser Arafat’s personal charisma and his political background gave him the legitimacy to lead the PA, just as the concessions made to Israel were “forgiven” in the pursuit of this international recognition. However, Mahmoud Abbas and his cabinet are not Yasser Arafat, and since Arafat’s death, there has been a succession of failures associated with an increasing loss of internal legitimacy and a rising foreign dependency destined to result in a united American and Israeli position. In short, the PA has been undergoing a crisis of leadership for years, aggravated by the frustration with the Oslo Accords and the continued security coordination with Israel.

Since the Oslo agreements, the United States has been the only mediator in subsequent attempts to reach some agreement between the Palestinians and Israelis. Throughout this process, the primary American objective has been to prioritize Israeli security above all else. To that end, the country has pressured the PA, which is completely dependent on foreign financial aid, to invest in security forces and intelligence services to the detriment of democracy and essential public services like education, housing, and health. Therefore, the PA is relegated to coordinating security with the Israeli army and administering basic services, in other words, Israel’s obligations as an occupying power.

Despite the collapse of the Oslo process and the failure of later peace initiatives, the PA has continued to “operate” in an external and internal political limbo: external because the peace process that created it has died (like the two-state solution) and there is no effective internationalization of the conflict, and internal because no Palestinian parliamentary or presidential elections have been held since 2006, while the division between

Fatah and Hamas continues. These two majority parties have been opposed since 2006 when Hamas won the most recent legislative elections. Part of the international community, led by the United States and Israel, pressured the PA to nullify the results. The consequence was an armed confrontation between Hamas and Fatah that divided Palestinian politics; the PA took control of the West Bank and Hamas took Gaza. Since then, the two parties have remained in a state of confrontation, unable to overcome their differences or reach a deal on national reconciliation, despite much negotiation and many preliminary agreements.

Another reason that the two sides have lost their legitimacy is related to the expiration of the terms of office of Fatah party leader Mahmoud Abbas in 2009 on the one hand (although he remains in that office to date) and, on the other, the Hamas-controlled Palestinian Legislative Council in 2010 (whose activities largely remain suspended). Given this power vacuum, new legislative and presidential elections must be held to give fresh impetus to Palestinian politics, even if the system is, in reality, “hijacked” by Israel as the occupying power.

The foreign economic dependency of the PA is equally important in this context. At this time, the entity is very vulnerable and the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the situation even more. The PA has also been accused of having established “crony capitalism” with all the funds received (Dana, 2020). However, foreign assistance from both Europe and other Arab states has decreased, while funding from Washington was drastically reduced. As observed by Tartir and Wildeman (2020), the Palestinians have been forced to live in a contradiction between assistance and development. As large sums of money have come in, Palestinian human indicators have gone down, accompanied by a “de-development” of the economy and dependency on foreign aid to pay for the imported goods that enter through Israel.

Accordingly, it has been argued that foreign assistance is a “cursed gift” that has paralyzed and molded the Palestinian population over the years (Tartir, 2018a). One full third of the foreign financial assistance received by the PA is earmarked for security forces, which accounts for the lion’s share of the national budget, more than education, health, and agriculture (Hawari, 2021). Security also employs almost half of the public sector workers. Various groups have contended that the PA should have responded to the economic cuts under President Trump—accompanied by the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the decision to move the United States embassy—by halting security coordination with Israel, a move supported by 70% of the Palestinian population (Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2017), as well as a suspension of relations and cooperation with the United States Security Coordinator and the United States Agency for International Development (Tartir, 2018a). In April

2021, however, American assistance was restored to \$235 million (“Biden administration to restore \$235m,” 2021). Neither are the European Union and its member states free from this accusation, with billions of euros invested and part of it allocated to the EU police mission in the West Bank (EUPOL COPPS), which has directly contributed to the “professionalization” of Palestinian authoritarianism (Tartir, 2018b).

Finally, domestically, the legitimacy of the PA has continued to decrease considerably, a result of its inability to handle the Israeli occupation efficiently, and because security coordination with Israel has not resulted in more security and protection for the Palestinian people. Everything seems to indicate that security coordination does not only benefit Israel but is also used by the PA to detain its detractors. In recent years, an increasing number of public demonstrations against the PA have taken place, with a majority of society believing that the PA has become a burden for the Palestinian people and that Abbas should resign (Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2018). The PA has been accused of “hinder[ing] and suppress[ing] Palestinian activism that targets the Israeli military presence and settlements in the West Bank,” and of engaging in intelligence-sharing with Israeli authorities (Sen, 2021). At times, the PA has threatened to conclude the security coordination, but in the end it has continued, despite the lack of political progress for Palestine.

The Palestinian society’s condemnation of the PA for its lack of action has been reflected in opinion polls. In June 2021, public support for Abbas and the PA fell sharply, with only 14% of Palestinians supporting Fatah under the leadership of Abbas versus 53% backing Hamas (Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2021). Hamas is gaining electoral ground and, therefore, greater legitimacy due to its opposition and resistance to Israeli policy.

At this juncture, according to Munayyer (2018), the most important present and future challenge for the Palestinian leadership is related to the “legitimacy/sustainability dilemma.” If the PA ceases to participate in the peace framework backed by the United States, centered around the security of Israel and reinforcing its maximalist demands, the political and economic cost will endanger its own survival. However, if it continues to operate in this framework, it will increasingly undermine its own legitimacy.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the post-Cold War world has oscillated between American supremacy and the erosion of multilateralism to increasing multipolarity, but without the gains or revitalization of multilateralism, at least for the time being. The resulting paradox with respect to the Palestine question is that, when Washington enjoyed a clear dominance, it did not manage to reach the end of the process to resolve the conflict, and its waning

supremacy has not led to renewed multilateralism. One clear sign of this is the current Palestinian dossier in the International Criminal Court, which has raised numerous expectations and an equal amount of pressure on the PA to suspend or withdraw it.

On the other hand, transformations in the power structure of the international system have an unquestionable repercussion on different regional subsystems. The MENA region is no exception; on the contrary, it has been very sensitive to changes in world power. It may be premature to conjecture about whether current developments in the international power configuration will have any positive impact on the resolution of the Palestinian question. There are two reasons to express a degree of caution. Firstly, while the strategic supremacy of the United States in world politics is clearly eroding (Cooley & Nexon, 2020), the process of change is still open, and there is no new distribution or organization of the power as of yet. Although this transition may occur, it is unlikely that the United States will lose all its power, which is based more on alliances and informal networks, on power “with others” and not “over others,” a sort of *primus inter pares* (Nye, 2015, pp. 114–115), without overlooking the importance of strategic alliances (United States–Israel) and areas of influence, despite some setbacks.

The emerging powers, in particular Russia and China, have not shown any political or ideological commitment to defending the Palestinian question, despite the fact that their positions are more in conformity with international law in global forums than Washington’s position. Of course, the context of Russia’s return to the region and China’s growing presence differs greatly from the circumstances surrounding the Cold War. While political and ideological rivalry were fundamental during that era, the post-Cold War approaches are more pragmatic. Both powers have extensive foreign relations with almost all the states in the region, regardless of international or regional strategic alignments or alliances, disagreements, and agreements. Good relations with Teheran do not exclude equally beneficial relations with Riyadh. Likewise, their position on the Palestinian question does not negatively impact their good relations with Israel.

Therefore, the fact that China and Russia both want to undermine the traditional geostrategic supremacy of the United States in the international system and, by extension, the regional MENA subsystem, does not necessarily guarantee a different approach and commitment to resolving the conflicts in the region. It seems that the behavior of the great powers is not dictated so much by ethics, but rather by an entire web of interests, competition over power, and distribution of wealth.

Equally important is Palestinian representation and dialogue to build more efficient international alliances and support that can compensate for its weakness or, by the same token, counteract Israeli supremacy and unconditional American support. The crisis of credibility and legitimacy within the PA is not dissimilar to the bit-

ter division between the two main Palestinian political forces. At the same time, everything suggests that the Palestinian political situation may soon undergo changes due to the weakened leadership of Mahmoud Abbas, along with his advanced age. With a PA lacking internal support and a PLO that has been largely subordinated to the PA since the Oslo Accords, moving on from this crossroads will require a thorough discussion about the type of future government based on three axes: a renewal of political leadership in terms of electoral legitimacy; a policy of generational replacement; and strategic unification, like joining the International Criminal Court as a state party. This renewal must also be assured of the very active involvement and participation of its social bases and civil society as a whole to recover enthusiasm for its national emancipation project and credibility in its leadership. Without fulfilling these requirements, it will be difficult to efficiently speak for and represent the Palestinian people as the PLO once did on the international stage.

This situation has become more complex in response to changes in the power structure of the international system and is also reflected in the MENA subsystem, where new regional alignments are taking place, most notably the alliances formed between a number of Arab states and Israel in order to establish a power balance more favorable to their interests in the face of Iran’s growing power in the region, at the same time that authoritarianism has become more consolidated since the Arab anti-authoritarian uprisings of 2010 and 2011. In these new regional and international circumstances, the Palestinian question has been even more marginalized and neglected, in a situation of external political, security, and economic dependency, the continuity of neocolonial policies, and continuous foreign intervention.

Finally, in the multilateral space, no force appears to be focused on resolving the Palestinian question. On the contrary, as seen here, there is now an accommodation of the status quo imposed by the policy of Israeli *faits accomplis*. Without a multilateral deterrent to this policy, colonial expansion is being consolidated, as demonstrated recently by the plan to invest almost €300 million in the Golan Heights to double the number of settlers there. While the possibility of appealing to the International Criminal Court exists, such actions are limited, as the criminal responsibility is personal and does not apply to legal persons. It will not put an end to the military occupation or the policy of apartheid. The relationship between the Palestinian question and multilateralism is epitomized by a comment made by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas during a speech at the multilateral institution par excellence, the United Nations, that also reflects this crisis and the sense of impotence: If his people cannot find justice in that place, where, he asked, should they go.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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