

# Polarized and Demobilized : Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine

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The Palestinian Authority (PA) faces unprecedented domestic and international challenges. Since taking office, the Trump administration has taken multiple steps to undermine the Palestinian Authority and its constituents, most recently announcing the unilateral peace plan favouring Israel. This plan followed several other policies and initiatives supporting Israel such as the administration's announcement that the United States no longer considers Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem illegal, which undercut over 50 years of US foreign policy. In 2018, President Trump threatened to cut aid to the Palestinians in a series of Twitter posts, citing their unwillingness "to talk peace." Furthermore, the Trump administration is the first to question the principle of the two-state solution altogether. These steps undermine the authority and legitimacy of the PA. This could result in the marginalization and eventually erosion of its jurisdiction despite the PA cooperation with Israel and the US. Moreover, the PA has been isolated regionally due to the shift in Arab interests towards countering Iran by working with Israel.

Dana El Kurd's new book, *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine*, examines how international involvement of countries such as the United States has had an impact on how the PA functions as well as the PA's relationship to society. The book looks at the effect of repression on demobilization in communities characterized by

high levels of international involvement. The book employs laboratory experiments, surveys, qualitative analysis, and statistical methods conducted at Birzeit University. El Kurd collected an original nationally-representative survey of Palestinian public-opinion, over 50 interviews with decision-makers within the Palestinian Authority, activists, and political leadership, lab-in-field experiments assessing polarization and political behaviour, and an original dataset (+50,000 observations) of daily political mobilization across the territories. El Kurd received her PhD in Government from The University of Texas at Austin in June 2017. She currently works as a researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and as an assistant professor at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. El Kurd's research examines how authoritarian regimes try to implement policies and how external intervention may affect their success.

El Kurd argues explicitly that international involvement generates a principal-agent problem between regimes and their people. International involvement can result in the divergence between elite and public preferences, as political leadership becomes insulated from public pressure. Such regimes gain their legitimacy from external powers, and their insulation allows them to rely increasingly on authoritarian strategies. The book delves further into explaining how authoritarianism encouraged by international intervention affect collective action in

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Palestinian society. It presents a two-stage theory arguing that (1) PA authoritarianism generated polarization, and (2) that this polarization has subsequently affected social cohesion and resulted in a weakened capacity for collective action.

Before 1994, many Palestinians organized themselves to provide better services to their communities and effectively pursue their political objectives. These organizations arose organically and functioned democratically. Thus, when the first intifada erupted in the late 1980s, a robust civil society was one of the main reasons that Palestinians were able to withstand the uprising despite the heavy cost of Israeli repression. In the aftermath of the intifada, the PA was founded during the negotiations between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Israeli government, and international entities such as the United States and European countries. The PA was created to transform the occupied Palestinian territories into a viable state within five years. In the early stages of its development, international entities provided aid and training to the PA to strengthen its security forces, start new economic initiatives, and develop its infrastructure. However, these efforts ignored the occupation as a moving force, negatively shaping the lives of Palestinians. The EU, Israel, and the United States utilized this aid and the reliance of the PA on it to leverage their agenda and suppress dissonance through the threat of sanctions and funds withholding. This eventually led the PA to become more authoritarian. The PA hurt civil society because conditional foreign aid served to empower groups supportive of the international agenda represented with the Oslo Accords over groups that took a critical position on the Accords and state-building process.

The situation became more severe after the second intifada, which was launched after the five-year deadline for statehood passed. Compared to the first intifada, this uprising was much less organized, more violent, and achieved few of its political objectives. This is due to the weakness of Palestinian civil society which hindered meaningful coordination on common strategy among the different factions of Palestinian society. The second intifada exposed the weakness of the PA, thus prompting international donors to further “professionalize” the PA to avoid future unrests. Under President Mahmoud Abbas, the PA used repressive tactics to consolidate its control over Palestinian society. The opposition has been mainly

silenced, either by cooptation into the PA’s patronage networks or through direct repression.

This dynamic is not unique to the PA. Across the Middle East and North Africa, authoritarian regimes supported by international forces have divided the opposition and demobilized their societies. Authoritarianism exacerbates polarization and affects the ability and willingness of different groups to coordinate. El Kurd’s argument demonstrates how international involvement, mainly represented by the United States, could worsen conditions conducive to authoritarianism in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa because the outcome of democracy is likely to be opposed to international intervention. In this region, the United States is wary of democracy after bringing Islamists into power following the Arab Spring and because it could empower groups interested in challenging the status quo on Israel’s role in the region. For that reason, El Kurd dedicated a chapter in the book to apply her theory to Bahrain and Iraqi Kurdistan. Her analysis found is that the involvement of the United States created authoritarian dynamics and increased polarization.

While the book provides extensive original data and essential contribution to the literature on authoritarianism, the book seems to narrowly define international involvement in terms of actions led by the United States. Addressing the various types of international intervention, including ones directed by international institutions such as the United Nations could shed light on multiple pathways of how international pressure could influence domestic politics. El Kurd ends her book by recommending that the international community should strengthen local civil society organizing and community initiatives to help Palestinians resist Israel’s oppressive policies. However, which international entities should do so? How can these entities strengthen local civil society initiatives? A further discussion of the role of Arab countries with strong ties to the United States, such as Saudi Arabia, or of other regional hegemony, such as Iran, in impacting the conflict is needed to expand our understanding of the different stakeholders able to shape domestic politics in Palestine.

Overall, the book is an essential read for anyone who is interested in understanding how authoritarianism in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa persists. It connects local activism with state

institutions and international influence. The book clearly explains how demobilization in Palestinian society is a direct result of the support for the PA's authoritarian institutions in order to maintain the status quo in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.