

**HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES**

## Humanitarian aid in Palestine: reconsidering neutrality through child protection

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In November 1947 the Partition Plan for Palestine was adopted, which would open the chapter of the Arab-Israeli wars. Seventy years later, the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory continues to deteriorate, particularly in the Gaza Strip, caught up in a process of “de-development”. Joan Deas and Elise Reslinger, through the lens of Palestinian children protection, invite us to think and question the current aid paradigm, nowadays ossified by a managerial approach favoring a lack of accountability from the occupying power.

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Since Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Yasser Arafat signed the Oslo Accords on September 13<sup>th</sup> 1993 under the aegis of the White House, more than 23 billion dollars of aid have been invested by the donor community. This means that the Palestinian people are one of the world's largest per-capita recipients of non-military aid<sup>1</sup>. 24 years after these accords set out the parameters for this hypothetical “economic peace”, however, not only is there still no peace but all available indicators point to a deterioration in the economic and humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, child protection is a particularly worrying and revealing subject, demonstrating not only the profound failings of the “Oslo model” but also its intrinsic ideological bias. The continued violation of the rights of Palestinian children, despite ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by Israel in 1991 and Palestine in 2014, highlights the limits of humanitarian aid under the terms of the paradigm proposed by the Oslo Accords.

**Oslo and the “economic peace”: a neo-liberal aid model perpetuating the occupation**

These accords, deemed at the time to be the most promising in the history of the conflict, were intended to form the starting point for a process of transition which was to culminate in the creation of a Palestinian State within five years. That was 24 years ago. Today, Palestine still has no sovereignty and remains under the total control of the occupying forces. As Sam Bahour explains, “strategic state-building economic are land, water, roads, borders, electromagnetic spectrum, airspace, movement, access, electricity, free trade relations, and the most important

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Wildeman and Alaa Tartir, “Can Oslo's Failed Aid Model Be Laid to Rest?”, Al Shabaka, 19 September 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See UNCTAD, “Assistance to the Palestinian People: Developments in the Economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory”, September 2017; Jon Pedersen and Rick Hooper (ed.), *Developing Palestinian Society Socio-economic Trends and their Implications for Development Strategies*, Fafo report 242, Fafo Institute for Applied Social Science, 1998; and Jeremy Wildeman and Alaa Tartir, “Can Oslo's...”, art. cit.

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resource of all, the human. [They are] 100 per cent micromanaged by the Israeli military occupation”<sup>3</sup>. The Palestinian people have restricted freedom of movement, no access to basic services and are caught in the vicious circle of dependency on aid. The principle of “economic peace”, developed by the Oslo Accords and backed by major international institutions including the World Bank, whose apolitical and out-of-context recommendations encouraged and systemised its application<sup>4</sup>, has held the ideological monopoly over the aid system in Palestine for more than two decades. It is based on a biased neo-liberal notion that economic development is the premise for political stability and peace, thus ignoring the political context of occupation and the asymmetrical relationship of economic dependency on Israel and international aid that the Palestinians endure. Applied in the OPT for the past 24 years, this principle aims to invest ever-increasing amounts of money via the donor community so as to encourage economic development that is illusory and artificial, in the sense that it is dependent on external economic inflow that is destined to run dry.

The creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), a kind of proto-government responsible for the local administration of this “economic peace” model, has encouraged an illusory and deceptive sense of economic sovereignty and political autonomy, whilst helping to de-politicise the “Palestinian question”. As Lev Mintz explains, “the PLO, an anti-colonial national liberation movement, was replaced as the main actor in Palestinian politics by the PA, a quasi-autonomous embryonic state-building government. Development, in accordance with the dictates of international institutions [...] became the primary concern for the PA government, supplanting political mobilisation against the occupation”<sup>5</sup>. The illusion of autonomy and prosperity thus created led the Palestinians to accept the political compromises conceded by their representatives, whilst helping to relieve Israel of its legal responsibilities as occupying power under the terms of the Geneva Convention. Instead of being renegotiated, however, these principles became the fundamental parameters for all post-1993 negotiations. The “language of Oslo” was therefore imposed as both the dominant vocabulary and approach for the conflict and its management processes, thereby discrediting and de-legitimising any suggestion that would attempt to depart from this ideology<sup>6</sup>. The Oslo Accords therefore established a kind of “regime of truth”<sup>7</sup>, internalised not just by the PA but also by the donor community and local and international aid organisations.

### **Paralysis and political asymmetry: US responsibility**

The role played by the USA in the construction of the Oslo model and in boosting its ideological monopoly is crucial. Officially the principal mediator in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations since the 1970s, the USA, has not only failed to redress the asymmetrical balance of power between the parties, but has actually aggravated it by systematically supporting Israel’s position at both the bilateral and the multilateral level. By fostering the “direct, bilateral negotiations” option that is much more favourable to the Israeli camp, US material and ideational hegemony over the peace process has allowed attempts at intervention by stakeholders potentially more favourable to the Palestinian camp to be neutralised. Similarly, this hegemony has paralysed the workings of those international institutions able to sanction Israel<sup>8</sup>. This is the case at the United Nations’ (UN)

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<sup>3</sup> Sam Bahour, “Palestine’s Economic Hallucination”, *This Week in Palestine*, 9 August 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Wildeman and Alaa Tartir, “Persistent Failure: World Bank Policies for the Occupied Palestinian Territories”, *Al Shabaka*, 9 October 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Jesse Lev Mintz, *After Oslo: Palestinian NGOs and the Peace Process*, MA dissertation, University of London, 2011, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits II (1976-1988)*, Quarto Gallimard, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Dannreuther, “Understanding the Middle East Peace Process: A Historical Institutional Approach”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, no. 2, 2010, p. 187-208.

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Security Council, where the USA has exercised its right of veto on a virtually systematic basis to protect the State of Israel (of the 49 vetoes cast in the 92 resolutions adopted by the Security Council with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1946, 41 have been cast by the USA<sup>9</sup>). This paralysis of multilateral mechanisms reflects the UN's wider failure to adopt a pivotal political role in the process to resolve this conflict and the situation of occupation it entails, a situation unprecedented in its duration. Even though the UN has been at the heart of the process of building the various parameters of the framework to resolve the conflict for over 60 years, it has gradually been bypassed, paralysed, and instrumentalised, or has seen its political role reduced significantly by US hegemony<sup>10</sup>, and has had to settle for what is no more than a technical and administrative role managing aid and archiving data.

### **Serious consequences in the field**

This economic fragility and lack of progress on the political front have had disastrous consequences for the Palestinian people. In 2016, unemployment stood at 18% in the West Bank and 42% in the Gaza Strip; the rate among young people (15-29 years old) was 27% in the West Bank and 56% in Gaza Strip<sup>11</sup>. In 2011, the poverty rate stood at 17.8% in the West Bank, and had risen to the alarming rate of 38.8% in the Gaza Strip. The Gaza Strip, whose economy is being totally suffocated by the Israeli blockade introduced in 2007, has now been in a “de-development” situation for the last ten years. In 2016, around half of Gazans were suffering from food insecurity and over 80% were dependent on food aid and other social programmes. After years of artificial growth, swelled by the financial inflow of international aid, per-capita GDP has also collapsed in the West Bank, falling by 1.5% in 2013<sup>12</sup>. The development of the occupation and rapid colonisation are fragmenting Palestinian territory and the communities that live there – the freedom of movement of these communities is severely restricted, and most of their fundamental rights are being infringed.

### **An inadequate humanitarian response**

A quick glance at the figures quoted above is enough to understand the problem: even though the humanitarian aid presence has been increasing steadily over the past 24 years, the situation of the Palestinian people continues to worsen. Even though humanitarian aid organisations have played a vital role in providing assistance during the conflict's regular peaks of violence, the context in which they exercise their mandate does not allow them to address the real sources of the problem and therefore prevent the humanitarian consequences described above. This problem is the direct result of the deadlock in the negotiating process and the perpetuation of the occupation, upon which the humanitarian organisations have very little influence. This eminently political problem is making any attempts at empowerment and capacity building for the Palestinian people impossible in the long term, forcing humanitarian organisations to “put bandages on” without ever really being able to heal the wound.

### **The effects of the occupation: the case of child protection**

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<sup>9</sup> Data taken from [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)

<sup>10</sup> Phyllis Bennis, “What has been the Role of the UN in the Israel-Palestine Struggle?”, Trans Arab Research Institute, January 2001; and Roland Dannreuther, “Understanding...”, art. cit.

<sup>11</sup> UNCTAD, “Assistance...”, art. cit.

<sup>12</sup> See various OCHA reports: [www.ochaopt.org](http://www.ochaopt.org) and Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (<http://www.pcbs.gov.ps>).

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Child protection activities in Palestine include building the capacities of the PA and boosting responses to the emergency situations faced by practically every Palestinian child. Two classic examples of violations are the demolition of structures, houses and schools, and also the detention of children. In 2016, 1,093 instances of seizure or demolition of property were reported by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)<sup>13</sup> in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), involving the displacement of over 1,600 Palestinians, half of whom were children; this is almost double the figure recorded in 2015. Furthermore, approximately 500-700 children are detained and taken to court every year<sup>14</sup>. In both cases, emergency response systems were implemented by NGOs and the UN. Even though numerous advocacy initiatives have been launched with the decision-makers and the general public<sup>15</sup>, there has been no reduction in the number of demolitions or children detained – quite the opposite in fact – which leads to the conclusion that these awareness-raising initiatives are failing. It is also worth to be noted that around 30% of the structures demolished or seized by the Israeli authorities in 2016 were international donor-funded humanitarian-assistance structures<sup>16</sup>.

### A policy of de-politicisation

The humanitarian aid offered in both these situations seems appropriate. Why, therefore, do we still have a situation that is worsening year over year? Part of the answer lies in the strategy of de-politicising aid in the OPT. In both cases, we can see that the approach to the problem – the approach taken both by aid operators and the occupying power – is purely technical: NGOs and the UN are trying to ensure that children’s basic needs are covered whilst striving to respect the humanitarian principles of “political impartiality”, with their mandate restricting them to a purely technical level of aid. As previously demonstrated, however, it is impossible to ignore the eminently political nature of the problem. The occupying power is very careful not to politicise aid in Palestine – or to let it be politicised. Still enjoying the unfailing support of the USA, Israel is taking advantage of its position of strength and the increasing asymmetry with the Palestinian side to develop a mindset of control based on a purely technical and technocratic approach to the “Palestinian problem”, thus fostering a “managerial” approach to aid, and spurning, *sine die*, any attempt to adopt an approach that would re-politicise or question the nature and efficacy of the aid system established by the Oslo Accords.

### A question of accountability

Israel’s accountability is also problematic at the highest level. A classic example is the UNICEF-coordinated case involving the “[Annual] report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict”<sup>17</sup>, which features a compilation of instances where children’s rights have been violated – the instances deemed to be the most “grave”. At the end of this report there is a list of the armed groups which do not respect these rights. For the first time since the inception of this report in 1999, the United Nations Secretary-General has gone against the opinion of his Special Representative, Leila Zerrougui, by deciding not to include the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in the list. This decision was taken after political pressure from Israel and the USA, and has been reported by various human rights organisations and sources close to the dossier<sup>18</sup>. This example therefore reopens the debate on the limits of international organisations

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ochaopt.org>

<sup>14</sup> See DCI: <http://www.dci-palestine.org>

<sup>15</sup> See OCHA, UNRWA and AIDA for various examples

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.ochaopt.org>

<sup>17</sup> Secretary-General’s report, “Children and Armed Conflict”, 25 July 2016, <http://www.un.org/ga>

<sup>18</sup> In particular, see Human Rights Watch: <http://www.hrw.org>

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as apolitical institutions and the way their most powerful members instrumentalise them to serve their own national interests and foreign-policy objectives.

### **The neutrality of aid and its perception**

For all those who work in child protection – and more generally in humanitarian aid – the issue is one of neutrality and the non-politicisation of aid provision in the OPT. There is no common definition of neutrality among the stakeholders, but they all agree on its aim: to gain the confidence of local stakeholders and be operational. Local populations, however, do not regard international humanitarian aid workers as neutral agents but as well-politicised agents with their own agendas that are deemed too opaque by the populations they are meant to serve. This is why most Palestinian demonstrations in support of political prisoners are organised outside the offices of the ICRC or the UN, which are regarded as “mediators” with the occupier and also deemed partly to blame, which can sometimes mean that they are subject to acts of violence<sup>19</sup>. Israeli civil society also has its reservations; the children’s summer camps organised by the UNRWA, for example, are constantly under heightened surveillance from the Israeli media which regularly accuse the agency of a lack of neutrality if not incitement to violence. The ability to maintain humanitarian access to the most vulnerable populations is the second reason given to justify the neutrality imperative. The report published by the humanitarian consortium AIDA, however, clearly demonstrates that the Israeli authorities are already severely hampering humanitarian access, forcing organisations to deploy considerable human, logistical and financial resources to guarantee their access to beneficiaries, or even to abandon certain projects. Donor-imposed restrictions also play a not insignificant role in reducing the humanitarian space: 60% of the organisations surveyed said that they were adversely affected by anti-terrorist clauses aimed at local partners, mainly in Gaza<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, the apolitical nature of these clauses could also be questioned.

### **“Everything is political”**

This therefore means that only by tackling the geopolitical pressures and dynamics at play behind the violations of children’s rights will aid professionals in Palestine be able to begin to address the real causes of these violations. As long as the work is carried out in a falsely labelled “apolitical” framework and without any processes for calling to account those stakeholders that violate children’s rights, child protection and any other humanitarian action in Palestine shall remain an impossible mandate. An examination of the Oslo paradigm from the child protection point of view can only begin by (re)examining the concepts of neutrality and accountability. As Jason Hart wrote in 2015, “Preventing systematic harm to children in the midst of armed conflict is an inherently political endeavour”<sup>21</sup>. If the UN and NGOs were therefore to recognise the eminently political aspect of their role, and measure their neutrality in terms of addressing violations, the real work could then begin.

The prevailing aid paradigm in the OPT has simply strengthened the Israeli State's domination and control. By accepting this logic as established by Oslo and imposed by Israel, by minimising the attempts to introduce accountability and question aid in the interests of “neutrality”, international organisations are helping to relieve Israel of its responsibilities as occupying power, and must therefore recognise their own share of responsibility for the worsening humanitarian

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<sup>19</sup> <http://blogs.icrc.org/ilot/2017/05/17/security-incident-forces-icrc-shut-ramallah-office/>

<sup>20</sup> Idem.

<sup>21</sup> Jason Hart, “The (Anti-)Politics of ‘Child Protection’”, Open Democracy, June 2015: [www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/jason-hart/antipolitics-of-%E2%80%98child-protection%E2%80%9999](http://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/jason-hart/antipolitics-of-%E2%80%98child-protection%E2%80%9999)

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situation in the OPT. In order to avoid leaving in place “an aid model that is likely to help subsidize the occupation”<sup>22</sup>, this aid paradigm must therefore, and as a matter of urgency, shift from a largely technocratic, apolitical and neutral approach – with the failures and inconsistencies set out above – to an aid model that recognises the asymmetry of power at work in the conflict<sup>23</sup>. The model must be re-articulated around the Palestinian people’s struggle for their fundamental rights, whilst ensuring that none of its actions foster the continuation of Israel’s colonial project. Everything must be done to foster an end to the political deadlock and to rekindle hopes of justice, which alone would allow a real improvement in the humanitarian situation in Palestine.

*Translated from the French by Derek Scoins*

### Biographies

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<sup>22</sup> Rony Brauman cited by Xavier Crombé (ed.), « L’action humanitaire en situation d’occupation », Les Cahiers du CRASH/Fondation Médecins Sans Frontières, January 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Wildeman and Alaa Tartir, “Can Oslo’s...”, art. cit.