Has the Question of Palestine Passed? A Neorealist Analysis of the Potentials for Regional Cooperation in the Middle East

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Abstract

The question of Palestine remains one of the most salient dilemmas for policymakers and scholars interested in Middle Eastern and international affairs due to its protracted nature, the many structural limitations it is subject to, and the human and material costs it continues to generate. This thesis explores the current opportunities for regional cooperation in the MENA region around the Palestinian statehood cause from an International Relations and Diplomacy perspective. Drawing upon data generated through 20 interviews with Palestinian intellectuals, in conjunction with existent statistical data on Palestinian public opinion, I sketch a comprehensive image of the current state of the Palestinian national struggle, as well as of the broader Middle Eastern interstate relations.

Engaging with the neorealist thought, I argue that the behaviors of neighboring Arab countries are driven by pragmatic thinking and security calculations which materialize in actions and stances that appear counterproductive to advancing the Palestinian cause. A key factor explaining the contrast between the prevalence of pragmatism at the decision-making level and the continued widespread solidarity cultivated by regional peoples consists of the authoritarian rule governing most regional polities. The results of this study emphasize an increased internationalization of the Palestinian cause, which has been assessed using insights from anti-imperialist thought. The intellectual and policy-making debate around the Two-State solution/One-state solution, intrinsic to any theoretical discussion of the Palestinian question, is explained by employing the Foucauldian binary power/knowledge.

Acknowledgments

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List of abbreviations

API – Arab Peace Initiative

BDS - Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions

DDT – Dynamics Differentials Theory

EU – European Union

MB – Muslim Brotherhood

MENA – the Middle East and North Africa

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OSR – One-State Reality

OSS – One-State Solution

PA – The Palestinian Authority

PCPSR - the Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research

PSR Polls - Policy and Survey Research Polls

TSS – Two-State Solution

UAE – United Arab Emirates

UN – United Nations

US – United States

I.   Introduction

The issue of Palestine and the broader Arab-Israeli conflict denominates the 105-years history (since the Balfour Declaration) or the 75-years history (since the UN Resolution 181) that unfolded in the region stretching from the Mediterranean Sea in the West to the Jordan River in the East. Geographical, political, demographical, and even cultural facts on the ground have changed since then; however, the Palestinian statehood issue remains a constant in both the intellectual and theoretical debates regarding the region and the empirical and policy-level developments.

A series of explanations for the inability of the Palestinians to create an independent state emerged: the structure of the international system and a continuing post-colonial logic that operates regionally, the lack of political will on the Israeli side to make concessions, and the inability of the Palestinians to secure a network of external allies able to change the balance of power, among others. As the question of Palestine is an integral part of the recent history of the Middle Eastern region, an element in the common identity of the people, and a reason for security calculations at the level of the regional governments, the regional dimension in settling the Palestinian dilemma is an essential one. While the failure of the Palestinian establishment and the regional governments to create a shared, strong front supporting the Palestinian liberation cause of Palestine is well-known, the dynamics behind this failure have not been discussed at length.

1.   Aim and approach of the study

Therefore, this study aims to address the regional aspect of the Palestinian question by inquiring about the current opportunities for regional solidarity – diplomacy-wise – to advance the Palestinian statehood project. In other words, how can the region animate the current policy and even paradigmatic stalemate revolving around the Palestinian statehood cause? In this regard, the focus is on the Palestinian perspective and decision-making, as at stake is the Palestinian statehood project. Hence, through this structured inquiry, I explore the opportunities for

regional cooperation around the Palestinian cause by drawing upon Palestinian intellectuals' perceptions alongside the Palestinian and Arab public opinion.

Integral to this scrutiny is a discussion of what is meant by statehood – thus, which state formula is feasible and compatible with the empirical reality on the ground, as well as desirable to the Palestinian people. In addition, the potential of formal diplomacy and negotiations to produce actual improvements on the ground is also evaluated. The debate is increasingly pressing now in light of enhanced settlement activities conducted by the Israeli government and the frequent episodes of violence between the Palestinians and Israelis occurring on an almost regular basis. Moreover, the recent diplomatic developments in the region, namely the rapprochement between some Gulf monarchies and Israel – materialized in the 2020 Abraham Accords (Singer, 2021) - indicates a change at the level of the regional architecture of relations, alliances, and threat perceptions.

The approach of this study is a pragmatic and normative one, derived from the continued relevance and empirical implications of any theoretical formulation around the Palestinian issue and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Moreover, considering the urgency and the topicality of the subject under inquiry, the normative perspective serves in opening up the theoretical and policy debates around its fundamental assumptions and elements - such as the regional dimension of the conflict, the leading two-state paradigm or the function played by the Quartet on the Middle East.

2. Research Question

In light of the above-stated aim, I endeavor to answer the following overarching question:

Do Palestinians perceive the need for a regional ally to advance the diplomatic dialogue on Palestinian statehood?

In addressing the regional dimension of the Palestinian question, a series of critical sub-questions will also guide the current research:

1. *To what extent do Palestinian people consider the existence of a regional actor able and willing to advance the Palestinian statehood agenda as imperative?*
2. *Which regional state, non-state or multi-state actor do Palestinians expect to take the lead in advancing the diplomatic dialogue on the Palestinian statehood issue?*
3. *What would be the rationale, motivations, and sources of legitimacy behind the potential regional actors to actively engage in advancing the Palestinian statehood question, according to the Palestinian people?*

3. Background

Rooted in the colonial history of the MENA region, the issue of Palestine refers to the long history of conflict and territorial contestation between the Jews and Arabs living in the territory of the former Mandatory Palestine. The Jews residing or immigrating to the region recognized in 1948 as the state of Israel, and Arabs living in what is officially named Palestine, as well as in the other neighboring countries, compete over the national and jurisdictional rights over this territory. The conflict has materialized into six military wars, many people-level clashes, two Intifadas, countless human victims, and a massive number of Palestinian refugees living abroad, currently estimated at 7 million (Albadawi, 2021).

The long history of military confrontations and popular demonstrations has been accompanied by an equal number of diplomatic intercourses, negotiating sessions, and official resolutions and agreements. The fundamental programmatic document is the 1947 UN Resolution 181, which firstly delineated the territorial jurisdictions assigned to Jews and Arabs living on the territory of the former British Mandate for Palestine, East of the Jordan River. However, this Resolution and many of the following failed to produce positive empirical results for both sides in the dispute. Therefore, the situation evolved into what some call a protracted conflict, others an occupation regime or a settler-colonial project. Chief among the negotiation processes and diplomatic attempts at addressing the issue of Palestine has been the Oslo negotiations that resulted in the eponymous Accords signed in

1993 and 1995 (Watson, 2000; Swenson, 2010). The Oslo Accords were formulated and agreed upon according to a Two-States paradigm. The envisaged solution consisted of two independent states functioning alongside each other, with mutual respect for their independence and territorial integrity.

Over two decades, the uneven balance of power and the failure of diplomatic negotiations led to a transformed reality – fueled by a sustained settlement activity conducted by the Israeli government ('The expansion of,' 2022; 'Israeli settlements,' 2021). Subsequently, the Palestinian authorities witnessed a shrinking of their governmental and jurisdiction powers, which further set the context for internal political and popular polarization. This skewed power balance, coupled with a demographic dynamic that predicts an increasing Palestinian population, is a cause of what many scholars and political analysts assess as the unviability of the Two-State solution and the existence of a One-State reality (Lustick, 2019). The issue of Palestinian statehood and the stalemate in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations revolve around eight key topics: the permanent settlement and the TSS, borders, the separation wall, settlements, Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, security, and water ('Key issues at stake,' n.d.). Currently, the Palestinian authorities enjoy a quasi-state status, able to exert a limited level of internal authority in relation to the Palestinian citizens. Externally, the state of Palestine is recognized by 139 countries, hosts eight consulates and 43 diplomatic representations, and has 81 embassies, four consulates, and 18 other missions abroad (*Palestine - Embassies & Consulates*, 2022; *Diplomatic Relations*, n.d.). Moreover, in 2012 it received non-Member Observer status within the UN (UN Resolution A/RES/67/19, 2012).

4. Limitations

While I aimed at both width and depth by triangulating data and accessing a relatively large number of interviewees, the current study is limited by and to its stated aim. Therefore, a series of essential dimensions have been briefly referred to or excluded from the present inquiry. A key aspect in this regard has been the discussion around the Palestinians' and Israelis' agency. Most Palestinian intellectuals that I have interviewed have explicitly stated that the Palestinians and

Israelis are the leading agents in conducting and advancing the statehood project. Their impact on the current and foreseeable developments is, therefore, undeniable. However, given the focus of the present paper on the opportunities for diplomatic and governmental alliances, the analysis focused on the role played by the regional establishments, including the Palestinian one, as well as on the potential of diplomacy, without denying or reducing the primary role played by the people themselves.

In addition, while the One-State Solution/Two-State Solution debate is indispensable to any discussion on the Palestinian statehood project, the fundaments behind these formulae, the constituent principles, and the manner they emerged and developed have not been subject to an in-depth assessment. Similarly, the issue of the UN and its democratic deficit and the way it reproduces some neo-imperial principles by virtue of its intrinsic structure have been pointed out during the data gathering process but have not been subject to analysis as they stand outside the aim of this research project.

Finally, the issue of internal Palestinian political and social dynamics has been marginally reviewed in light of the current Palestinian leadership's compatibility with any foreseeable state solution. However, essential aspects regarding contemporary Palestinian politics, polarization, and economic problems have not been addressed for the sake of consistency and linearity.

5. Outline

This explorative inquiry proceeds with a comprehensive review of the specialized literature addressing the issues of regional and extra-regional intervention in the Palestinian cause, the Palestinian cause on the Middle Eastern map, the sources of transnational solidarity, and the debate around the TSS/OSS. The following chapter will introduce the main theoretical perspectives that guided the analytical process: the neorealist thought, the pervasiveness of authoritarianism, anti-imperialism, and the power/knowledge binary. The fourth chapter describes the methodological approach applied in this study and aspects regarding the ethical implications. Based on a qualitative approach, the current research draws on two

sets of data: personal perspectives and accounts conveyed by Palestinian intellectuals and existing statistical data on some of the key aspects under investigation. The following two chapters encompass the findings resulting from the data generation and collection phases and the thematically organized analysis of the results. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and empirical implications of the results transpired by this study.

II.   Literature review

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has become a constant of Middle Eastern affairs and a recurring theme on the foreign agendas of the leading world actors, as well as a focal point for addressing current manifestations of settler-colonialism neo-imperialism, and occupation regimes. The literature dedicated to assessing and comprehending the conflict and its derivations and prescribing potential paths of action is vast and dense. While a comprehensive review of the literature written on the issue of the Palestine-Israel conflict, Arab-Israeli, and the Palestinian question exceeds the aim of this project, an overview of the main discussions around the topic needs to precede any further investigation.

Two main principles guided the choice of scholarly sources reviewed in this survey: firstly, the most recent intellectual debates around the Palestinian question, and secondly, the relevant works addressing the issue of external interference - either regional or extra-regional- in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The literature survey is thematically structured around four main focal points, as identified in the literature: the Palestinian issue as part of the broader Middle Eastern affairs; external intervention in the Palestinian issue; regional converging and diverging factors; and a call for intellectual and paradigmatic reconsideration. However, considering the intertwined nature of the conflict with the broader Middle Easter affairs, I have also included scholarly insights on regional leadership and on the strategic interests of extra-regional powers in the region.

The current literature survey has not included domestic Palestinian politics and the Israeli-Arab military confrontations. Moreover, Palestine's position in the regional architecture of relations prevails over the Israeli one due to the current project's focus. However, an assessment of the Palestinian foreign relations and the Middle Eastern diplomatic and political affairs cannot be undertaken without reviewing the place Israel occupies in the regional system. Finally, considering the focus on the diplomatic and international relations dimension and the current leading paradigm of the Two-State solution, only instances of external intervention in the Palestinian issue and intellectual debates that took place after the Oslo

Accords have been reviewed. Similarly, literature addressing the current and recent developments and debates regarding the Palestinian cause have been prioritized.

1. The Palestinian issue in the broader Middle Eastern affairs

The Palestinian statehood issue and the broader Arab-Israeli conflict represent recurring, omnipresent topics on the agenda of scholars working on the Middle East. The question of Palestine continues to bear significance for the people of the region, and it has played many functions for the regional governments: as a legitimizing tool, as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the United States and Israel, as a reason for advancing pan-Arabist projects or for projecting power in the region.

The popular solidarity expressed towards the Palestinian cause, based on ethnic, religious, or cultural linkages (Noble, 2008; Holt, 2020; Hussein, 2015), has been pointed at by Khatib, who summarized it by remarking that "the Palestinian cause is close to the heart of every Arab and every Muslim" (2021: 83). In a similar vein, Khalidi (2020) draws upon statistical data to evince the sensitivity of the Arab public opinion towards the question of Palestine. Pioneer of this shared concern has been, according to Noble (2008), the regional media outlets. In addition, the widespread usage of the Internet and the regional Palestinian diaspora forged increased awareness and overlap between Palestinian and Arab nationalism (Mellon, 2002). Recently, due to the disillusionment with the secular, pan-Arab discourse, a shift towards religious-based affinities, namely Islam-driven ones, has replaced it at the popular and political levels (Noble, 2008; Holt, 2020). In this regard, the literature acknowledges the central role that the cause of Palestine got to occupy in the Islamic thought and public conscience (Litvak, 1998; Breger, Reiter&Hammer, 2017).

2. Transnational solidarity

However, there is a perceived gap between the popular support expressed by people from the region and their governments, whose actual positions require further scrutiny (Noble, 2008; Milton-Edwards, 2018; Dessouki&Korany, 2008;

Khalidi, 2020). In broader terms, the Palestinian issue has come to play a prominent function in regional affairs (Rabinowitz&Kelani, 2020; Mason, 2021), becoming an arena for interstate contests for leadership and hegemony (Milton-Edwards, 2018; Zarras, 2018; Dessouki&Korany, 2008). The regional tendency towards polycentrism and competition for influence has also been noted by Noble (2008) and Podeh (2014). In addition, the Palestinian cause also functioned as a tool for performing Arab nationalism and building "solidarity and power-balances with external powers" (Milton-Edwards, 2018:125). Similarly, Mason portrays the conflict as "a historical and current legitimizing tool used by various governments and militia" (2021:231). The consequence of this gap between the pro-Palestine Arab public opinion and the defiant autocratic governments is an immunization, Khalidi argues, of "Washington from any blowback for its support of Israel's occupation and colonization of Palestine" (2020:231).

Apart from the regional dimension, the conflict has acquired an international dimension as well, becoming "an issue of global leadership, a cause célèbre, a function of Israeli and Palestinian Diaspora politics globally" (Ibid.) and an instance for advancing Western projects of "development, security, and peacemaking" (Dessouki&Korany, 2008:62).

Despite continued intellectual debates and political discourses around the question of Palestine, the current state of affairs reveals a "dead end" of the statehood project and a tendency toward "disintegration" (Ghanem, 2020:622; Holt, 2020). This trend is confirmed by an increased agreement on the failure of the Oslo process (Awad, 2015; Khalidi, 2020) and on the need to reconsider the Two-State paradigm (Lustick, 2020). This stalemate is caused, among other factors, by a change in the regional threat perception (Smith, 2019; Mason, 2021), a subsequent reconfiguration of alliances, and weaknesses on the Palestinian side (Khalidi, 2020). Moreover, the emergence of new facts on the ground, consisting of the expanded settlement activity by the Israeli state, as well as the construction of the separation wall, are further hindering the resolution of the Palestinian question (Bier, 2017; O'Malley, 2017; Rempel, 1997; Trottier, 2007).

In the following section of this review, I will identify how these dynamics played at the regional level by assessing the history of external intervention in the negotiation process, either regional or international.

3. Regional intervention in the Palestinian issue

The forms of external intervention and the actors that played a role in settling, negotiating, and keeping the dialogue on the Palestinian issue ongoing were changing and constantly influenced by other regional and/or international developments. However, for clarity reasons, a further assessment of their impact will be structured according to a rather artificial division by state actors. Additionally, considering the mutual exclusivity surrounding the foreign relations of the two countries, a review of external involvement in the Palestinian question cannot be undertaken independently from a discussion of the regional and international actors' relations with Israel.

The literature on third-party mediation is varied, as they are the scholars' perspectives on what makes an efficient mediator. While Young argues (1968) that impartiality provides a third party with legitimacy and increased effectiveness in a mediation context, Kydd adopts a diverging perspective, maintaining that biased mediators are more likely to have a meaningful impact on conflict resolutions (2003). According to his reasoning, for a third party to retain mediation legitimacy, it has to be perceived as having the ability to "increase the likelihood of conflict" (Ibid.:605). In line with this non-neutral third-parties paradigm, Corbetta (2015) explains the decision to intervene in conflict settlements using the concept of social proximity. The third party's choice between different interventionist approaches - either military or non-military, diplomatic or economic - is determined by the level of homophily existing between the actors. The principle of homophily refers to an increased likelihood of developing social ties between actors "sharing similarity in key traits" (Ibid.:8). In line with this argument, the transnational solidarity and the culturally-driven affinities pointed out above should incentivize and determine regional third-party engagement in mediating the issue of Palestine. As for the argument regarding non-neutral mediators, it is consistent with the divisive impact

of the US's presence and interests in the region, given its status as a dishonest broker in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations (Aruri, 2003).

3.1. The Gulf monarchies

A substantial body of scholarly work has been dedicated to the role played by the Gulf countries in financing and politically supporting the Palestinian cause and their increasingly close relations with Israel. The intellectual accounts regarding the role of Saudi Arabia in the regional architecture of power and the Palestinian question are remarkably extensive (Podeh, 2014; Smith, 2017; Eilts, 2004; Mansour, 2021; Zarras, 2018).

Firstly, concerning the support granted by the Gulf states for the Palestinian state project, two tracks can be identified: first, the economic one - entailing the financial aid offered by the oil-rich countries to their Palestinian neighbors (Hussein, 2015; Noble, 2008; Eilts, 2004; Zureik, 2017). The second track is the political one which translated into diplomatic initiatives and official political discourses expressing loyalty and encouragement for the Palestinian national cause (Mason, 2021). The period that followed the Oslo peace process has witnessed a series of attempts to address the Palestinian-Israeli issue at the diplomatic level. Chief among these endeavors have been the Arab Peace Initiative Plan (API), proposed in 2002 by Saudi Arabia at the Arab League Summit and the Arab Quartet (Podeh, 2014; Ben-Meir, 2010). The API diplomatic project is credited with being legitimate by virtue of its ability to voice the shared willingness of the Arab states (Ben-Meir, 2010; Podeh, 2014; Mason, 2021) and promising, given that it marked a change in the Arab states' positions towards Israel (Mason, 2021). However, it failed to produce positive results due to the Israeli reluctance to open to dialogue with its Arab counterparts and assume it as a viable diplomatic option, Podeh argues (2014). Another thread in the literature addressing Gulf's stance towards the Palestinian cause is the hesitation expressed by the monarchies to collaborate with Hamas - the political entity governing Gaza, due to its ideological underpinning (Kausch, 2017; Zarras, 2018), an exception in this regard being Qatar (Galeeva, 2022).

In contrast to their official allegiance to the Palestinian cause, the Gulf countries play a substantial, counterbalancing role in the regional interstate affairs through their equivocal stance towards Israel. In this regard, there is a distinction between covert and recent overt relations between the Gulf countries and Israel ('The Palestine Question,' 2013; Noble, 2008; Mason, 2021; Podeh, 2014). The recent diplomatic enterprise named the Abraham Accords has been subject to scholarly attention and analysis (Mason, 2021; Khalidi, 2020) because of its impact on the Palestinian question (Benstead, 2021), perceived in negative terms. As for the reasons driving this rapprochement between the oil-rich monarchies of the Gulf and Israel, a common concern over the regional threat posed by the increased power of Iran (Mason, 2021), alongside a shared alliance with the United States (Khalidi, 2020; Mason, 2021) are the leading arguments. At the state actors' level, the literature points at two countries whose recent role in shaping the Palestinian question has been more significant, namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Saudi Arabia is considered a key actor of the region (Khalidi, 2020; Noble, 2008; Rabinowitz&Kelani, 2020) by virtue of its "position as the birthplace of Islam but also its strong ties to the West through oil" (Rabinowitz&Kelani, 2020:129) and its ability to "influence beyond the borders of [its] country" (Fisunoglu, 2020:139). Moreover, it attempts to symbolize a leading Arab voice in the context of a "leadership vacuum in the Arab world" that has been perceived in the post-Arab Uprisings period (Podeh, 2014:586).

The literature informs on the kingdom's consistent pro-Palestine, and rejectionist stance toward Israel (Noble, 2008; Eilts, 2004; Mason, 2021; Mansour, 2021). However, as in the case of the broader Gulf region, the challenge imposed by the growing regional power of Iran changed the attitude of the country into becoming more accommodative with Israel (Rabinowitz&Kelani, 2020; Mansour, 2021; Mabon, 2016). Besides, the kingdom is credited with playing an important role in the Palestinian question by firstly being the proponent of the API in 2002, the mediator between Hamas and Fatah in 2007 (Podeh, 2014), and an indispensable decision-maker concerning the issue of Jerusalem (Eilts, 2004).

Alongside the Saudi kingdom, the second Gulf monarchy whose involvement in the Palestinian question stands out in the literature is Qatar. However, while Saudi Arabia employed an all-encompassing approach, Qatar's engagement can be resumed to its backing of Hamas and the subsequent financial assistance offered to the Gaza Strip (Mason, 2021; Cladi&Webber, 2016; Zureik, 2017). The literature explains this particularity through the broad Qatari support for Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movement (Milton-Edwards, 2016; Leech-Ngo, 2019; Kausch, 2017; Kamrava, 2015; Galeeva, 2022) that Hamas is connected with.

3.2. The Levant and Egypt

When assessing the Levant's contribution to the development of the Palestinian question, the specialized literature indicates its marginal role in the political and diplomatic developments that followed the Oslo peace process. As border states, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan represent potential negotiating actors due to their direct historical engagement in the conflict (Eilts, 2004; Hussein, 2015) and the shared widespread solidarity with the Palestinian cause ('The Palestine Question,' 2013). However, in the Jordanian case, the literature highlights the rift between the kingdom and the Palestinian cause as a consequence of the 1994 Peace Agreement with Israel ('Israel-Jordan peace treaty,' n.d.; Lukacs, 1997:181-200; Eisenberg&Caplan, 2003). However, the more recent history emphasizes the sole engagement of Hezbollah and Syria, which materialized in their allegiance to the "axis of resistance" against Israel, alongside Iran and, formerly, Hamas (Mason, 2021:221-224).

Finally, Egypt is the last Arab actor in the region recognized for its stake in the Palestinian question (Cladi&Webber, 2016). The country's supportive stance towards Palestine (Smith, 2019) does not occur at the expense of Israel, with whom it has shared a peace treaty since the late 1970s (Milton-Edwards, 2016) and cooperates in the fields of security and anti-terrorism. In addition, both Israel and Egypt are recipients of the US's financial aid (Rabinowitz&Kelani, 2020). In this regard, Washington's large amount of financial and military assistance to the two countries is noteworthy (Talhami, 2013; Aboul Kheir, 2013; Aruri, 2003). By virtue of the same shared American partnership, Egypt is also associated with Saudi

Arabia and Israel, alongside which it can ally for regional influence, Fisunoglu argues (2020). In this regard, Rabinowiths and Kelani (2020) assert that this association represents a potential opportunity for the Palestinian cause. Another dimension of Egypt's engagement with the Palestinian question consists of its relationship with Hamas. The former Muslim Brotherhood administration led by President Morsi played a crucial role in providing Hamas with regional support and assurance based on the shared political ideology (Milton-Edwards, 2016; 'The Palestine Question,' 2013). However, this changed after the 2013 Egyptian coup, with the Cairo government nurturing suspicion toward Hamas due to its potential links with members of the Egyptian MB (Milton-Edwards, 2016; Leech-Ngo, 2019).

3.3. Turkey and Iran

Outside the Arab world, Turkey and Iran are two significant regional actors that continue to exert influence on the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The literature assessing Turkey's engagement with the Palestinian issue is relatively modest, being limited to Ankara's relations with Riyadh (Zarras, 2018) and Israel (Milton-Edwards, 2018) and its collaboration with Qatar and Hamas (Kausch, 2017; Milton-Edwards, 2018). Additionally, the literature reveals a tendency of ideological reframing at the foreign policy level (Fisunoglu, 2020; Milton-Edwards, 2018), marking a departure from Europeanization toward Middle Easternization (Oğuzlu, 2008), or Islamization (Sözen, 2012), which could entail an augmented role in the Middle Eastern affairs. In this regard, Turkey is perceived as a "key protagonist of the future," alongside Iran, with whom it is engaged in an "emerging competition" for regional influence (Fisunoglu, 2020:140).

When it comes to Iran's role in the conflict, a distinction must be drawn between its direct and indirect impact on the Palestinian issue. Directly, the Iranian voiced support for the liberation of Palestine is a crucial element of its broader pan-Islamic cause (Khatib, 2021; Mason, 2021). What distinguishes Iran is its continued anti-Israel stance, coupled with the pro-Palestine one ('The Palestine Question,' 2013; Khatib, 2021; Mason, 2021). This twofold positionality is reproduced only by the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah, also depicted as Tehran's offspring

(Milton-Edwards, 2018; Ben-Meir, 2010; Kausch, 2017). However, when assessing the current regional patterns of alliances and interstate relations, the function played by Iran as a geopolitical actor stands out, and its indirect effect on the Palestinian question is enhanced.

This increased impact manifests in the changed strategic alignments of the region – including the Gulf monarchies' rapprochement toward Israel, which deprioritizes the Palestinian question in the foreign policy calculations of the regional actors.

Iran's recent outlook as a "patron of `resistance` movements (Shi'a or Sunni) in the Israeli front (Hizbullah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad)" (Noble, 2008:139) has had a direct impact on how the regional actors perceive the immediate source of threat. A crucial shift in this regard has been from depicting Israel as the regional source of evil to associating this function with Iran. What this entails in empirical terms is a reconfiguration of regional alliances against the emerging power of Iran and, implicitly, a lessened animosity toward Israel (Noble, 2008; Mason, 2021). The Gulf monarchies are key actors in the regional re-patterning of strategic alliances. A more accommodative stance towards Israel has illustrated this trend, either tacit, as in the Saudi case (Elie Podeh, 2014; Mansour, 2021; Rabinowitz&Kelani, 2020; Smith, 2019), or explicit, in the case of UAE and Bahrain, by means of diplomatic agreements (Mason, 2021). Smith defines this new Israel-Gulf rapprochement as an "alliance of convenience" (2019: 291).

As previously mentioned, while there seems to be consensus over the shared public solidarity at the level of the region's populations, the same cannot be said about their governments (Noble, 2008). The literature highlights an illusion of unity that camouflages divergent economic and security-related interests and attempts at regional leadership (Noble, 2008; Milton-Edwards, 2018). Moreover, drawing upon Noble's distinction between vertical and horizontal alliances, these diverging interests reveal a primacy of vertical, extra-regional alliances to the detriment of horizontal, regional ones (Noble, 2008).

4. Extra-regional Intervention

In addition to the above-mentioned regional players, the literature recognizes four international actors that have shaped, to varying degrees, the realities of the Palestinian issue in the period that followed the Oslo peace process: the United States, the European Union, China, and Russia.

Grounded in the colonial history of its Member States and in the geographical proximity and economic ties with the region (Hollis, 2019), the European Union's involvement in settling the Palestinian question has materialized mainly at the economic level (Milton-Edwards, 2018). Employing soft power (Nye, 2021) and a normative approach (Manners, 2002) in dealing with its neighboring region, the EU launched in 1994 an all-encompassing economic and political project for regional collaboration and financial assistance - the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which later transformed into the European Neighborhood Policy (Dessouki&Korany, 2008; Hollis, 2019). Under this policy framework, the Middle Eastern region represents a key area for the EU's external relations, dialogue, and projects. Under it, the Union has become the largest aid donor to Palestine. Additionally, it has been directly involved in the negotiating process as one of the four members of the Quartet on the Middle East, established in 2002 to solve the Palestinian issue (McMahon, 2016; Hollis, 2019; Cladi&Webber, 2016).

The European Union distinguishes itself through its support for the Two-State Solution, the UN resolutions concerning the conflict (Hollis, 2019), and its sponsorship of the Palestinian state project (Cladi&Webber, 2016; Persson, 2019). This has been complemented by a mainly critical discourse on invasive Israel's undertakings (Cladi&Webber, 2016; Leech-Ngo, 2019; Hollis, 2019) within the limits of the European historical legacies that prevent it from employing a very condemnatory stance on Israel (Harpaz&Shamis, 2010:590; Kaplan&Small, 2006). This way, the European Union has been perceived as contrasting the United States' pro-Israeli position. This contrast is described by Cladi and Webber (2016:563) as "a creative tension" as it entails a reciprocal counterbalancing approach.

While consistent (Hollis, 2019), the EU's policy towards the Palestinian question is subject to both internal and external limitations, making it less effective in the longer term. Internally, the bureaucratic imperatives and the exigency to aggregate the positions of all its Member States are hampering its ability to exert more influence over the conflict's settlement (Cladi&Webber, 2016; Hollis, 2019). Externally, the power wielded by the United States, and the need, at times, to partly align with the American foreign policy - due to the shared membership in NATO (Hollis, 2019) and the Quartet (Cladi&Webber, 2016), impose another layer of limitations to the EU's policy towards Palestine. In a similar vein, the organization's ambivalent stance toward Hamas represents another factor for its diminished effectiveness (Hollis, 2019; Persson, 2019).

When shifting the focus of extra-regional intervention in the Palestinian question on the United States, three main tracks emerge within the intellectual debates: the unquestionable US support for Israel, the US's relations with the oil-rich monarchies of the region, and the diplomatic projects it has sponsored. Firstly, the literature depicts the US's foreign policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as being the result of the American Jewish lobby over the US policymakers rather than derived from the US's particular interests concerning the two countries (Lustick, 2020; Khalidi, 2020; Mearsheimer&Walt, 2008). In official terms, Washington supports the Two-State solution paradigm, providing some financial assistance to Palestine (Hudson, 2019; Cladi&Webber, 2016) and directly engaging in diplomatic projects such as the Quartet (McMahon, 2016; Mason, 2021; Cladi&Webber, 2016).

There have been slight fluctuations in the US's stance in the conflict, which were determined by the presidential figure in charge (Hudson, 2019; Zittrain Eisenberg&Caplan, 2010; Mason, 2021; Khalidi, 2020). It is worth noting that while all the other regional and extra-regional actors are assessed using state lenses, the US's foreign policy is often analyzed based on individual decision-makers, given the central role that the president retains in the American foreign policy decision-making architecture. In this regard, the Obama administration has been associated with a period of optimism for a more impartial American position

(Smith, 2019; Milton-Edwards, 2018; McMahon, 2016; Cladi&Webber, 2016; Leech-Ngo, 2019). However, the steady US support for the state of Israel has been a constant in the conflict (Milton-Edwards, 2018; Hudson, 2019; Smith, 2019; Hussein, 2015). This support has materialized in the military, financial and political backing that Washington invested in the Israeli side. This offered the US a "higher high-profile intermediary role" (Zittrain Eisenberg&Caplan, 2010:269; Aruri, 2003; Bakkour, 2022), upon which the other external actors are shaping their policies.

The US's divisive impact in the Middle East can be grasped in the impact that the superpower has on preserving and even reinforcing some of the regional undemocratic regimes (Khalidi, 2020: 231). This is further sustained by the susceptibility of some regional governments to US's influence (Hussein, 2015:59; Dessouki&Korany, 2008; Noble, 2008; Levaggi, 2020). However, anti-imperialist sentiments still animate segments of the region at the popular level. Adding to this that the literature recognizes Washington as the neo-imperial hegemon (Noble, 2008; Holt, 2020; Chamberlin, 2011; Zunes, 2013), the American intervention in the region leads to further division and polarization.

China and Russia are acknowledged as alternative, non-Western actors who have the potential for influencing regional affairs in general and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in particular. However, their role in settling the Palestinian issue has been relatively modest, with Beijing prioritizing business relations and economic interests in the region over conflict settlement (Burton, 2022). On the other side, Russia of the current decade is more engaged in other regional conflicts, such as the Syrian civil war (Dannreuther, 2019; Rabinowitz&Kelani, 2020; Milton-Edwards, 2018; Levaggi, 2020). At the diplomatic level, China's 2013 proposal, The Four-Point Plan (Burton, 2022), and Russia's membership in the Quartet (McMahon, 2016; Mason, 2021) are the sole projects that the literature indicates, both of them reproducing the Oslo paradigm.

5. Intellectual and paradigmatic awakening: a one-state reality and a settler-colonial project

At the intellectual level, a debate around the leading Two-State paradigm (TSS) has developed as a reaction to the changing facts on the ground that indicate decreased feasibility for its implementation. Seen as an instance of externally imposed globalization (Dessouki&Korany, 2008), as well as of the continued dominance of the Zionist ideology, the Oslo Accords and the subsequent TSS require political and intellectual reconsideration, especially as the state of affairs on the ground tends to illustrate a one-state reality (Lustick, 2020; Awad, 2015; Khalidi, 2020).

The current intellectual debate revolves around the issue of Zionism, perceived as a structural element of Israeli politics (Lustick, 2020; Khalidi, 2020), and the necessity to manage it by pursuing a One-State Solution as the preferred path of action (Hussein, 2015). This call for paradigm change is also coupled with a call for reviving diplomacy as the means for conflict settlement (Khalidi, 2020) and for Palestine's need to secure external allies (Awad, 2015; Khalidi, 2020). A departure from traditional lenses that assess regional solidarity in terms of ethnic and religious links can also be identified. It announces a transition towards focusing on the power of democratization ideas and anti-imperialist sentiments (Noble, 2008; Hussein, 2015) to forge public mobilization and unity around the Palestinian cause.

The intellectual discussion on the one-state reality intersects with another significant trend in the literature that depicts the empirical reality in terms of a settler-colonial project (Busbridge, 2018; Veracini, 2013; Lloyd, 2012). This argument highlights the disproportionate economic, coercive and international political power that the Israeli side can exert in relation to the Palestinian population living in the territory. The imperial historical background in which the question of Palestine emerged, as well as the similarities in the lived experiences of the Palestinian people with other former colonies (Clarno, 2017; Slaita, 2016), explain the settler-colonial nature of the regime operating at the level of the Israeli-Palestinian relations. Moreover, the Israeli expansionist behavior adds to the settler-

colonial nature of the existing regime (Khalidi, 2020; Haddad&Rstam-Kolayi, 2013, Zunes, 2013).

Furthermore, this emphasis on the settler-colonial character of the problem at stake is the reason for another important dynamic that unfolds at the Palestinian governmental level: the co-optation or collaboration of the Palestinian authorities in the West Bank by the Israeli ones (Zunes, 2013). This is a crucial element of what is referred to in the literature as the corruption and low level of legitimacy associated with the Palestinian leadership (Amundsen&Ezbidi, 2002; El Kurd, 2019; Brynen, 1995; Zureik, 2011).

The above-cited body of literature and additional sources suggest the existence at the level of Middle Eastern political affairs of a series of diverging factors that prevent more widely-shared and efficient solidarity in the region, with direct implications for the Palestinian question.

The emergence of Iran as a potential regional leader with a pan-Islamic agenda tends to divide the region between a pro-Iranian axis and an anti-Iranian one. On the pro-Iranian side, regional actors, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Syria, tend to converge their interests and foreign policies based on their shared anti-imperialist and anti-Israeli stances. In the case of Hezbollah and Hamas, the underlying Islamic agenda complements these converging factors. In contrast, the anti-Iranian sentiments and current threat perception allied the oil-rich Gulf monarchies' interests with Israel's ones, alongside their traditionally-shared alliance with the United States. Complementarily, the United States' interests in the region function as both a unifying and dispersing factor for regional cooperation. While the US's interests aggregated the Gulf states, Jordan, Egypt, and Israel, it separated these Arab states from their traditional, regional allies with whom they share similar historical developments and ethnocultural traits.

As a political and ideological movement, Hamas has also determined new alignments and divisions in the region: due to its ideological and organizational links to the Muslim Brotherhood, it successfully obtained financial and political support from Turkey and Qatar, and during the previous Morsi administration, from

Egypt. However, given the ideological discrepancy between the Gulf monarchies – especially Saudi Arabia – and the political movement, Hamas functioned as a diverging factor in the regional cooperation-building around the Palestinian cause. An exception in this regard is Qatar, which maintains financial and political relations with the political party.

These sources of regional convergence and divergence reveal an intertwinement of regional interests, identities, and affinities, which can transform into opportunities for strategic and stable regional alliances. Alongside empirical factors of regional divergence, an intellectual debate and scrutiny of the viability of the current Two-State solution paradigm dominate the literature. Part of this intellectual debate is also the question of the role played by regional actors in addressing and advancing the Palestinian cause. In this regard, the current literature survey reveals a considerable gap in what concerns the relation between the Palestinian statehood cause and the current regional affairs. Similarly, an all-encompassing picture of how the converging regional affinities and interests can be channeled for advancing the Palestinian cause is also lacking.

Therefore, through this research, I endeavor to cover this crucial gap in the literature by advancing the debate on the Middle Eastern states' solidarity aggregated around the Palestinian cause and on opportunities for regional alliances. In conjunction with this, I will assess the viability of the Two-State Solution and current attempts for regional hegemony, as perceived by the Palestinians.

III.   Methodology

1.   Research design and methodology

The current research project aims at advancing the intellectual discussion on the issue of Palestine by addressing some of the core assumptions that dominate the existent body of literature and the public opinion around this topic. The point of departure lies in the traditional perceptions indicating a need for external support in advancing the Palestinian state project and a natural sense of solidarity between Palestinians and their neighbors. Utilizing an explorative intellectual puzzle (Mason, 2018:10-11; Stebbins, 20021:2-3), I scrutinize the extent to which there is a perceived need at the level of the Palestinian people for external intervention in advancing the state project. Complementarily, by mapping the regional powers and their links to the Palestinian cause, I attempted to identify opportunities for further regional cooperation and for advancing the Palestinian state cause.

To answer the guiding questions of this research, I employ a mainly qualitative approach for data collection, generation, and analysis, since "the nuanced and the particular" (Salmons, 2016:2) opinions, subjective experiences, and critical assessments of the reality on the ground are valuable and insightful. Moreover, extensive explanations and a deep understanding of regional and local perspectives and a sense of identity are particularly important when addressing the regional relations of Palestine (Mason, 2018:ix). The qualitative optic is further appropriate given the topic's evolving nature and the significant intellectual, social, and political implications that the question of Palestine determines (Mason, 2018).

The motivation behind the methodological choice derives from my ontological and epistemological stances (Mason, 2018), as I consider the knowledge, views, interactions, identities, and relationalities to compound the individual and collective realities. In addition, a proper and effective way of grasping knowledge and data is through dialogic encounters, including the verbalization of opinions, experiences, and perceptions, and their critical reading, where people play the role of "telling sources" (Ibid.:63). Epistemologically, critical and pragmatic approaches guide my investigation (Mason, 2018:8;

Salmons, 2016:25). While the critical perspective (Given, 2008:171-174) allows me to scrutinize the current leading ideas and assumptions regarding the Palestinian cause, the pragmatic stance (Morgan, 2014; Given, 2008:672-675) derives from the continued social and political significance that the question of Palestine continues to bear. Moreover, considering the reverberations that different intellectual formulations might have for the reality on the ground and "the centrality of organic intellectuals in both empowering the oppressed, and building counterhegemony on the ground" (Hussein, 2015:4), a pragmatic approach is therefore necessary.

2. Data collection and generation

I explore how Palestinians perceive the need for external support to advance the Palestinian statehood project and the current opportunities for regional solidarity alliances. To this end, I retrieved relevant statistical data and generated qualitative data through interviews with Palestinian intellectuals.

I generated data by conducting in-depth, online interviews with Palestinian scholars and professionals specialized in the fields of Middle Eastern affairs and the Palestine-Israel conflict. I interviewed 20 individuals whose individual experiences and positionalities as Palestinians, coupled with their comprehension of the political, diplomatic, and social dynamics associated with the Palestinian problem, provided my project with both depth and breadth. This method is the most appropriate one as the topic requires both a deep understanding of Palestinian people's lived experiences and the broader Middle Eastern political architecture.

Considering the global dispersion of the Palestinian scholars and the travel restrictions imposed by the current pandemic, online videoconferencing platforms replaced the physical variant of conducting interviews. The online interviews served as means of communicating (Salmons, 2016:12;), as well as an opportunity to connect with interviewees residing in different places at convenient times (Ibid.:36). I have conducted 20 in-depth, one-on-one interviews, which were loosely structured around five main themes (Mason, 2018:110): the regional dimension of the Palestinian cause (both at the governmental and the social level), the diplomatic means and leverage that the Palestinian leadership can employ, the

viability of the Two-State Solution, regional powers' ambitions for leadership and the role of specialized international bodies. However, as I proceeded with the interviewing process and became familiar with some leading perspectives and lines of argumentation, I slightly modified my questions. The interviews were conducted in English between January and March 2022 and were video-recorded. As I provided my interviewees with assurance about the privacy of the recordings and the exclusive use for transcribing only, they did not express reluctance toward being recorded. However, this aspect might have generated an increased level of caution when communicating their perspectives in some interviewees' cases. Throughout the interviewing process, I capitalized on previously trained social, intellectual, and technical skills, paying particular attention to preserving consistency and continuity throughout the discussions (Mason, 2018:129). Moreover, since my interviewees are themselves scholars, some of them conducting fieldwork, they were familiar with and easily adaptive to the interviewing process.

During the data gathering process, attention has been paid to obtaining the informed consent of the interviewees for recording and publishing their contributions. I have offered the choice of anonymity to all the interviewees; however, all of them agreed on having their names stated, as well as on being quoted. Due to the sensitivity of the topics being addressed and the individual security concerns, additional consent was asked by some interviewees for having their quotes published. The consent has been video recorded either at the beginning or the end of the interviewing process.

I had initially invited 40 Palestinian intellectuals to participate in my study. Twelve refused to be interviewed for reasons related to either their availability or their specialization in other subjects and/or approaches, while eight of them did not provide any answer. The 20 Palestinian interviewees represent different academic and non-governmental contexts, as well as different geographical regions: seven are based in North America, four in Europe, and nine reside in the MENA region, among whom five in Palestine and four in Qatar and Lebanon. I have not identified any impact of geographical residence on the interviewees' stances. Out of the 20

interviewees, ten were holding teaching positions by the time the interviews were conducted, while 17 of them have PhDs and are published authors.

Moreover, I aimed at having proportionality also in terms of gender and age distribution (with a slight overrepresentation of male intellectuals – twelve men to eight women- and underrepresentation of younger scholars - under the 30s). Most of my interviewees have witnessed or partook in key moments of the Palestinian question's development, such as the two Intifadas and the Oslo peace process. In addition, I have triangulated (Carter et al., 2014) the information to confirm some of the data I have gathered during the interviews by reaching out to official Palestinian diplomatic representatives.

Moreover, I drew upon existing statistical data concerning the Arabs' and Palestinians' opinions regarding regional affairs and statehood project provided by the *Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research* (PCPSR) and by the *Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies*. Therefore, the collection of extant data sets (Salmons, 2016:7) complemented the data gathered throughout the online interviews. Thus, the empirical material used in this study consists of the analytical and personal accounts obtained through interviews with Palestinian scholars and the existing statistical data on Palestinian and Arab public opinion.

3. Sampling

The selection of the interviewees for collecting the primary data was purposive (Salmons, 2016:104), taking into consideration the principles of strategic relevance and representation (Mason, 2018:58-60). Therefore, the interview subjects were selected according to three main criteria: 1. the quality of being Palestinian and self-identifying as such; 2. intellectual and professional interest and expertise on the issue of Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian cause, and/or Middle Eastern foreign affairs and 3. diversity in terms of gender, age, and geographical distribution.

To identify the suitable interviewees, I started by approaching Palestinian scholars I was familiar with through published literature. Thereafter, I used the snowballing strategy of sampling (Patton, 2002, cited in Salmons, 2016) to draw

upon their peer networks (Hughes, 2012, cited in Salmons, 2016) to get acquainted with a larger number of potential participants.

The statistical data sets were selected thematically and chronologically: statistics revealing Palestinians' opinions regarding their support for negotiations, for the TSS, for the OSS, and Arabs' perceptions towards threatening actors in the region and the Palestinian cause. For each of these themes, statistical results from each year between 2010 and 2021, where available, were used for identifying evolutions and trends in people's opinions. The period was chosen because of the focus of this thesis on the current period and because the Arab Uprisings, starting in 2010, have been pointed out by my interviewees as a period of converging popular causes and of expressed widespread solidarity for the Palestinian cause. Thus, I have retrieved the spring edition of the *Policy and Survey Research Polls* ('Index PSR Polls,' n.d.) for each year between 2010 and 2021, and where the examined questions were not included, I have scanned the other editions of that year. In addition, I extracted the relevant questions and graphs illustrating the Arabs' perceptions regarding the Palestinian cause and regional threats from *The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index*, which also included trends in public opinion figures over the last decade.

The sampling process was guided by both the empirical and the theoretical purposes of my research, on one side allowing me to obtain the necessary data for answering the research question, and on the other to enrich the academic and intellectual discussion regarding the Palestinian question (Mason, 2002, cited in Salmons, 2016:104). Throughout the subjects' selection and data collection processes, special attention was paid to aspects related to the validity, generalizability, and reliability of the information being gathered (Mason, 2018:34).

4. Data analysis

The analysis process has been twofold, on one side assessing the data generated through the interviewing process, and on the other, exploring what the existent statistical data convey.

The video recordings of the interviews were transcribed prior to the analysis (Salmons, 2016:162), and the resulting text was organized thematically in an all-encompassing table around the main topics and opinions that have emerged during the interviewing process. The emergent themes that further guided the analysis process are the following: the Palestinian cause as part of the broader Middle Eastern affairs, the gap between the popular and the governmental level in the region - as far as the Palestinian cause is concerned, the unreliability of the regional governments, the limited potential of diplomatic means and international structures, and a changed regional system. The retrieved opinion surveys were also organized thematically and chronologically to identify patterns of change and constancy, and current trends. In this regard, I have created three statistical trend charts (Figures 1, 2, and 7 in the Findings section) that summarize the data retrieved from PCPSR, and I included four relevant charts Figures 3,4,5 and 6) from the Arab Opinion Index based on the topics addressed during the interviewing process. The statistical data was meant to complement the results obtained through interviews, and the findings conveyed by the two sets of data have been implicitly compared. Therefore, thematic analysis was employed as the leading analysis strategy, as it allowed for a structured synthesis of the data being gathered around the most relevant concepts and opinions (Given, 2008:867).

The review proceeded with interpreting and meaning-making (Salmons, 2016:165) by synthesizing the interviewees' opinions and interpreting the statistical figures to identify the main directions and explanations that the answers were pointing at. As the thematic analysis method suggests, the data has been approached in a descriptive manner which is coherent with the aim of the current research project, namely, to find patterns and points of convergence in Palestinians' opinions regarding opportunities for regional cooperation around the Palestinian cause. (Given, 2008)

In the final phase of the data analysis process, the main findings and their further theoretical and policy implications have been identified using an inductive approach (Salmons, 2016:164).

5. Ethical considerations

The primary source of ethical concerns derives from the sensitivity and subjectivities associated with the issue of Palestinian statehood and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. As well-argued by Hussein (2015:4-5), knowledge production cannot be separated from political practice; therefore, I have been cultivating cautiousness while drawing conclusions and indicating directions for further research and practical actions.

Another ethical dimension that needed consideration was the issue of representation (Gobo, 2004) and the focus on intellectuals during the data generation process. Elites' and intellectuals' opinions (Lancaster, 2017) - especially intellectuals in the diaspora - might differ from those of Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. To mitigate this shortcoming, I completed the opinions expressed by the intellectuals with the popular Palestinian perspectives as reflected in the existent public opinion polls.

6. Positionality

While I am an outsider and therefore have some degree of objectivity, I favor the Palestinian struggle for national and human rights (Greenstein&Mosley, 2020). Because of my sympathy for the cause, I assume that some of my interviewees became disposed to convey to me their opinions more openly. Nevertheless, I was aware of the necessity to preserve an objective stance toward the data being analyzed, and I have cultivated it throughout the research process.

Power relations (Lancaster, 2017) are often at play during the interviewing process, as there are gender-based roles and age-based power differentials. However, in this case, the more usual power dynamics emerging in research-interviewing processes that assign enhanced power to the researcher (James & Busher, 2009) were reduced by the expertise differentials between myself and my interviewees. Most of the interviewed intellectuals are well-known academics, with whom I engaged from a master's student position. This slightly tilted the power balance to their side. In this regard, I have shown knowledge of the topic being discussed, as well as of broader Middle Eastern affairs, by engaging in dialogue and

following up on the ideas they articulated. As for the gender and age-based dynamics, they have not played any prominent role in the data gathering process.

IV.   Theoretical framework

In assessing what the findings of this study reveal about the current state of the Palestinian statehood project and the broader Middle Eastern affairs, several theoretical lenses have been employed based on their ability to provide meaning out of the data that has been gathered. I draw on four main theoretical approaches and concepts: the neorealist thought, the concepts of anti-imperialism and authoritarianism, and Foucault's binary power/knowledge

1. Neorealism

Theorized by Kenneth Waltz, the neorealist/structural realist thought (the terms are used interchangeably) revolves around the centrality of balances of power and state security as the primary goal driving states' behaviors. To this end, state actors endeavor to gain and maintain a level of power that allows them to preserve their security and resilience without pursuing increased power as an end in itself.

The neorealist/structural realist accounts proved insightful for explaining ambiguities in the foreign policy behaviors and positions that the regional Middle Eastern states adopt towards the Palestinian cause. Two central elements compound the neorealist perspective, the determinant nature of the international structure in shaping the foreign policy calculations of state actors and the pursuit of power as a means for preserving state survival (Mearsheimer, 2013; Keohane, 1986; Waltz, 1979). Employing this theory to assess regional interstate affairs helps in discerning the rationale behind regional actors' conduct and the motives shaping their foreign policy alignments.

Two regional factors explain the appropriateness of employing realist lenses in assessing the empirical developments under study. Firstly, the anarchic nature of the Middle Eastern system, which lacks any established leader or hierarchical order, justifies the necessity to treat the region in terms of individual state actors pursuing particular interests. Complementarily, the interplay between international and regional developments and the continued interests of extra-regional actors in the

region explain the focus on state survival as the primary rationale of the regional actors.

1.1.Defensive/Offensive neorealism

Drawing upon the dichotomy between balancing and bandwagoning foreign policy strategies, Waltz scrutinizes the assumption that balancing is a universal state strategy, arguing that the system's structure determines the choice between the two approaches. A bandwagoning behavior that entails aligning with the stronger potential rival in the system facilitates the accumulation and enhancement of power but does not necessarily serve the states' primary interest, which is security assurance. In fact, employing a bandwagoning strategy represents a risky endeavor given the structure of the international system, according to the defensive neorealism theorized by Waltz. Therefore, considering the international anarchical system and the reason of the states, which revolves around national security, a balancing approach is the more rational behavior (Waltz, 1979:125-127). In the realist thought, balancing strategies refer to the endeavors and actions aimed at countervailing the mightier, threatening actors in the system. However, the defensive neorealism theorized by Waltz is not reduced to security-seeking behaviors but can also entail goals consisting of "tranquility, profit, and power," provided that "survival is assured" (Ibid.:126). Moreover, external alignment serves the power strengthening goal of a state when it does not enjoy enough power to impose itself as a balancer and/or challenger for other actors threatening its security.

With a different outlook, Mearsheimer (2013) expanded on the neorealist thought by encompassing state behaviors directed at challenging or revisioning the status quo. Offensive neorealism refers to the theoretical base explaining the rationale behind hegemony-seeking approaches to foreign affairs as the strategy assuring state survival. While both theoretical tracks conceptualize national interest in terms of state survival and state security, the means to achieving them and the required level of power to be employed differ.

1.2.Dynamic differentials theory

Drawing upon the structural realist thought and aiming at enhancing its explanatory power, Copeland frames the dynamic differentials theory as an

analytical extension to be applied to regional subsystems. Copeland underlines two fundamental assumptions inherent to the realist thought: firstly, that the states are rational actors, able and willing to follow their national interests, and secondly, that there is an insurmountable level of uncertainty when attempting to grasp the intention of other state actors (2012:79-80). Therefore, a logic of mutual fear and caution exists at the interstate level, given states' inability to distinguish between revisionist and status-quo-keepers actors.

In assessing how the neorealist theory can be applied to regional contexts, the first point of inquiry is the context's anarchical nature, which differs at the sub-systems level. This is because there exist extra-regional greater powers that can exert a higher level of influence and/or authority (Ibid.: 51). Accordingly, Copeland distinguishes two kinds of geopolitical state actors: "regionally dominant states and extra-systemic great powers," which need to be considered when applying the neorealist framework to regional contexts.

The material power that extra-regional actors can exert in a region plays a key role in adjusting the dynamic differentials by providing the declining or weaker state with material and political reassurance. The US's support for Israel provides an illustrative example of the recalibrating power that extra-regional players can wield on geopolitical dynamics. Nevertheless, the external powers' strategies are determined by the level of polarity existing at the regional level. According to Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier (2012:58-59), the Middle Eastern region is defined by a multipolar order, driven by the relative higher material capabilities of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. Copeland argues that where the regional system is multipolar, the external powers will employ a double-track policy to facilitate an even balance of power by providing assurance to all the actors in the regional system. Evocative in this regard has been the US's strategy toward Israel on the one side, and its Arab counterparts Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, on the other, prior to the Camp David Accords that put the basis for the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. Accordingly, multipolar systems also tend to be more stable and less war-prone than bipolar regional systems, according to the dynamic differentials theory,

given the availability of strong allies that can be capitalized upon in security shifting situations (Copeland, 2012:64-67).

1.3.Regionalism and multipolar orders

Employing an offensive realist perspective, Levaggi (2020) builds upon the idea of regional cooperation, dismantling the assumption that a multilateral, less hierarchical regional order can lead to a higher level of cooperation. Agreeing with Copeland that such conditions allow extra-regional powers to intervene, Levaggi argues that multipolar systems incentivize hegemonic regional powers to contest the balance of power and, therefore, prevent cooperation. This hypothesis seems to explain the empirical reality defined by a relatively low level of cooperation between the regional Middle Eastern state actors, whose foreign policies are subject to the above-mentioned extra-regional intervention.

While the neorealist accounts as theorized by Waltz and Mearsheimer, as well as Copeland's adaptation to regional subsystems, are useful in apprehending the regional interstate dynamics, there is still an essential gap in the neorealist analytical toolkit. The cooperative state behavior and cooperation strategies appear incoherent with the structural realist thought and remain unaddressed in most realist accounts. To fill this gap, Glaser (2010) explains the choice between competitive and cooperative strategies, providing a theoretical argument for the rationality of cooperative behaviors.

1.4.Strategic choice theory

Building upon Waltz's neorealism, Glaser introduces the dimension of motives to differentiate between security-seekers and greedy states. This dichotomy is insightful in identifying and assessing different regional state behaviors. By combining the dimension of states' motives with the determinant impact of the international system, Glaser formulates a strategic choice theory (Ibid.:148) to distinguish between cooperative and competitive approaches. Accordingly, the global anarchical system does not necessarily translate into an inter-state competition, but the formulation of security interest determines inter-state relations and strategies.

In line with Glaser's conceptualization, cooperative behaviors refer to "coordinated policies designed to avoid arms races and improve political relations," while competitive ones involve "unilateral military buildups, which can generate arms races, and the formation of alliances" (Ibid.:51). In line with this thought, if the primary condition of security is guaranteed, rational state actors are more incentivized to pursue cooperation, rather than competition, as a less costly means. Glaser's theoretical argument is based on a positive sum-game logic, where the security of one's adversary also implies the security of the other. In line with this logic, cooperative behaviors are preferred over competitive ones, given that they are "more likely to be reciprocated" and that they communicate a security-seeking motivation (Ibid.:7). However, the positive sum-game approach cannot be applied in any context, given that there are instances of negative sum-games named security dilemmas. This concept defines the situation when strengthening one's security occurs at the expense of the adversary's security. The theoretical discussion on cooperative, positive sum-game logic vs. security dilemmas is explanatory for the ambivalent perspectives on the impact of having or not having relations with Israel that this study reveals.

The following theoretical discussion of post-colonialism and anti-imperialism is connected to Copeland's dynamic differentials theory (DDT), which deals with the impact of extra-regional actors on the state of conflict and cooperation at a regional level.

2. Anti-Imperialism

While not established as a body of International Relations theory in itself, the anti-imperialist theoretical discussion is extensive and identifiable at the intersection between the broader debates on imperialism, post-colonialism, feminism, Marxism, and the contemporary global order (Orloff, Ray&Savci, 2016; Parry, 2013; Grovogui, 2013; Rupert, 2013; Kaplan, 2006). As a theoretical and transnational social phenomenon, anti-imperialism is the basis for what the interviewees have conceived as a cornerstone for connecting the Palestinian struggle to similar ones and for achieving external support.

2.1. Neo-imperialism

Using Tully's conceptualization (2017:196), the current world functions according to a "neo-colonialism, imperialism without colonies" or "'informal and interactive' imperialism" logic. Two key aspects distinguish this current regime from its previous expressions. On the one hand, a very complex governance structure operates between the imperialized communities and the so-understood "empires," which involves more ambiguous forms of organizing the reality than in the previous colonies. On the other hand, while power relations remain asymmetrical, the more powerful actors in the system recognize the "subalternised peoples" as autonomous entities and interact with them within this paradigm of formally equal bodies. In Tully's words, this transformed regime of dominance can be defined as an "interactive rule among unequal sovereigns," in contrast to the previous "unilateral domination of colonialism" (Tully, 2017:196).

From a similar perspective, Pitts scrutinized the conventional dichotomy between rulers and ruled in addressing more recent forms of imperialism by emphasizing the multiple functional relations that the current imperial order has brought about. In this regard, the cooptation of and collaboration with local elites are of central importance, with the implication that this dynamic leads to the alienation from their natural supporters, namely, their citizens (Pitts, 2010). Therefore, while the neo-colonial side is represented by the economically and politically stronger actors in the system, on the colonized side, two types of actors can be identified: "collaborators" and "resisters" (Ibid.:224). This divide is coherent with the recurring theme of the gap between peoples and their leaders, as it is with the regional polarization among state actors, on the resisters' side standing Hamas, Hezbollah, Syrian, and Iran, while on the collaborators' side, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey.

2.2. Anti-imperial solidarity

In what concerns the reactionist movement against imperialism, the concept of anti-imperial solidarity refers to a cross-national, widespread feeling of shared struggle based on a strong mobilizing and converging power. Framed as "normative affinity" (Tansey, 2016:106) and previously as "tiers mondisme" or "third-world

anti-imperialism" (Chamberlin, 2011:26), the transnational solidarity around shared causes is rooted in the Cold War history and the worldwide polarization it generated. Under the umbrella of the non-aligned movement, the advocacy for "human rights, economic justice, and national liberation" has filled the agenda of this "post-imperial global community" (Ibid.).

Reviewing the Palestinians' positioning in the world architecture, Chamberlin (Ibid.) emphasizes the self-identification of the Palestinian cause as part of the broader struggle against the emerging post-colonial and neo-imperial projects in the Third World. In this regard, the association with other global communities facing the perils of neo-imperialism - namely "Asian, African, and Latin American peoples"- would provide the reactionist movement with political, ideological, and even material support (Ibid.: 30). Hence, the anti-imperialist solidarity is based on the creed that "mobilizing the masses, studying the art of revolutionary warfare, and building international alliances" can foster success against the negative impact of imperialist projects (Ibid.:31). In this new architecture of power, the United States is perceived by advocates of this counter-colonial movement as the neo-imperial hegemon (Zunes, 2013; Chamberlin, 2011; Khalidi, 2010).

2.3. *Internationals* and the international support

Building upon the theoretical discussion around anti-imperialism and shared struggles, Tabar's concept of "internationals" (2017) is specifically important for scrutinizing the role played by international structures and/or actors in settling the Palestinian cause. Internationalism has represented the ideological base for many revolutionaries and anti-imperialist movements. In this regard, Frantz Fanon's conceptualization of Third World liberation in terms of "a global decolonial struggle against [...] global capitalist-imperialist domination" (Tabar, 2017:417) is an insightful account.

Tabar identifies a paradigm change regarding the exponents of anti-imperialism solidarity from mainly Third-World political movements toward an "individualized and depoliticized" activism that emerges from more privileged countries. Framed as internationals, the new engine of international solidarity is

composed of "First World solidarity activists" or individuals working for the UN and other international organizations based in the territories being worked upon. Tabar draws attention to a critical development in the field of international alliances and solidarity. She argues that a new "ally industry" has emerged, which is disconnected from the ground struggle against the system of oppression in place. In this regard, by employing a critical feminist perspective, she calls for the necessity to acknowledge the positionality of these internationals and the role they are playing in the broader architecture of oppression (Ibid.: 419).

The central assumption of the neorealist thought, according to which the structure of the international system determines the foreign policies of the countries under scrutiny, is coherent with the domestic regimes operating in the countries under study. The existing gap between the peoples and their governments, often referred to in terms of authoritarian rule, diminishes the role played by the popular will and the domestic affairs in foreign policy decision-making and state behavior. This gap is further reproduced by the cooptation of regional elites by extra-regional neo-imperial powers. In this regard, the rentier nature of some key regional economies and the existing patronage relations with Western powers represent a structural factor explaining the robustness of authoritarianism in the region that I will expand upon in the following section.

3. The robustness of authoritarianism

The issue of authoritarianism is of central importance when assessing Arab intra-state affairs, as it explains the peculiar nature of the social contracts functioning within some of the countries and the way the national interest is framed. An insightful structural scrutiny of authoritarianism's pervasiveness in the Arab World has been undertaken by Bellin (2004; 2012).

She explains the exceptionality of the robust authoritarianism in the MENA region through the ability and willingness of the existing coercive structures to prevent and repress any grassroots initiatives towards democratization (Bellin, 2004:144). A series of structural factors explain the strength and will of this coercive apparatus: the financial revenues supporting it, the constant international

backing it enjoys, the patrimonial logic governing the whole polity, and a low level of popular mobilization (Ibid.:46). Among the four structural factors facilitating the authoritarian rule in these countries, two are particular to the region, namely the substantial revenues provided through rents and the continued active interests of Western countries that collaborate with the regional actors. The almost unconditional support that these regimes enjoy from their international patrons, mostly Western powers, is explained through the rentier nature of their economies and their geostrategic importance to external actors. Specifically, the existence of oil supplies and the issue of Islamist threat represent security interests for Western powers that indirectly sponsor the resilience of these authoritarian regimes.

The interplay of the aforementioned four dynamics enhances the power of the coercive apparatus, which, coupled with the prevailing patrimonial paradigm, leads to the perpetuation of authoritarian rule. This structural analysis of authoritarianism's robustness in the region provides insights into the Gulf monarchies' ambivalent regional behavior that strive to maintain the balance between national and regime security interests and the traditional, historical pro-Palestine solidarity. In addition, this account of authoritarianism proves insightful also for explaining the Palestinian authorities' disconnection from their subjects and their co-optation by their Israeli counterparts.

4. Power and discourse

Finally, in order to understand the distinction between the currently leading Two-State Solution paradigm and the alternative of a One-State Solution, a Foucauldian reading is useful in explaining the prevalence of one of the formulae at the expense of the other. In this regard, the power/knowledge binary (Foucault, 1982; 1980) is specifically insightful for explaining the gap between the peoples and the governmental bodies (either national or international) regarding the preference and feasibility assessment of these solutions.

The gap between the OSR and the policy-level dominant TSS paradigm is paralleled by the gap between the grassroots and their leaders and/or the global bodies leading the formal negotiation process. This confirms Tabar's concern

(2017:425) regarding the disconnection between the internationals in solidarity with the ground liberation movements.

The continued prevalence of TSS in the diplomatic and governmental circles can be explained as the endurance of a well-established "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1980) pioneered and sustained by international powers committed to preserving the status quo.

Drawing upon Foucault's thought, truth - in this case, the widely accepted Two-State solution - cannot be dissociated from power, being the product of "multiple forms of constraint" (Ibid.:131) and power struggles. Therefore, this "general politics of truth" (Weir, 2008) becomes the criterion for what is perceived as acceptable and valid in the public space and the basis of legitimacy for public discourses and their endorsers.

Moreover, Foucault's concept of "regime of truth" further explains the rationale behind the continued discursive allegiance of regional actors to the traditional pro-Palestine, anti-Israel stance, despite diverging strategic interests and policies.

The starting point for choosing the appropriate theoretical framework that allows a comprehensive reading of the data being gathered and collected has been the concept of national interest and the idea of a gap between peoples and the higher authorities. Therefore, four theoretical sets of lenses have served this goal: the neorealist thought – both in its defensive and offensive forms, the concept of anti-imperialism solidarity, the authoritarianism, and a Foucauldian perspective on power and discourse. Each of these perspectives has been employed according to their relevance to the data being assessed and, where necessary, combined.

V.   Findings

1. Introduction

The results of the interviewing process reveal much convergence at the level of the Palestinian intellectuals' perspectives, with small but insightful nuances and different approaches. Similarly, the data transpired by the interviewing process converged and was complemented by the reviewed statistical surveys. While the interviews provided me with answers to key questions and debates regarding the current state of the Palestinian statehood project, the starting assumption about the need for regional allies has been rather contradicted. External regional allies are perceived as needed but of secondary importance. Moreover, not a single state actor has emerged as the leading choice, but several regional countries have been indicated and, more importantly, the local popular movements, in addition to the regional and international ones.

The findings of this inquiry have been organized around five overarching themes, as they emerged during the data gathering process: the conceptualization and problematization of the issue at stake, including the debate on the Two-State/One-State solutions; the regional dimension of the Palestinian cause; the Palestinian establishment's role in negotiating the Palestinian cause; the international dimension of the cause and, finally, the ways forward.

2. Conceptualization and problematization

2.1. Problematizing the Palestinian question

The first point of discussion revolved around conceptualizing the Palestinian issue. A quarter of my interviewees expressed reluctance to frame it as a conflict, while another quarter explicitly portrayed it as a settler-colonial project or, others, as a humanitarian and financial cause for external actors. According to some participants, framing the Israeli-Palestinian encounters in terms of a conflict is problematic due to the discrepancy in the two sides' military capabilities and the external support they receive. In this regard, George Bisharat, a law professor based in the US, formulated it as a "confrontation between a very powerful settler-colonial

project and indigenous people." From a slightly different perspective, Khalil Jahshan, the director of the Arab Center Washington DC, perceives it as a protracted conflict with a dynamic of its own which also encompasses an important regional dimension.

For some interviewees, the disproportionate US support provided to the Israeli government represents the primary source of the problem. Other interviewees have pointed out the lack of substantial external pressure on the Israeli government to restrain from occupation practices and open to negotiations as an essential part of the problem. In a similar vein, another trend in the answers revolves around framing it as a balance of power issue. In this regard, the focus on the disproportionate balance of power between the Palestinians and their Israeli counterparts is coherent with the views according to which the current regime defining the Israeli-Palestinian relations is one of a settler-colonial nature. In a similar vein, a quarter of my interviewees depicted the Palestinian statehood issue as a manifestation of continued imperialist and post-colonialist practices. In line with this perspective, Mai Albzour, Social Sciences professor in West Bank, specifically highlighted the international dimension of the conflict, in contrast to the more traditional way of framing it as a regional affair. Khalil Jahshan concisely summarizes the interlink between this power discrepancy and the regional dimension:

> the Palestinians have a curse in terms of the Palestinian problem: the uniqueness of their enemy -Israel is a superpower, is a nuclear power, is supported by West and East, [...]and the uniqueness of friends, unreliable friends [referring to the neighboring countries]. They have never been blessed with a weak enemy to be able to overcome and a strong ally to push them forward.

Alternatively, some interviewees defined the problem in terms of weakness on the Palestinian leadership side due to its inability to keep the Palestinian cause strategically important for the regional countries.

As for defining the institutional reality on the ground, most interviewees acknowledged the existence of the one-state regime by specifically highlighting that between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river, "it is a single functional state,

governed by apartheid principles" (George Bisharat), that "determines the fate, in one way or another, of all the peoples" (Ahmad S. Khalidi) living in the territory.

In what concerns the diplomatic independence that the Palestinian entity enjoys, the interviewees acknowledged the limited diplomatic capital at its disposal. However, as Camille Mansour, former professor of International Relations in West Bank and Paris, highlighted, "There is a surplus of the international aspect of statehood, Palestine is more of a state outside Palestine than inside Palestine," referring to some bureaucratic aspects regarding personal documents and the status of Palestine within the UN.

2.2. Two-State Solution/One-State Solution

The interviewees also scrutinized the TSS, agreeing over its failure and incompatibility with the current realities on the ground, and maintaining that it contradicts the actual will of the Palestinian people. However, while most interviewees assessed it as inherently unfair/unpracticable, due to its reproduction of the uneven balance of power and its lack of popular legitimacy (it was not a priorly agreed-upon solution) or due to the fragmentation it created at the people's level, others focused on its development. These interviewees perceived it not as intrinsically inappropriate but rather dysfunctional because of Israel's unwillingness to accept it and because of the demographic and territorial changes on the ground.

The interviewees agree that the TSS remains the prevailing paradigm only at the official discursive level and within the diplomatic and policy-making circles. In contrast, the empirical developments indicate a One-State Reality, or a "no state" reality, as Ibrahim Shikaki, professor of economics based in the US, asserted. However, as Tareq Baconi, president of the Al-Shabaka board, pointed out, "The international community continues to invest its diplomatic and economic power behind the TSS framework, not out of a belief that [it] is possible, but rather as a way to manage the conflict on the ground." In a similar vein, Leila Farsakh, Political Science professor based in the US, warns, referring to Israel's approach towards settling the question of Palestine, that "managing the issue [and not solving it] is delaying the catastrophe." Moreover, at the regional level, some underscored that

the neighboring governments, alongside the Palestinian leadership, are also invested in the TSS paradigm.

The lack of an alternative formula offered by the Palestinian authorities has been highlighted by Ahmad S. Khalidi, senior associate member at the University of Oxford, and Tariq Dana, conflict and humanitarian studies professor based in Doha, who signal that no other programmatic political goals have been articulated. Therefore, while there are alternative formulations at the intellectual and empirical level, the TSS paradigm continues to prevail at the policy one. Diana Buttu, former spokesperson and legal advisor for the PLO, has described the current situation as "a phase of anti-apartheid struggle" that does not have any defined, clear finality yet.

The discussion around the One-State reality and the alternatives to the current paradigm concludes with a question regarding the translation of the existing order into one entailing equality among the people and human rights guarantees. However, conceptualizing the outcome to be pursued is also problematic, as Ahmad S. Khalidi indicates. He and George Bisharat emphasized that the solution has to be necessarily "fair" and "just" alongside being "agreeable, meaningful, and substantial."

Similarly, several interviewees referred to the primacy, at the popular level, of individual and collective rights over the overall statehood architecture. Therefore, people focus on having their rights preserved rather than on the state formula being proposed and pursued. In a similar vein, a third of my interviewees have explicitly maintained that it is the Palestinians who will decide upon the preferred state formula in a "decolonial setting where people [both Palestinians and Israelis] would decide if they want a state or not, or what form of governance suits them" - Wassim Ghantous, postdoctoral fellow at Columbia University.

However, while most interviewees indicated an increased likelihood of a one-state formula, some expressed concerns over its viability, given the reluctance of both sides to accept it. According to Camille Mansour, adopting the OSS formula would entail an abandonment of the international legal personality and prerogatives that the Palestinian entity currently enjoys and the potential co-optation under the

stronger Israeli one. Similarly, the claims regarding the occupation regime and Israel's illegitimate settlement activities on the Palestinian territories would lose their ground. In this regard, Tareq Baconi highlights the pragmatic approach employed by the Palestinian leadership that is aware of the unfeasibility and limitations of the TSS framework, but only by consenting to it are they able to receive economic support and diplomatic recognition.

The following charts illustrate the evolution of the Palestinian public opinion regarding the two leading options of statehood: the two-state paradigm and its one-state alternative. The figures reveal relative constancy in the support for either one of the formulae. However, it should be noted that there is no consensus over the preferred state option but rather a slight polarization around supporting/opposing any of the two variants. The recent trends regarding the stance towards the TSS (Figure 1) show increased opposition among the Palestinian people (starting from 2017), in contrast to a formerly more supportive opinion towards this formula. As for the OSS (Figure 2), the uncontestable majority positions itself against the formula of a single state encompassing both the Israelis and the Palestinians. What these figures convey is, firstly, the lack of popular agreement, as well as a continued reluctance to accept a state entity inclusive of both peoples. This contrasts with the opinions of my interviewees, who seem to agree that the one-state has become a reality or at least the more feasible option.

Figure 1

Support for the two-state solution

Figure 2

Support for the one state solution, providing equal rights for Israelis and Palestinians, given the failure of the two-state solution
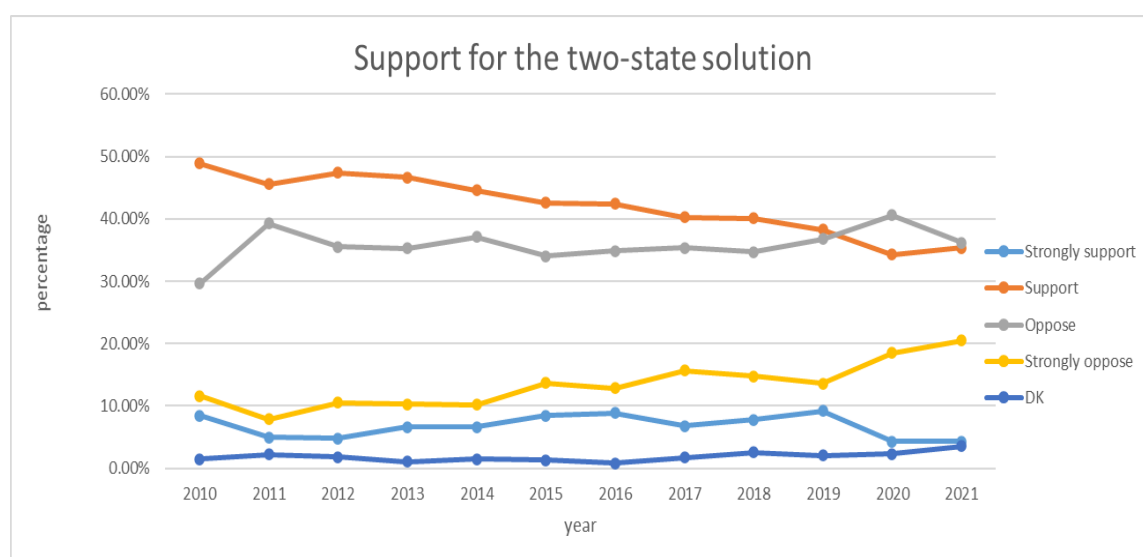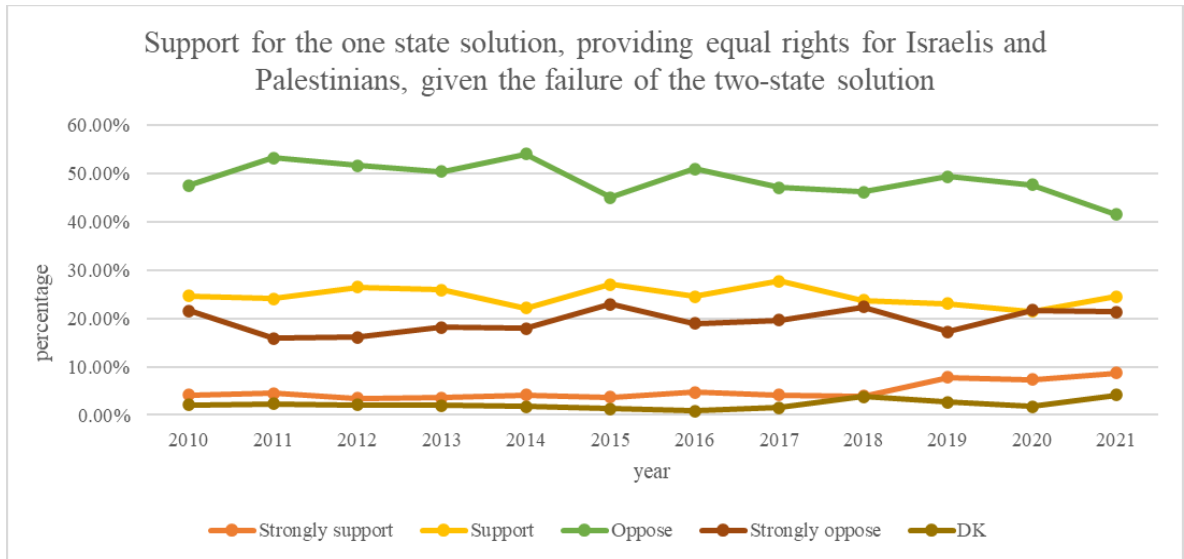
3. The regional dimension

3.1. Unreliability and gap between the governments and the people

In assessing the regional dimension and implications of the Palestinian cause, an overarching motif has emerged, either implicitly or explicitly indicated: the abandonment or isolation of the Palestinian cause. The interviewees have explained this trend toward deprioritizing the Palestinian question through a series of structural, social, and political dynamics at play, which I describe in length below. Given the continued popular solidarity towards the Palestinian cause, the main argument revolves around the gap between the regional governments and their people. In line with this argument, the discussion on the diverging national interests represented another key recurring theme. From a slightly differing angle, another explanatory track referred to the "the Palestinian fatigue" as a popular reaction to the existence of other sources of concern at the national level, such as conflicts and authoritarianism. Finally, the last discussion theme revolves around the systemic shift unfolding in the broader Middle Eastern region.

Among these themes, the interviewees agreed on the unreliability of the regional support and the gap between the governments and the peoples of the region. In what concerns the lack of reliable regional allies, some scholars point to differing national interests as being the leading cause. At the same time, a quarter

of my interviewees emphasized the weakness on the Palestinian side in terms of leveraging power. As for the disconnect between regional governments and the peoples of the region, most interviewees explained it through the endurance of authoritarianism in the area. In this regard, Bana Madi, a graduate student and researcher in Lebanon, maintained: "You cannot be acting for other people's liberty and freedom, and you are a very dictatorial regime on your people. You cannot be both."

Some interviewees highlighted the indivisibility between the Palestinian issue and the broader regional concerns, arguing that settling the Palestinian question has undeniable implications for the area. For instance, four out of the eight points of concern (borders, Jerusalem, security, and the Palestinian refugees) inevitably require the engagement of other regional countries. Mohammed Almasri, the coordinator of the Arab Opinion Index, emphasized the role played by the Palestinian cause in building the Arab identity: "we cannot disconnect the Palestinian question from the Arab dimension. I believe even in the Arab identity construction, the Palestinian question is one of the components that give a glue for the Arab people." Indeed, all of the interviewees agreed, to varying extents, on the continued popular support for the Palestinian cause among the peoples of the region.

At the level of the Arab public opinion, the continued transnational solidarity cultivated by the peoples of the region is illustrated in respondents' answers, as they have been congregated below. Accordingly, during the last decade, the Arab peoples have self-identified with the Palestinian cause in a proportion of close to 80%, according to the most recent available data.

Figure 3

Year	The Palestinian cause concerns all Arabs and not the Palestinian people alone	The Palestinian cause concerns the Palestinians solely	Neither of the above two statements	Dk /Declined to answer
2019 /2020	79	15	4	2
2017 /2018	77	15	5	3
2016	75	17	5	3
2015	75	18	4	3
2014	77	14	4	5
2012 / 2013	84	8	4	4
2011	84	9	1	6

■ The Palestinian cause concerns all Arabs and not the Palestinian people alone
■ The Palestinian cause concerns the Palestinians solely
■ Neither of the above two statements
■ Dk /Declined to answer

"Attitudes towards the Palestinian cause by country" ('The Arab Opinion Index,' 2020:53)

3.2.The basis for regional support

In identifying the basis for this shared popular support for the Palestinian cause, a quarter of my interviewees indicate a shift from traditional forms of solidarity towards a paradigm dominated by shared concerns over human rights and democratization, coupled with anti-imperial and anti-occupation sentiments. Another quarter highlighted the continued pan-Islamist sentiments expressed in the form of political Islam. However, some problematize the pan-Islamist approach to state-building, emphasizing its partial incompatibility with the Palestinian desiderata for a democratic state. From a different standpoint and employing an Islamic perspective, Osayd Awawda also emphasized the religious underpinning of the envisaged Palestinian state and the distinction between how Muslims define Palestine vs. how the international law frames it. However, the differences between the two tracks of regional solidarity are explained by some interviewees in terms of generational differences.

All things considered, the prevailing approach toward national liberation appears to be the secular one, in addition to the pan-Islamist one, which finds its expression in Hamas' political agenda. In this regard, Mohammed Almasri's comment is insightful: "the people in the Arab world are not emphasizing the

religious reasons against normalizing with Israel, they do not see it as a conflict between Muslims, or Christians and Jews, they see it as a national liberation movement."

This prevailing secular thinking is also illustrated by the Arab public opinion figures regarding regional normalization with Israel and the motives behind its dismissal. In this regard, the popular Arab opinion mirrors the intellectuals' one in framing the Palestinian-Israeli reality in terms of a neo-colonial project. In addition, these figures give evidence to the authoritarianism thesis that explains the gap between the peoples and their governments regarding foreign policy, in the case of those countries who have already normalized relations with the state of Israel. As the following table illustrates, an absolute majority of 88.2% of the Arab respondents oppose the recognition of the Israeli state, out of which 33.7% perceive it as a "colonialist occupying power."

Figure 4

	2019 2020/	2017 2018/	2016	2015	2014
Colonialist occupying power in Palestine	33.7	31.7	27.0	24.5	23.4
Expansionist state set on controlling more Arab territory	9.4	10.1	13.0	13.0	2.4
A terrorist state/supports terrorism	7.6	7.4	7.6	10.4	1.2
Israeli dispossession of the Palestinians; continued oppression of the Palestinians	6.8	8.3	8.1	6.9	5.5
Religious reasons to oppose Israel	6.7	6.6	5.2	3.3	4.9
(Israel) is racist towards Arabs	5.9	6.3	8.2	10.3	12.2
Recognizing Israel negates the Palestinian people	4.8	5.3	5.8	5.6	7.5
Israel is an enemy of my people/the Arabs in general	4.1	3.4	3.3	4.7	11.5
Israel threatens regional security	3.6	3.4	3.2	3.4	2.5
Israel violates agreements and treaties	1.6	1.6	2.1	2.4	2.3
Israel does not exist	2.3	1.1	0.6	0.3	3.4
No reasons given	1.9	1.6	1.8	0.6	10.2
Total of those opposed to recognizing Israel	88.2	86.8	85.9	85.4	87.0
Approve of the recognition of Israel	6.2	7.9	9.5	8.9	6.0
Do not know/declined to answer (as a percentage of respondents)	5.6	5	5	6	7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

"Reasons for opposing diplomatic recognition of Israel over time" ('The Arab Opinion Index,' 2020:57)

There is also a distinction between emotional commitment and pragmatic calculations at the level of the neighboring countries' peoples. While Islam and the shared Arab identity still constitute a strong self-identification and emotional basis, in which the Palestinian cause is central, it does not translate into actual positive changes. This is due to two factors: the existence of other, sometimes more

immediate issues and challenges that the neighboring countries face and the diverging national interests. As for what George Bisharat called "Palestinian fatigue," Ahmad S. Khalidi explains it as a saturation at the level of the peoples of the region with the Palestinian question, in the context of new or continued internal challenges or geopolitical shifts. Mohammed Masoud, a young professional based in Europe, maintains that while the people of the region show support for Palestine, "they have many problems to care about before they care about the political cases in any of the neighboring countries; they have their owns dilemmas."

3.3. National interest

The issue of national interest is central to the discussion about opportunities for regional cooperation around the Palestinian cause as it determines some cleavages at the empirical and intellectual levels. Empirically, the security, economic and political interests of the neighboring countries lead to changing relations with Palestine and to the abandonment of the Palestinian cause despite the continued popular support. However, this reorientation is explained by a change in the regional challenges and states' interests rather than by a decreased weight of the Palestinian cause. At the intellectual level, a discrepancy can be identified in how the issues of regional cooperation and regional normalization with Israel intersect. For most interviewees, the two dimensions - regional solidarity around the Palestinian cause and collaboration and/or normalization with Israel - are perceived as mutually exclusive. This is underlined by Mohammed Masoud who stated that "as long as we have governments that normalize with Israel, this will not lead to anything positive or promising to us." However, Hilal Khashan, Political Science professor based in Lebanon, pointed out that it is imperative for any country attempting to effectively advance the Palestinian cause to have relations with Israel. "For a country to become a sponsor of the Palestinian question, it has to have good relations with Israel." In a similar vein, the interviewees stressed the interdependency between preserving relations with the US and its regional ally – Israel; in this regard, Nadia Naser-Najjab referred to the "road to Washington that goes through Israel."
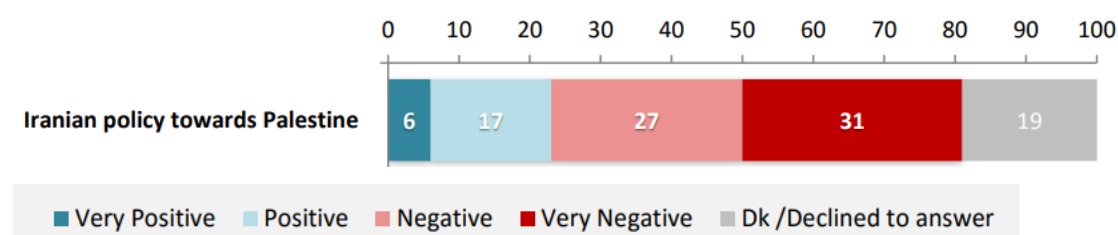
3.4. The role of the leading regional states

The following point of inquiry revolves around Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran's roles in the regional subsystem, given their hegemonic tendencies and their self-portrayal as promotors of the Palestinian cause. Generally, none of the three regional leaders is perceived as a potential sponsor of the Palestinian cause, with a different nuance regarding Iran. Turkey resembles Saudi Arabia in its approach toward the Palestinian cause, both being conditioned by their relations with the US and by their positive relations with Israel (either overt or covert). However, Tareq Baconi underlines that the two countries are employing different discursive paradigms for explaining their geopolitical actions: Turkey using mainly the Islamist card, while Saudi Arabia replaced the Islamist discourse with a modernization one encompassing religious tolerance to justify its rapprochement with Israel.

However, the Iranian case is slightly different from the Turkish and Saudi one. Some of my interviewees consider Iran to be an active, supportive, and more honest player. Its exceptionality derives mainly from its unquestionable anti-Israel stance and its constant and consistent pro-Palestine stand. The interviewees explained the Iranian regime's hostile attitude towards Israel through different arguments. Ahmad S. Khalidi perceives this hostility as a matter of Iranian domestic politics - due to the association of the previous Shah's regime with Israel and "the sympathy for the Palestinians [as] a function of the fact that the Shah was an ally of Israel." In a slightly different approach, Wassim Ghantous asserts that Iran "understands that Israel's role in the region is to maintain Western domination." Similarly, Tareq Baconi contends that Iran "places the question of Palestine in the anti-American, anti-Imperialist view." However, he also highlights a crucial difference between the anti-imperialism cultivated by the Iranian regime - which has an Islamist underpinning- and the secular anti-imperialism cultivated by the Palestinian national liberation movement. Dana El Kurd, Political Science professor based in the US, acknowledges the influence that the Iranian foreign policy has on some segments of the Palestinian society that she perceives as having a divisive impact as it creates polarization. In what concerns Iran's constant pro-

Palestine stance, the interviewees perceived it as serving its geopolitical and religious interests in the region.

The rather negative impact of Iran's foreign agenda on Palestine is also acknowledged by the Arab public opinion, as the following table reveals. Accordingly, 58% of the Arab respondents perceive the Iranian foreign policy on Palestine in negative terms.

Figure 5

	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Iranian policy towards Palestine	6	17		27		31			19		

■ Very Positive ■ Positive ■ Negative ■ Very Negative ■ Dk /Declined to answer

"Assessment of Iranian foreign policy" ('The Arab Opinion Index,' 2020:48)

However, in what concerns the opportunities for strategic alignment between Palestinians and these three regional leaders, the interviewees prescribe pragmatism in both thinking and action. In this regard, Camille Mansour concisely describes the foreign policy calculations of the Palestinians:

> I am sure that people say: why not? Let us benefit from it, but my skepticism comes from this: alliances have changed so many times in the last ten years that policymakers or intellectuals feel like they cannot count on such actor or the other.

This perspective is echoed by other interviewees who acknowledge that while working with these countries could be beneficial, subordinating the Palestinian question to their will and decision power or, for that matter, depending on them must be avoided. As for the continued portrayal of solidarity towards the cause of Palestine, all the interviewees agreed that this narrative was embraced for the sake of the national interests of these governments. Inès Abdel Razek, Advocacy Director of PIPD based in Jerusalem, emphasizes this aspect by stating: "The Palestine cause is tokenized by these countries, is purely a geopolitical tool for them."

When shifting the focus to other regional state actors willing and able to play a positive role in addressing the Palestinian question, some trends emerged

among the interviewees' answers. Egypt, due to its border with Gaza, and Jordan, due to its status as the custodian of Al-Aqsa Mosque, in addition to their historical and geostrategic roles, were indicated by a quarter of my interviewees as potentially important actors. Moreover, when asking about other regional actors whose pro-Palestinian stance appears sincere and more likely to impact the Palestinian cause positively, the answers differed - some pointing at Algeria (another quarter of participants), Tunisia, Qatar, and Kuwait - since they have not normalized with Israel- and Hezbollah, at a sub-state level, due to its ability to pose a serious challenge to Israel. Other countries that have been indicated are Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq under the same argument of not having normalized their relations with Israel. However, the interviewed scholars have acknowledged their limited role "in terms of the broad regional move towards accommodation if not formal peace with Israel" - Ahmad S. Khalidi.

3.5. A changed system

In what concerns the larger Middle Eastern context, Nadia Naser-Najjab, Palestine studies lecturer based in the UK, argues that it resembles the international one. According to her, "unfortunately, today, there is a lot of division among the Arab countries," arguing that "the colonial tactic of `divide and rule` still works" in the regional context.

The geopolitical shifts and security alignments indicated by the interviewees are part of a larger process of regional systemic change. One of the most notable shifts consists in the regional threat perception that is currently associated with Iran. In this regard, Ibrahim Shikaki, referring to the financial help that the Gulf countries provide for the Palestinian authorities, emphasizes that: "there is a balance that these countries are trying to maintain, [...] the balance between US, Israel, and what the Gulf countries see as the threat coming from Iran; and money is the easy way out, it has always been the case for the Gulf countries." In addition, Leila Farsakh has pointed to the US's attempt at reconfiguring the regional balance of power. She argues that Washington attempts to re-include Iran as a regional ally by re-engaging in a nuclear agreement to counter-balance Israel in the region.

In conjunction with these perspectives, the Arab Opinion Index's figures offer evidence of the increasing threat perception associated with Iran, with values comparable to the ones associated with Israel and the United States.

Figure 6

	2020/2019	2018/2017	2016	2015	2014	2013/2012	2011
Israel	37	39	41	45	42	52	51
United States	29	28	27	22	24	21	22
Iran	12	10	10	10	9	6	4
Arab Countries	5	7	5	5	5	3	2
Russia	1	2	3	1	--	--	--
European Countries	1	1	1	1	2	1	--
Other countries	1	1	1	1	1	0.3	1
Others	1	0	1	1	0.1	--	0.2
No threats	2	4	1	1	1	1	0.4
DK/ Declined to answer	11	8	9	12	17	15	19
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

"States poses the greatest threat to the Arab Countries" ('The Arab Opinion Index,' 2020:51)

Part of the same sub-systemic change, Mai Albzour emphasizes an increase in normalization with Israel and a reformulation of the main concern at stake regionally: "The main dilemma now is: supporting Israel and ensuring its security or not, as the question of Palestinians' rights has been seized in the region." In a similar vein, Tariq Dana describes the current regional state of affairs as follows: "now we are witnessing a new era in the Arab-Israeli conflict," which is one framed "rather [as] Arab-Israeli relations."

4. The Palestinian leadership

All interviewed intellectuals agree on the incompatibility between the current Palestinian leadership and any pursuable solution to the Palestinian statehood question. This incompatibility derives from the corruption in the Palestinian Authority and the lack of meaningful representation associated with it. In general terms, the current Palestinian leadership, and especially West Bank's Fatah, is invested in preserving its hold on power and, therefore, in the TSS formula. Mohammed Almasri explains the current political situation of Palestine in terms of a "bankruptcy," created by the fact that Hamas is currently concerned with "functioning, rather than resisting." At the same time, the PA's facilitation of the

status-quo and collaboration with Israel "impacts the dignity of the people" and its legitimacy. By collaborating with the Israeli government, Tareq Baconi argues, the Palestinian leadership becomes "an essential part of the occupation."

Therefore, a change in the Palestinian political leadership and the currently prevailing patterns of action is needed in light of a substantial movement toward statehood; viewpoint summarized by Osayd Awawda: [it is] "impossible to liberate ourselves if we do not liberate ourselves from ourselves first."

5. International dimension

5.1. International community

The continued widespread solidarity with the Palestinian cause is not confined to the region but has also acquired a significant international dimension. The majority of my interviewees argue that international popular solidarity and favorable public opinion play a key role in supporting the Palestinian statehood project. From a more pragmatic stance, Camille Mansour draws attention to the necessity "to distinguish between expectations and slogans," stating that he does not believe that "people expect anything in the foreseeable future, even at the popular level, but they cannot say we do not believe in the Palestinian statehood."

Apart from capitalizing on the favorable international opinion, a couple of interviewees suggested the necessity of changes at the US and EU policymaking levels. In fact, in some cases, the international community resembles the regional one in terms of a gap between an increasing supportive popular opinion and the ineffective or unfavorable state policies regarding the Palestinian cause. This is illustrated in Tareq Baconi's assertion regarding international state actors: "These actors have been more invested in maintaining the status quo, rather than resolving the question of Palestine [and, therefore, will not be] actors for change, I think they will react to changes that happen on the ground." In what concerns governmental-level diplomatic orientation, Diana Buttu also underscored a counterproductive practice at the level of the Palestinian leadership. She argues that the Palestinian leaders have concentrated their diplomatic effort in the US, Europe, Australia, or Canada, abandoning their traditional allies - developing or formerly occupied

countries. And Buttu maintains this is problematic because these Western powers have "unchangeable diplomatic stances" despite the shifting public opinion: "Even if the public opinion is changing, nobody wants to be that country that puts its neck along the line and confronts Israel."

The same reluctance has been widely expressed toward the efficiency and relevance of the UN structures because they reproduce the international power relations and the disproportionate level of power that the US can exert within it. In this regard, Diana Buttu refers to the "Israeli veto" and the "double US veto," emphasizing the almost exclusive use by the US of its veto power for Israel's benefit and its enhanced power given the double membership in the Security Council and the Quartet.

However, while dysfunctional, the interviewees also acknowledged that the UN is the only internationally legitimate structure and should be capitalized on for the benefit of the Palestinian cause. Therefore, it has continued relevance in the absence of another international, equally legitimate tool. In this regard, some interviewees emphasized the international law component that continues to provide Palestinians with some level of protection. In formulating a way forward by employing diplomatic means, Zaha Hassan, human rights lawyer based in the US, referred to the need for "a third party that can promote international law and which is supposed to be a fair arbiter between peoples in conflict," arguing that "you need that party that can enforce that will among the parties; you need a multilateral mechanism of some kind, either that is UN or an international group that would include stakeholders that could balance each other." However, given the power relations and socio-political dynamics at play regionally and internationally, no state actor has been indicated as a currently potential mediator.

6. The way forward

Finally, when assessing the role assigned to diplomacy, most of the responses tend to indicate a relatively modest role, of secondary importance to other tools at the disposal of Palestinians, such as popular struggles, capitalizing upon favorable international public opinion, and putting pressure on the Israeli state.

While sustained as a practice, the diplomatic channel has failed to transpire any substantial positive change so far. Hilal Khashan refers to the peace process as being "the beginning and the end" in itself. Moreover, considering the current impracticability of the TSS and the uneven balance of power, Dana El Kurd draws attention to the detrimental effects of a continued diplomatic dialogue on statehood under the current conditions. "The state being recognized as such would narrow the discussion on the nature of this state [...] and make the entire negotiation about these little cantonments of space."

Another trend in the answers revolves around the prospective role played by the grassroots movements. Wassim Ghantous referred to a "grassroots diplomacy" able to connect struggles of decolonization, opinion also shared by many other interviewees. Others argue for the employment of all available means, encompassing a mix of governmental and grassroots approaches. Finally, the continuation of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) practices has also been prescribed. However, Tariq Dana argues that for any diplomatic alliance or international channel to work, "the Palestinians themselves have to revive the national movement."

The Palestinian public opinion also indicates that negotiations -and, therefore, diplomacy- are not the first of their options, excepting the year 2019. However, as the figure below reveals, armed struggle is considered the most efficient method for ending the occupation and pursuing the statehood project. Negotiations are mentioned as a second or even third choice, while peaceful popular resistance is also considered less effective than armed resistance.

Figure 7

The best means employed for ending the occupation/obtaining an independent state
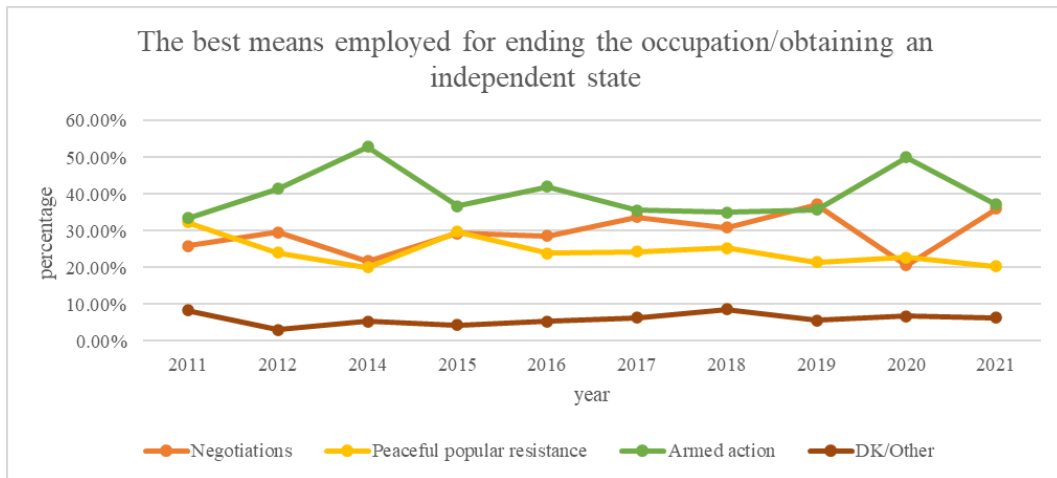
For 2010 and 2013, no data is available regarding this question.

The debate around the Palestinian state is intertwined with other broader topics regarding the current Middle Eastern states' system and the connections between the regional actors and extra-regional interests and interventions. What the interviewees indicated, and the reviewed surveys further illustrate about the regional dimension of the Palestinian cause is an important gap between the Arab peoples and their governments. This is mainly illustrated by the contrast between the popular sympathetic sentiments and the governments' pragmatic behavior. At the states level, Iran appears as a different case on the regional leadership map due to its strategic importance, the consistent anti-Israel stance it cultivates, and its more sympathetic reception by some sectors of the Palestinian population. Generally, the interviews convey the prevalence of pragmatism at the state decision-making level and a paradigmatic transition towards different forms of regional and international solidarity, namely political Islam and common anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist struggles.

Moreover, another important trend in the interviewees' answers concerns the interconnectedness of the Palestinian issue with other developments unfolding in the region. In this regard, an important discrepancy has been highlighted between the poor human rights and democratization records of the regional authoritarian regimes playing the Palestinian card and the justness associated with the cause.

As for what the reviewed Palestinian public opinion polls reveal, a constant reluctance to accept the one-state solution as a foreseeable option, as well as polarization regarding the support expressed towards the currently leading Two-State paradigm are identified. In addition, as indicated by the reviewed statistical figures and sustained by the interviewees, negotiations are not perceived as a priority in the Palestinian liberation struggle. In this regard, the public opinion suggests a more effective role played by armed actions, while the interviewed intellectuals emphasized the positive role that can be played by local popular movements, alongside regional and international ones.

VI.   Analysis of the data

In assessing what the above findings convey about the region and, specifically, about current opportunities for regional cooperation around the Palestinian cause, four theoretical approaches have been employed. The neorealist thought, the anti-imperial solidarity, the authoritarianism, and Foucault's binary power/knowledge have been applied due to their ability to shed light on the question under investigation. In this section, each of the themes and subjects of inquiry as they were identified during the data gathering process will be assessed by applying these theories in a logical order, around six main themes.

1.   A neo-imperial project

Firstly, the problematization of the issue at stake and its conceptualization as a settler-colonial project and as a conflict between a very powerful actor, backed by the West and East, and the indigenous people reveals an essential feature: the neo-imperial character of the Palestinian issue based on an uneven balance of power and discrepancy between the main actors involved. The emphasis on the disproportionate support that the US provides to the Israeli side is as part of the same neocolonial logic. In this regard, a key expression used by the interviewees is particularly revealing for both the neo-imperial logic dominating the regional dynamics and the neorealist approach toward foreign policy that the regional actors are cultivating: "the road that goes to Washington through Israel."

In addition, an essential finding and point of intellectual convergence consists of the international dimension associated with the Palestinian cause. Portraying the issue as a global affair has implications for who is considered a stakeholder, which are the means to be employed for its settlement, and the avenues for advancing the dialogue.

2.   Paradigm change

Secondly, the discussion around the viability of the leading TSS paradigm revealed a discrepancy between the policymaking and diplomatic level vs. the

public and intellectuals' opinion. While within the policymaking and diplomatic circles, the Two-State solution remains the prevailing paradigm, the results of this research tend to indicate that neither through a preference assessment nor through a feasibility analysis, it does represent a pursuable goal. The next question to be asked in this regard is why it still maintains the prevailing position in the policy architecture. I argue that by virtue of the power relations associated with its formulation and implementation process, it became the exponent of the existing "regime of truth," in Foucault's terms.

In line with this perspective, the TSS paradigm, by being proposed and sponsored by the Palestinian government and the international powers with whom the Palestinians do not self-identify, becomes part of the broader neo-colonial agenda. Thus, I argue that the association of TSS with the neo-imperialist powers is one of the causes behind Palestinians' reluctance toward the TSS project. Either way, the mismatch between the public and the intellectuals' opinions on one side and the policy field on the other further indicates a necessity to reconsider the current leading paradigm.

The TSS also serves an essential function for both the Palestinian leadership, the Israeli counterpart, and the international community. By preserving the discursive and formal allegiance to the Two-State formula, the Palestinian leadership maintains its hold on power and governmental prerogatives. As for Israel, the TSS represents the framework allowing it to postpone finding a solution and exploit the situation to its benefit. As the findings indicate, the discourse of TSS represents an instrument also for the international community, allowing it to preserve the status quo and manage the problem without necessarily settling it.

As no alternative programmatic agenda has emerged at the popular level, the formulation of a pursuable foreign policy and diplomatic strategy is further hindered. The ambiguity surrounding the solution to be pursued at the popular and policymaking levels and the sense of a changed system prevent the formulation of a clearly defined aim and a foreseeable end for this liberation struggle. This ambiguity is also illustrated by the public opinion, as this study reveals, given that neither the TSS nor the OSS appears agreeable to a significant extent. However, it

can be argued that the decreasing support for the TSS derives from the continued formal allegiance, which contrasts with its increasing empirical impracticability.

3. The gap between the societal and the governmental level

In what concerns the regional dimension of the Palestinian cause and the potential for building solidarity around it, two central tracks emerged: the primacy of national interest over transnational sentiments of solidarity and the subsequent gap between peoples and their governments. The gap between the solidarity shared by regional communities and the modest or counterproductive governmental stances toward Palestine can be largely apprehended through the robustness of authoritarianism in the region. In this regard, while the Arab peoples continue to perceive the Palestinian cause as directly concerning them - in a percentage close to 80%, as the surveys reveal, the counterproductive actions and allegiance of their governments to other extra-regional or security interests contradict the will of the people. However, the distinction is made between what is publicly conveyed and what are the "behind the doors" or de facto foreign policy orientations. The governments' public pro-Palestine discourse can be understood in terms of a "truth regime" given the strong historical background of the Muslim and Arab peoples' support for the Palestinian cause. On the other side, the behind doors policies can be better grasped by applying pragmatic, neorealist lenses.

Bellin's emphasis on the role played by external supporters as a structural factor in explaining the robustness of authoritarianism in the Arab world appears coherent with the interviewees' emphasis on the role played by the US and EU in the region and their detrimental effects on the Palestinian question. In reaction to this, a key finding refers to the ideological discrepancy between the anti-imperial narrative associated with the Palestinian cause and the authoritarian and neo-imperial logic reproduced by some regional governments portraying themselves as advocates of the cause. To put it differently, the Palestinian national project, which is perceived as a just national liberation cause, is inconsistent with the authoritarian political culture cultivated by its so-called regional supporters. As some interviewees highlighted, the envisaged Palestinian state is a democratic one, the

current Palestinians' struggle revolving around human rights, dignity, and economic and social justice concerns. In contrast, the regional actors formally and discursively sustaining this cause are driven by authoritarian principles of governance and operate according to a neo-imperial logic by acquiescing to the cooptation of extra-regional powers.

Pragmatism and a logic of regime survival drive the behavior of the Palestinian leadership and the national and regional architecture of power, mostly at the expense of the popular democratization tendencies. The corruption associated with the current political leadership in Palestine, and the gap between what people expect in terms of a pursuable state formula or the foreign policy orientation, reveal an almost exclusive preoccupation of the Palestinian establishment with its survival.

4. The primacy of national interest

The primacy of national interest explains why states in the region pursue foreign policy strategies that seem to alienate them from their traditional, regional allies and policy orientations. The structural realist perspective proves appropriate as a leading theoretical approach in explaining this tendency. Firstly, it provides a theoretical basis for what has been conveyed through the data gathering phase as the prevalence of national interest over transnational solidarities. Secondly, it explains the paradigm shift at the level of Gulf monarchies - Israel relations that currently represents a critical aspect of regional interstate affairs. The inherent neorealist division between defensive vs. offensive approaches offers essential insights for apprehending the regional powers' behaviors. In this regard, the Iranian case can be better comprehended applying the offensive neorealist lenses as it illustrates a hegemony-seeking behavior, being engaged in a balancing act against Israel's power in the region. Conversely, the Gulf monarchies' rapprochement towards Israel and their sole financial support towards the Palestinian cause can be better understood using the defensive neorealist perspective. In their case, a phenomenon of cooperation and bandwagoning with Israel, alongside which they create a counterbalancing pole against Iran, can be identified. Therefore, I argue that the Gulf states are firstly concerned with maintaining their position in the

system rather than maximizing their power, which explains the bandwagoning approach toward Israel.

As this study reveals, the security, economic and political interests of the regional actors prevail over their discursive or historical commitments to supporting the Palestinian cause. As neorealism indicates, state survival and security are the fundamental reasons of a state; therefore, all its external behavior should revolve around this logic. In empirical terms, this means that decisions regarding war, conflict, cooperation, alliances, and strategies should be dictated by the necessity of the state to preserve its integrity and security. Further on, applying Copeland's dynamic differentials theory helps us explain why the traditional regional alliances have not been static and why, as some interviewees indicated, there is permanent fluidity in terms of regional alliance networks. This fluidity produces a sense of unreliability and reluctance on the Palestinians' side to entirely depend on a regional actor for advancing its statehood agenda. The general reluctance expressed by the interviewees towards potential allies from the region, and especially towards the self-portrayed pro-Palestine advocates of the region, is coherent with the neorealist logic, as it is based on a pragmatic stance. Accordingly, changes in threat perceptions, states' capabilities, and the material and political power that extra-regional actors are disposed to deploy in the region lead to changes in inter-state relations and alliances.

At the popular regional level, the phenomenon of "Palestinian fatigue" further reproduces this logic of priority of national and more immediate concerns. This, coupled with the authoritarian paradigm operating in most neighboring countries, further diminishes any expectancy for potential external support. However, the concept of "Palestinian fatigue" appears contradictory to what the Arab public opinion surveys have conveyed – namely, a self-identification with the Palestinian cause in a percentage of over 70%. This seemingly contradiction can also be apprehended using pragmatic lenses and circling back to Camille Mansours's distinction between "expectations" and "slogans."

In what concerns the three state actors perceived as potential leaders of the region – Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran – a series of elements explain their

positions toward the Palestinian cause. Palestine serves as a function for these countries, considering the central role occupied by the Palestinian cause in the Islamic world and the historical conscience of the region, coupled with the Islamic ideologies that operate within these countries. Therefore, playing the Palestinian card can be a highly effective strategy for obtaining political gains or internal stability, given the supportive public opinion towards Palestine. While the foreign behaviors of all three countries can be grasped applying neorealist lenses, their motivations differ.

In the Iranian case, the embracement of the Palestinian cause fuels Iran's attempt to extend power in the region in an anti-imperial and pan-Islamic project. When it comes to Iran's stance, two essential findings require further explanation: firstly, the adoption of the pro-Palestine, anti-Israel discourse - which is part of a broader, historically based regime of truth and serves the interest of the state. This regime of truth, anchored in the shared solidarity expressed at the popular level and coupled with a strong domestic motivation, can deliver political gains both domestically and regionally. Internally, the historical background which associates the former Shah regime with Israel represents an additional incentive for cultivating this anti-Israeli discourse. In line with this logic, normalization with Israel is received with reluctance and even criticism since it contradicts both this regime of truth that has been the cornerstone of the regional identity, and the domestic political discourse. Secondly, Iran's strategy can be understood in purely offensive neorealist terms as an attempt to gain regional hegemony through balancing acts against the other powers of the region. Playing the anti-imperial card and embracing a pro-Palestinian discourse of solidarity provides it with regional popularity. However, this anti-imperial discourse differs from the one cultivated by the Palestinian activism and national liberation movement. The Palestinian genre of anti-imperialism is based on secular thinking and anchored in universal values of human rights, representation, and economic justice. In contrast, the Iranian anti-imperialism has an inherent Islamist agenda. This discrepancy is also echoed by the popular threat perception (Figure 6) – Iran being placed alongside Israel and the

United States - and by the general Arab perspective on the Iranian foreign policy regarding Palestine, which is perceived in negative terms (Figure 5).

The Saudi and Turkish foreign approaches are more similar, sharing a structural element that influences their regional behavior – namely, their relations with the West and with the US in particular – in the Saudi case by virtue of its rentier economy and in the Turkish one, through its membership in NATO. However, the findings of this study suggest that this dimension is of secondary importance. Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Israel is best understood as a balancing act against Iran through a bandwagoning strategy toward the Israeli state. The ambivalent position adopted by the Saudi government vis-a-vis normalization with Israel can be further explained through the sensitive balance it has to preserve between its security and economic interests, on one side, the role it plays in the Islamic world, and the necessity to preserve domestic acquiescence, on the other. At this point, two levels of security concerns can be distinguished: the state security – against threatening regional actors and the regime security – against potential popular dissatisfaction. This duality is a product of the authoritarian logic governing the country. Thus, as far as the Saudi case is concerned, I argue that it follows a defensive neorealist logic as it endeavors to secure itself a level of power that guarantees its internal and external stability. Moreover, another angle explains the Saudi policy reorientation – the patrimonial logic operating in the kingdom, produced and reproduced by the authoritarian regime. Accordingly, the change in the Saudi leadership – with the emergence of the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, entails changes in the security calculations of the regime and, subsequently, in the foreign policy strategy.

When it comes to the Turkish case, similar dynamics are at play. Adopting the pro-Palestine discourse serves Turkey's attempt to gain legitimacy and project power in the region, its behavior being apprehended in defensive neorealist terms. Aiming for an increased role in the region, the Turkish government adopts a pro-Palestinian discourse within the limits of preserving its relations with the other regional players. Maintaining economic ties with Israel, normalizing its relations with Saudi Arabia, and preserving relatively positive relations with Iran allow

Turkey to maintain its position in the regional architecture. It can be labeled, capitalizing on Glaser's dichotomy, as a security-seeker rather than a greedy actor, despite its regional hegemonic ambitions. Thus, while Saudi Arabia and Turkey are operating according to a security-seeking logic, Iran combines the security interests with its aim of projecting power regionally, which qualifies it as a greedy actor, using Glaser's conceptualization. In all three instances, the Palestinian card is used in utilitarian ways by virtue of its Islamic symbolism. What differentiates Iran from the Turkish and the Saudi actors is its anti-imperial discourse and the consistency and constancy of its anti-Israeli stance.

Regarding the ambivalent stance that some interviewees expressed toward the practical value of having relations with Israel, it can also be explained through the strategic choice theory. For regional countries that normalized their relations with Israel, such as the UAE, Bahrein, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, the costs of cooperation are exceeded by those of competition. Engaging in a balancing act against Iran, which is perceived as the more immediate and important threat, the collaboration with Israel appeared as the less costly solution. This broader architecture of interstate relations reveals a regional tendency toward bipolarity, where Iran and Israel represent the leading poles of power.

5. Anti-imperial solidarity: an international cause

When looking at the states indicated as sincere supporters or potential backers of the Palestinian cause, the two emergent trends revolve around anti-imperial solidarity and opposition against normalization with Israel, portrayed by regional actors such as Algeria, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, or Syria. The limited diplomatic and international political power that the indicated countries enjoy, coupled with internal problems in some cases, prevent them from playing any substantial role in advancing the Palestinian cause. However, the reason behind their indication reveals an emerging focus on crediting and connecting with states sharing or having shared anti-imperial struggles. This anti-imperial, anti-colonial perspective is also nurtured at the Arab public opinion level, the explanations against normalization with Israel (Figure 4) being illustrative in this regard.

Despite the regional focus of this research and the traditional perspective that views the Palestinian cause as part of the regional dynamics, I have also addressed the international dimension of the issue and its implications. In this regard, Tabar's concept of internationals is particularly insightful. Thus, while the international community and international solidarity groups appear as a promising avenue for effective and positive changes, they remain highly disconnected from the ground realities and should be subject to scrutiny. The point of caution raised on the distinction between "emotional commitment" and "pragmatic actions" that one should expect from extra-national solidarity groups reaffirms the necessity for pragmatic thinking on the Palestinian side.

At an institutional level, the low level of effectiveness associated with the responsible international structures – such as the Quartet on the Middle East - is coherent with the overall neorealist logic, which operates according to a state-unit logic. Thus, the states-dictated interests prevail over the international commitments, preventing their efficiency. Moreover, the inefficiency of this structure confirms Tabar's concern regarding the disconnection between the international supporters and the actual causes they allegedly sponsor. In a similar vein, the low expectancy associated with the use of diplomatic means and channels for settling the Palestinian statehood issue is part of the same neorealist, interest-driven logic.

This suggests, and the surveyed public opinions also indicate a prevalence of alternative means – such as armed struggles and/or peaceful demonstrations – due to their more likely effectiveness. However, conventional diplomacy is not rejected as an inherently ineffective practice, but it is the regional context and the existing power relations that prevent it from being efficient and effective. The Palestinian state enjoys a limited diplomatic and leverage power and, therefore, it is highly unlikely for negotiations alone to produce fundamental positive changes. Moreover, negotiations are deemed to fail because of the lack of a concrete, nationally agreed-upon agenda for the statehood project.

The overall direction indicated by the findings of this study is that of transnational connected struggles, based on the similarity in goals and concerns faced by the people. This is part of what has been theorized as anti-imperialist

solidarity and the internationalization of local and regional issues. Portraying the Palestinian cause in terms of anti-imperialist and anti-occupation struggle has a series of implications for the broader intellectual and policymaking discussions. At the theoretical and analytical level, there is a paradigmatic shift from the primacy of regionalism and regionally-based linkages – such as shared Islamic and Arab identity – toward what is considered universal humanistic values and national rights. While pan-Islamism is still acknowledged as one of the most important mobilizing forces, it is not perceived as a separate phenomenon but rather as an expression of the anti-imperial struggle.

Moreover, as the findings of this study indicate, at an individual and community level, the main concerns of the people revolve around having their rights and freedoms preserved, rather than which is the official state formula being adopted. According to the same logic, assigning the agency to the Palestinians themselves who are the ones to decide upon and lead the national liberation process further points out the anti-colonial, anti-imperial underpinning of the struggle.

6. The regional subsystem

As for the broader regional system, two elements emerge as the main structural factors determining its current dynamics: the continuation of the post-colonial and neo-imperial practices and the primacy of the state survival logic. One of the main factors determining regional and interstate relations consists in the continued geostrategic interests of global powers – the US retaining a central role in this regard. In addition, the current assessment reveals a leading pragmatic paradigm that dictates states' behavior; accordingly, the logic of state survival and security prevails over other extra or transnational loyalties and commitments. As for the broader Arab-Israeli conflict, the current dynamics indicate a tendency towards cooperation and normalization derived from the same state security and interests logic. The Arab public opinion emulates this regional tendency, despite the continued opposition towards normalizing the governmental relations with Israel (Figure 4). Illustrative in this regard is the decreasing threat perception

associated with Israel during the last decade (Figure 6) which is equated by an increasing threat perception regarding Iran and, to a lesser degree, the US.

To follow up on the guiding research questions of this explorative inquiry, some elements need to be re-emphasized. The reluctance and limited potential associated with the regional actors in advancing the diplomatic dialogue on the Palestinian statehood issue can be explained based on two main arguments. The Palestinian cause ceased to be framed and understood as a localized, regional issue. While it has an undeniable Islamic and Arab underpinning, the Palestinian cause is not perceived in purely regional terms, nor in pan-Arabist and/or pan-Islamic ones, but it has encompassed a primarily international dimension. Its universal dimension lies in the root of the issue at stake, the actors involved, and, more importantly, the nature of the values and goals that fuel it. By virtue of its nature as a national liberation and humanistic cause, the assessment of the Palestinian statehood issue requires an evaluation of the role played by extra-regional powers in the region, as well as by the nature of the dominating regimes operating there.

Secondly, the potential of diplomacy is limited given the lack of a clearly defined programmatic agenda and the state survival logic prevailing in the region, which puts priority on securing the state. In this regard, formulating and advancing a commonly agreed-upon negotiation agenda defining the state formula to be pursued is needed.

Finally, regarding the necessity of engaging regional actors and the motivations and rationale behind their involvement, the current study reveals that the Palestinians appreciate the value of regional, traditional alliances but do not perceive them as imperative for advancing the statehood project. In indicating potential state actors able to positively impact the negotiating process, similarity in struggles and anti-imperial stances represent the guiding criteria.

VII. Conclusions

1. Results of the study

In broader terms, the current regime of Israeli-Palestinian relations is perceived as a contemporary settler-colonial project which defines the problem in terms of an uneven balance of power. The discrepancy between the two sides is explained through two main, complementary arguments: the support that the US invests in the Israeli government and weaknesses at the level of the Palestinian leadership to capitalize on the regional card strategically.

This disproportionate balance of power is also translated at the diplomatic level, where Palestine enjoys limited leveraging and negotiating power. Therefore, modest achievements are expected from the diplomatic avenue, which is considered of secondary importance to other action paths for advancing the Palestinian statehood agenda. Chief in this regard is the issue of connecting the Palestinian struggle for national liberation with other regional and international endeavors against contemporary forms of post-colonialism and neo-imperialism. This direction is based on the nature of the concerns and objectives at stake - preserving human and national rights, freedom, dignity, and economic justice. Thus, a narrative change is unfolding when addressing the Palestinian cause. It ceases to be framed in purely local and/or regional terms but entails an international dimension.

A series of factors are hindering progress in the statehood settlement process, and the lack of an updated and commonly agreed-upon national agenda on the Palestinian side is key in this regard. While the Two-State paradigm has been contested by both the public opinion and the intellectuals, an alternative is yet to be formulated.

As for the regional dimension, the key finding points to the leading pragmatism that dictates the behaviors of regional state actors. However, a necessary distinction is made between the grassroots, the peoples of the region who continue to nurture pro-Palestinian sentiments, and their governments which are driven by security-related, economic, and regime survival calculations. In this

regard, I argue that the regional system is shifting from a multipolar order to a bipolar one, in which Israel and Iran retain the leading positions.

The authoritarian rule that pervades neighboring countries coupled with internal conflicts and concerns that the neighboring peoples face are diminishing the weight and urgency of the Palestinian cause for them. This way, the potential for internal representation and democratization within key regional countries, mainly Arab states, is hindered for the sake of the establishment's interests. An exception in this regard is Iran which appears more consistent in its pro-Palestine stance and which, in this very regard, has internal coherence in terms of governmental and popular alignment. However, two essential elements prevent Iran from playing a significantly active role – the disruptive effect and polarization that it has on the Palestinian society and, secondly, the ideological discrepancy between the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist sentiments nurtured by the Palestinian liberation struggle and the anti-imperialism advocated by Teheran.

Formal instruments and tools for negotiating at the disposal of Palestine ought to be preserved and operationalized but in conjunction with more effective channels and mechanisms for generating substantial change. In this regard, connecting with similar international struggles, continuing the BDS campaign, raising global awareness, and directing it toward policy changes at the level of the stronger actors in the international system represent alternative, more effective means.

In comprehending the rationale behind some of the phenomena and concepts that have been addressed during the data gathering process, neorealist accounts, alongside authoritarianism, have proved insightful in untangling the behavior of regional actors. In tandem, anti-imperialist and neo-colonialist lenses have been useful in setting the Palestinian cause on the current world map. Finally, for scrutinizing the sustained prevalence of the Two-State formula as the leading paradigm, a Foucauldian power/knowledge reading has proved revealing.

2. Theoretical implications and further research

The current study opens a series of meaningful discussions and questions to be further addressed by academia and policymakers. Theoretically, aspects regarding the elements of the Palestinian statehood that link it to similar struggles unfolding in other areas and the mechanisms for fostering joint discourses and actions represent key subjects to be further addressed. Another point of inquiry revolves around the question of how to develop a national programmatic agenda in a quasi-democratic and polarized socio-political context.

In addition, the current study provides insights and empirical material for developing the theoretical discussions on the impact of authoritarianism on foreign policy, as well as on the limits of diplomacy. In this regard, the need for a theoretical reassessment of the pre-requisites of efficient diplomacy and negotiation mechanisms is another implication of the current study.

Finally, I argue for the continued relevance of realist accounts when assessing the Middle East and the interstate affairs unfolding in the region. Therefore, while aspects related to cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic links have an undeniable impact on the mutual perception of the people of the region, the element of state and regime security remains, in some fields of action, still the primary rationale behind states' behaviors.

3. Empirical implications

The current study informs about a series of aspects to be further considered empirically. Firstly, it speaks to the Palestinian civil society and other international or remote organizations supporting the Palestinian cause for mobilization around formulating a common political agenda. In a similar vein, raising awareness on how the dialogue with external entities and powers can shift the regional and national power balance is another aspect worth noting.

Another point of attention revolves around the discrepancy between regional peoples and their governments regarding the stance toward Palestine. Therefore, popular pressure on regional governments when the national and

regional context favors it can have an impact on the foreign policy behavior of these governments. However, I do not perceive the Arab-Israeli and Arab-Palestine relations in mutually exclusive terms. Therefore, the popular pressure would not necessarily imply halting relations or nurturing hostile relations with the state of Israel, or any other state, but rather employing a more proactive foreign policy toward settling the question of Palestine.

Another key finding with significant empirical reverberations consists in the need to scrutinize the efficiency and relevance of the Office of the Quarter, considering the current realities on the ground and what the peoples living in the territories of Palestine and Israel want.

Finally, and foremost, two questions resulting from the current study remain the most central ones: how the current reality can be transformed into a state formula satisfactory and agreeable to both the Palestinians and Israelis. And secondly, how can the Palestinians agree upon and formulate a national statehood agenda to be further advanced diplomatically.

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Appendix 1 – List of interviewees

The Palestinian intellectuals interviewed for this research are listed below. The information about their professional and academic work and experience has been retrieved from the Internet and is public, excepting those for whom no or very limited public detail was available. In their case, I have used the self-presentations they conveyed to me during the interviewing process.

Dr. Ahmad Samih Khalidi
Dr. Ahmad Samih Khalidi is a political and strategic analyst who serves as Senior Associate Member at St Antony's College, Oxford, and as Associate Fellow at the Geneva Center for Security Policy, Geneva. He is also editor-in-chief of the Journal of Palestine Studies (the Institute for Palestine Studies) and co-editor of the London-based daily Mideast Mirror. Alongside his extensive intellectual and academic work, he served as an advisor to the Presidents Abbas and Arafat and has served as a consultant on Middle East Affairs to the Swedish, Belgian, Spanish, Dutch and Norwegian governments.

Bana Madi
Bana Madi is a graduate student in Sociology at the American University of Beirut and a graduate researcher at The Palestine Land Studies Center (PLSC). She completed her BA in English Language and Literature in Jordan, where she has been engaged in volunteering activities with local and international NGOs specialized in promoting the Palestinian culture and in supporting the refugees, children, and women.

Dr. Camille Mansour
Dr. Camille Mansour is a member of the Institute of Palestine Studies' Board of Trustees and chairman of its research committee. He served as a Professor of International Relations at Paris University from 1984 to 2004. He also taught at Birzeit University, where he founded and headed the Institute of Law (1994-2000) and established the Palestine Judicial and Legislative Databank. He is currently the chief editor of the Interactive Timeline of the Palestine Question, a joint online project of the Institute for Palestine Studies and the Palestinian Museum. He is the author of *Beyond Alliance: Israel in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 1994).

Dr. Dana El Kurd
Dr. Dana El Kurd is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Richmond and a non-resident Senior Fellow at Arab Center Washington DC. Her expertise revolves around international involvement and authoritarianism within

the Arab world. Her multi-method research focuses on how authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have maintained durability and the societal impact of this authoritarianism on political engagement. She is the author of *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine* (Oxford University Press: 2020).

Dr. Diana Buttu

Dr. Diana Buttu is a Ramallah-based analyst, lawyer, and former legal advisor to Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Mahmoud Abbas and Palestinian negotiators and Policy Advisor to Al-Shabaka. She served as a legal advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team and was part of the team that assisted in the successful litigation of the Wall before the International Court of Justice. She frequently comments on Palestine for international news media outlets, is a political analyst for Al Jazeera International, and regularly contributes to The Middle East magazine. She maintains a law practice in Palestine, focusing on international human rights law. Her area of expertise and interest revolve around negotiations, international law, and international human rights law. She has also been a fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Dr. George E. Bisharat

Dr. George Bisharat is a law and Middle Eastern affairs Professor at Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. His research and writing concentrate on international legal aspects of Palestine/Israel and U.S. policies toward the Middle East. He is a member of the Journal of Palestine Studies' editorial committee and a board member of the Transnational Arab Research Institute. He has published extensively on Palestine-Israel and is the author of *Palestinian Lawyers and Israeli Rule: Law and Disorder in the West Bank* (Univ. of Texas Press, 1989).

Dr. Hilal Khashan - HK

Dr. Hilal Khashan is a Professor of Political Science at the American University of Beirut and an analyst of Middle Eastern affairs. He is the author of more than 110 articles that appeared in journals such as Orbis, The Journal of Conflict Resolution, The Brown Journal of World Affairs, Middle East Quarterly, Third World Quarterly, Israel Affairs, Journal of Religion and Society, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, and The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies. He authored six books, including *Hizbullah: A Mission to Nowhere* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

Dr. Ibrahim Shikaki

Dr. Ibrahim Shikaki is Assistant Professor at Trinity College, Hartford, where he teaches economics and is a policy analyst at Al-Shabaka. Previously, he held teaching positions at NSSR, The International University College of Turin, Birzeit, and Al-Quds universities. He has also been a researcher at the Palestine Economic

Policy Research Institute (MAS) in Ramallah and Diakonia's IHL Research Center in East Jerusalem. His areas of interest revolve around macroeconomics, distribution and inequality, heterodox growth models, and political economy. He is particularly interested in identifying and rectifying the shortcomings of macroeconomic analysis when studying developing countries' diverse political, social, and institutional contexts.

Inès Abdel Razek

Inès Abdel Razek is Advocacy Director for the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy (PIPD), an independent Palestinian organization, policy member of Al-Shabaka, and board member of BuildPalestine. Prior to joining the PIPD, Inès held advisory positions in the executive offices of the Union for the Mediterranean in Barcelona, the UN Environment Programme in Nairobi, and the Palestinian Prime Minister's Office in Ramallah, where she focused on international governance and development cooperation policies. She holds a Master's degree in Public Affairs from Sciences-Po, Paris.

Dr. Khalil E. Jahshan

Dr. Khalil E. Jahshan is a political analyst, media commentator, and Executive Director of Arab Center Washington DC. Between 2004 and 2013, he was a Lecturer in International Studies and Languages at Pepperdine University. Previously, Jahshan served as Executive Vice President of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and Director of its government affairs affiliate, the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA)-ADC. Throughout his career, he held numerous leadership positions in Arab American organizations, as well as in several Middle East-oriented organizations, including ANERA, MIFTAH, and Search for Common Ground.

Dr. Leila Farsakh

Dr. Leila Farsakh is an Associate Professor and Chair of political science at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Dr. Farsakh has worked with several international organizations, including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris, and since 2008 has been a senior research fellow at the Center for Development Studies at Birzeit University, West Bank. She has published on questions related to the political economy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, alternatives to partition, and international migration and is the author of two books, the most recent one being: *Rethinking Statehood in Palestine: Self-Determination and Decolonization Beyond Partition* (Univ. of California Press, 2021).

Dr. Mai Albzour

Dr. Mai Albzour is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Science at Birzeit University, and she has published research papers in the fields of Political Psychology and Sociology. Her area of interest and expertise

revolves around Intergroup Relations - Intergroup Contact Theory, Social Change, Conflict, Collective and National Identities, and the phenomenon of Normalization within the Settler Colonial Context in Palestine. She holds a PhD. in Social Sciences from the University of Lausanne.

Dr. Mohammad Almasri

Mohammad Almasri is a Political Scientist who serves as an Associate Researcher at the Doha Institute, the Executive Direct of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, as well as the coordinator of the Arab Opinion Index. His engagement with the Palestinian cause revolves around his academic and professional interest and his lived experience as he resided in Jordan, which he describes as a "mixed society" where the Palestinian component is an essential one.

Mohammed Masoud

Mohammed Masoud is a young professional interested in international politics and the current debates around the Palestinian cause. He holds a BA in English Language and Literature and a MA in Translations and Interpretation – Arabic and English. He worked as an English teacher in Jordan and is currently a freelancer in translations. The volunteering activities he has been involved in and different projects and conferences that he attended allowed him to actively engage in debates related to the current situation in Palestine.

Dr. Nadia Naser-Najjab

Dr. Nadia Naser-Najjab is a Lecturer at the University of Exeter, where she teaches Palestine Studies. Previously, she served as Assistant Professor at Birzeit University in the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies. Her fields of interest revolve around Palestine studies, focusing on the peace process, resistance, civil society, and track II. She is the author of *Dialogue in Palestine: The People-to-People Diplomacy Programme and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (I.B. Tauris, 2020).

Dr. Osayd Awawda

Dr. Osayd Awawda is an Assistant Professor at Hebron University, Palestine, where he teaches Constitutional Law and International Law. He holds an LLB from Birzeit University, an LLM, and a Ph.D. from Melbourne Law School, Australia. He also works with the Minister of Justice in Palestine and works as a lawyer. He is the author of the book: *The Palestinian Constitutional Court: An Assessment of Its Independence under the Emergency Regime* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022).

Dr. Tareq Baconi

Dr. Tareq Baconi serves as the president of the board of directors of Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. He is also a senior analyst for Israel/Palestine and Economics of Conflict at the International Crisis Group, based in Ramallah, and is

a frequent commentator in regional and international media. In 2021 he was a visiting affiliate researcher at the Centre for Humanities Research, University of Western Cape. He is the book review editor for the Journal of Palestine Studies and the author of *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Stanford University Press, 2018).

Dr. Tariq Dana

Dr. Tariq Dana is an Assistant Professor at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies and adjunct lecturer at Northwestern University, Qatar, where he teaches conflict and humanitarian studies. He was the director of the Center for Development Studies at Birzeit University and a senior research fellow at Ibrahim Abu-Logoud Institute of International Studies, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, and the School of Oriental and African Studies. He also serves as a policy advisor for the Palestinian Policy Network (Al-Shabaka). He is the co-editor of the volume: Political Economy of Palestine: Critical, Interdisciplinary, and Decolonial Perspectives (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Dr. Wassim Ghantous

Dr. Wassim Ghantous is the Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Fellow at the Center for Palestine Studies, Columbia University. He holds a Ph.D. in Peace and Development Studies, and he was a postdoctoral fellow in the Space and Political Agency Research Group (SPARG) at the University of Tampere. Previously, he has worked in several Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations, most notably at the BADIL Resource Center and B'Tselem. Currently, he is working on his book manuscript, *The Rise of the Israeli War Machine: Palestinians' Encounters of Spectral Violence, Destructive Velocities, Intensive Elimination*.

Dr. Zaha Hassan

Dr. Zaha Hassan is a human rights lawyer and a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Her research focuses on Palestine-Israel peace, the use of international legal mechanisms by political movements, and U.S. foreign policy in the region. Previously, she was the coordinator and senior legal advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team during Palestine's bid for UN membership and was a member of the Palestinian delegation to Quartet-sponsored exploratory talks between 2011 and 2012. She regularly engages in track II peace efforts and is a contributor and a media commentator for many international publications.

Interviewee description: [prior information about the interviewee retrieved from the Internet]

Logistics: Asking consent for recording; publishing their names and quotes; asking if they prefer anonymity; offering to send the thesis at the end of the writing and evaluation process.

Thesis subject description: Regional cooperation around the Palestinian question; potential alliance configuration that might advance the Palestine question; the role of diplomacy in conflict settlement and in obtaining state independence.

RQ: How do Palestinians perceive the need for a regional ally to advance the diplomatic dialogue on the Palestinian statehood issue?

Aim of the study: Assess whether there is a perceived need at the level of Palestinian people for an external Middle Eastern state/organization actor to support +/ advance the Palestinian question. If yes, who should this actor be?

Questions:

1. Would you like to start by telling me more about yourself and your involvement in the Pal cause?

2. How would you define the Palestinian entity on the Middle Eastern map? Do you consider that the Palestinian entity enjoys any level of diplomatic independence?

3. How would you describe the current state of relations between Palestine and the neighboring Middle Eastern countries?

4. Do you consider that the two-state solution still represents a viable option? If yes, can Palestinian people achieve this goal on their own?

5. How would you describe the role that the neighboring Middle Eastern countries played in the negotiation process of the Palestinian question?

6. As a Palestinian, do you consider that the Palestinian state needs an external actor for moving forward with the Palestinian question?

7. Should this actor be a Middle Eastern one? Or one from outside the region? Should it be a single actor or a formula of more actors?

8. Considering the relatively high level of regional and international political power that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran enjoy, as well as their regional leadership ambitions, could any of the three countries assume and support the Palestinian cause at the international level? If none of them, which Middle Eastern state or formula of states should advance the Palestinian question?

9. Which would be the criteria that would shape the configuration of the alliance between Palestine and this regional actor? Religious solidarity, pan-Arabism, security-related interests, others? and What would be the benefits of cooperating with Palestine for the regional actor/actors?

10. What would be the level of engagement of this actor? Negotiate on behalf of Palestine? Support the Palestinian representatives?

11. How do you think the Palestinians, the PA, Hamas, and Fatah would react to this? Would they be interested in cooperating?

12. Is there another relevant aspect that I missed, or would you like to add to the discussion?

13. Do you know anyone with whom I should get in touch on the topic, and would you like to introduce me via e-mail or help me with his/her email address or contact info? (maybe someone in Palestine, a Palestinian activist, etc.) Is there any specific literature that you would recommend I look into?